
A Mirror that shames (?): Mahasweta Devi's 'Daini'

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Cultural materialism as a theoretical approach seeks to undertake a critical analysis of culture, cultural forms and their relationship with nationhood and nation formation. Raymond Williams in his 1973 work *The Country and the City* elaborated on the central concerns of this approach. According to Williams, cultural forms and particularly literature, reflect and consolidate social norms and realities. As Hywel Dix explains, “Williams emphasized the fact that nationhood had originally been imagined into existence in part through its literature and cultural forms. Accordingly, to produce a different kind of literature is to imagine a different kind of nation.”(3) Similarly, Benedict Anderson’s seminal work *Imagined Communities* talks of the convergence of capitalism and print culture as central to the creation of the ‘imagined community’ of the nation. Cultural forms and particularly printed texts help reflect and generate social order. In doing so, they help create the identity of a nation. When certain texts then, subvert this overarching social order by presenting narratives of liminal, marginalised (non) identities, they problematize the notion of a unified nation and help generate a more nuanced understanding of the same. This aspect of cultural forms, particularly writing, would be examined in detail by Homi Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* where he builds upon the work of both Williams and Anderson. In the words of Dix, “Bhabha refers to Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* in which Rushdie gives fictional realization to the kind of working class Indian community that had previously made little impact on the novel tradition in Britain. This is not, Bhabha points out, because such communities had not previously existed but

because they lacked access to the means of representation. Bhabha says that by writing a novel about a community of people previously excluded from the literary record, and explicitly in opposition to the dominant political tones of the period, Rushdie enables us to imagine ‘how newness enters the world.’” (23)

The political and cultural space of India houses several varying groups of people and therefore some community or identity category is constantly under threat of being stifled and marginalised in the grand narrative of the nation. Literature, as a cultural form, has time and again sought to give voice to and rebel against such injustice and hold itself up as the repository of human values and ethics. The writings of Mahasweta Devi can be regarded as representative in this concern. In her novels and short stories, writer and social activist Mahasweta Devi has always sought to give voice to some of those communities in India that have remained on the margins of literary and political society and have been denied access to the ‘means of representation.’ This paper shall examine one such short story, ‘Daini’ which has been translated by Ipