

The Harsh Realities of Starvation and Tribal Alienation in Mahasweta Devi's 'Little Ones'

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Abstract

This paper focuses on 'Little ones' and exposes the hypocrisy of the present civilization which is no different from the colonizers of the past. The short story "Little Ones" is one among the four stories taken from the collection of 'Bitter Soil' written by Mahasweta Devi, which deals with the issue of malnutrition which makes the Adivasis dwarfs. In order to improve the condition of the uneducated and poor tribes, as part of the welfare scheme, the government sends relief which is swindled by the officers like the special relief officer and tehsildar. On the other hand "Little Ones" relates the experience of an honest relief officer too, with full of sympathy for the aborigines having a strong will to provide them relief not for only one year but permanently. In fact the "little ones" – according to superstition, are believed to be either small tribal children or ghosts. They are pigmy size adults hiding in the forest to escape the wrath of the Government at their revolt. Tribal myth says that in revenge, the Sun cursed the Aagariyas (tribals) that the wealth they earn from iron would be reduced to ashes and the tribal people seem to believe it literally. Out of utter poverty they are forced to steal relief materials and take to violent attacks against those who have appropriated their land and livelihood. In fact, the main thrust in the bulk of her creative work is the release of tribals from all kinds of oppression.

Key words: 'Little Ones', 'Bitter Soil', Relief, Exploitation, Agariyas, Mahasweta Devi

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi is a renowned writer who dedicated all her works for the cause of the tribals and Dalits. 'Bitter Soil' written by Mahasweta Devi is a collection of four short- stories entitled "Little Ones", "Seed", "Witch" and "Salt" and the stories bring out powerfully the class and caste exploitation and the exploitation of the Government machinery as well.. This paper focuses on 'Little ones' and exposes the hypocrisy of the present civilization which is no different from the colonizers of the past. "Bitter Soil" refers to the region of Palamau, a district formed in 1892, in Jharkhand. It is bitter because the people living here has had only unpleasant experiences of poverty, oppression and exploitation. They have become victims of wage-less labour and bonded labour because of the money minded, greedy and selfish mainstream society.

“Little ones”

The short story “Little Ones” deals with the issue of malnutrition which makes the Adivasis dwarfs. In order to improve the condition of the uneducated and poor tribes, as part of the welfare scheme, the government sends relief which, it is believed, is swallowed by the officers like the special relief officer and tehsildar. “Little Ones” relates the experience of an honest relief officer, full of sympathy for the aborigines having a strong will to provide them relief not for only one year but a permanent one, with the “little ones” – who are believed to be either small tribal children or ghosts. But they are pigmy size adults hiding in the forest to escape the wrath of the Government at their revolt.

Unlike the previous dishonest officers, a very honest officer was needed to execute the welfare scheme for the tribes in the village Lohri. The author describes about the village Lohri in the following manner. “Earth bears a fire of unbearable heat in the womb. So the trees are stunted, the breast of the rivers dried out cremation ground, the villages dim behind a film of dust,” It is a desert like place, as people used to refuse to visit such godforsaken place or it becomes impossible for them to keep the relief material under their control. The little ones stole them away. It is also suspected that only the officials swindle the charity goods. When the officer was selected, he was informed that Lohri was a “damned terrible place”(Devi,1), where people did not lead an honest way of living whatever relief materials were taken, it would be stolen. Further, the relief officer was surprised to learn that the thieves were not children but dwarf men and women.

The Myth

Another myth was narrated to the relief officer. In Lohri, once the Aagariya tribes were the iron miners and produced iron implements and enjoyed the sole right of extracting iron from that place. Their proud king Logundih and his eleven brothers all of whom married one woman. Logundih believed that he was more powerful than the Sun. The Sun God came down and fought with Logundih and killed him in the battle and his wife ran away to take shelter in a gond’s house and gave birth to the son, Jwalamukhi. Jwalamukhi fought against the Sun God and burnt down. In revenge, the Sun cursed the Aagariyas that the wealth they earn from iron would be reduced to ashes. Though it is considered as a tribal myth, it has its own symbolic significance in association with their actual struggles of life. They were never ready to involve in farming. Even if they were given farms by the government, they would sell it to the Mahajans. Further, they would raise so many questions such as “Where’s the water? Where are the seeds? Plough? Bullocks? How can we farm?” (Devi, 3). Yet, they cannot be fully blamed for their refusal. Their sentiments with reference to iron ore and the place was not properly respected and handled by the then Government of India, which sought for iron ore in Lohri village and blasted out the hills, sacred to the Aagariyas, against their will.

The Aagariyas revolted and attacked the people mining the hill. Then, they disappeared themselves inside the hill. The government searched for a month. None disappeared from any other village except Kubha. The police burnt Kubha village and imposed punitive taxes on all other Aagariya villages and oppressed them in a cruel way.

On his way, the relief officer heard many mysterious wailings from the forest hills in the name of songs. The person who accompanied him was carrying a gun. He said that he carried it out of fear of the Aagariyas hiding in the hills, who might come at any time. Moreover, he was warned by the block development officers about the “Little Ones” who stole the relief materials such as rice and milo. The BDO told him that the little ones might not be small kids but only ghosts, because their looks had been different.

After hearing a number of stories, threatening and warnings, the relief activity began with the construction of camp tents. The relief officer had also decided of a medical camp. He was ready to offer food and one rupee as daily wages for the village boys to work as volunteers while the tehsildar said that they would work for food alone.

The tehsildar was not ready to take in – charge of the stores saying.

“Things get stolen. And those who do the stealing are not human” (14).

With the help of ten Aagariya village boys, the camp activities were carried out successfully. Mahasweta Devi gives a comment on the character of the tehsildar also: “Every year, he steals from the relief and consolidates his own affairs. He is extremely corrupt....” (14). But the new relief officer was ready to take the relief materials to the very place of the tribes. He was happy and satisfied about the proceedings of the camp. One day, he heard the sounds of disturbance in the relief materials, when he was sleeping. Immediately he got up and rushed to find that the Aagariya boys disappeared into the forest and two sacks of rice and milo

were missing. The relief officer ran and followed them. The thieves were not spirits but only humans but so small that they might be small children. When the relief officer went near them, he realized that they were not children but adults shrunk to dwarf sizes due to malnutrition. They were Aagariya tribes who killed the workers who had mined their hills. The oldest among them laughed and said:

We're not kinds. We're the Aagariya of Kubha village..... we protected the sanctity and honour of our sacred hillock by cutting you down; and Since then, we've been forest dwellers. No one was able to catch us. Not one police man or sipahi, no one.... The other Aagariyas keep us alive continuously on the run, not being able to eat. Most of us are dead now..... The Aagariya help us. It's because of the revolt at Kubha that we're in this state. The revolt at Kubha...(19-20).

The dwarf Aagariyas madly laughed and showed the relief officers the secret parts of their bodies which were unnaturally thin and scaly. "The sight of those who come for relief, the near naked, shriveled, worm ridden, swollen bellied Adivasi men and women repels him. The author makes a powerful comment saying, "Drought and famine are the curse of the evil spirits".

Mahasweta Devi's descriptive narrative portrays the tribal village, where these people have to live in a place of extreme poverty and scarcity. Here human beings are dehumanized due to years of neglect and paucity of resources in terms of literacy and health care. Their bodies never developed, they were born and brought up in starvation. They have seen rice – but only in dreams. It is a shame for the postcolonial India to have forced this particular group of tribal people into starvation. This has forced some of them to take to stealing and violent activities.

Mahasweta Devi writes "Little Ones" was born of tribal experience. My experience keeps me perpetually angry and makes me ruthlessly unforgiving towards the exploiters, or the exploiting system. That the mainstream remains totally oblivious of the tribal situation furthers that burning anger. (Devi, ix).

The tribals were dwellers of the forest, and as settlements came up, these people were driven away and rendered homeless. India belonged to these tribes long before Aryans invaded it. These people were forcibly evicted from their homeland by these invaders and forced to recede to margin. Their marginalization has been continuing in the post independence period as well. These people are being dispossessed of land by the outsiders or non-tribals. The tribes of Palamau were oppressed by the hands of money – lenders and land owners. They can be considered the subalterns in terms of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci who used the word "Subaltern" to refer to a class of people subject to the hegemony of another more powerful class.

The plight of this tribal

The plight of this tribal is worrisome as they still do not have the right to vote', says the author. In one of the most cruel subversion of human rights, the population is kept running from place to place and is shuffled from one police register to another in a guise of system and organization. The main purpose of her writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies. "I believe in documentation", she writes in her introduction to *Bitter Soil*, a collection of her short stories, "After reading my work, the reader should face the truth of facts, and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India." Her writings are based on fact but not fiction. She further adds that: "I have not written these stories to please my readers. If they get under the skin of these stories and feel as the writer feels that will be reward enough" (*Bitter Soil* x). Most of the stories in *Bitter Soil* can be interpreted at a symbolic level. *Little Ones* deals with tribal who were unable to grow up on account of the overbearing presence of the Big Brothers. In a sense, the story describes an inversion of civilized norms by the very people who are supposed to sustain them. Violence in turn is offered as the only way out. Evidently this is writing envisages a sense of commitment, with the purpose of examining the myths of progress in terms of those excluded from the main stream society. The stories are well crafted, using the experience of tribal life as a creative raw material, though it is her own location which shapes the narrative. Her stories take us to the roots of the problem of complete ignorance on the part of the civilized which makes the situation deeply ironic. This is also the cause of Devi's anger towards the so-called ideas of progress. She believes that the root cause of these ills lie in the inability of the tribal mind to break free from primitive myths. In other words any move to bring these people into the mainstream will have to function within the paradigms of tribal narratives. The reason, the protagonist of *Little Ones* fails, is precisely he refuses to accept that his way of handling the problem is unintelligible to the starving tribal for whom he ostensibly brings relief supplies. Mahasweta depicts his traumatic encounter with a group of tribal who appear to be small kids. But actually they were adults, reduced to the size of emaciated children on account of malnutrition. Their bodies never developed, they were born and brought up in starvation. They have

seen rice – but only in dreams. Starvation has been the sole meaning of their existence in postcolonial India. Malnutrition as a cause of stunted growth in the case of pygmies, writes the author, has been affirmed by anthropologists. In the story, Little Ones, she exposes such a system that keeps the tribal locked in the age old cycle of poverty, hunger and disease.

Champion of tribal rights

Mahasweta Devi, as a champion of the rights of the tribes brings into light the actual condition of the tribes in contrast to the official list of welfare schemes and the steps taken by the concerned ministerial department which are focused in the lime light through instruments like media. It cannot be denied that the governments have taken measures to develop the life of the tribes. But, it is a question whether they have reached these people in proper sense. The MPs, M.L.As, B.D.Os, and other officials swallow the money granted for the upliftment of them and the police who have to stand for the protection of the tribes would stand by the side of the mainstream society which includes the money lenders and the land lords who have oppressed the tribes. Mahasweta Devi locates the reason for the poverty of the tribes in the land system which was designed and devised during the British rule. The land owner's feudal mental make up and greediness make the tribes poor, under developed and starved to death. And, Devi says in his Introduction to Bitter Soil Says:

..... Caste and class exploitation and the resistance of the exploited ones are rooted in India's land system. I say 'India', though the location of these stories is Palamau. Palamau is a mirror of India (Devi, "Introduction," Bitter Soil, vii). Mahasweta Devi wants the readers to understand that Indian's land system and class exploitation responsible for the marginalization of tribals.

Showing both, testimony of her commitment to the cause of the starving tribal as well as her thorough grasp of the political and social dimensions of the problem, Mahasweta Devi says: There are about two and a half crores [25 million] of such people who still live in bondage. Because 1871 Criminal Tribes Notification Act was repealed, but Government of India re-introduced a Habitual Offenders Act in 1959 for every state, which is nothing but a repetition of that British myth, Criminal Tribes Act. So, what happened before-that continues. ("On Tribal Welfare")

'Little Ones' though written as a short story, it brings out the important oppressive facts about Indian reality being perpetrated in the name of development against the indigenous tribals. Agariyas living in Lohri are deprived of their iron extracting profession and forced into starvation to that extent of being physically reduced into pygmies. Out of utter poverty they are forced to steal relief materials and take to violent attacks against those who have appropriated their land and livelihood. So the subjects of her stories become the subjects of author's life. In fact, the main thrust in the bulk of her creative work is the release of tribals and Dalits from all kinds of oppression.

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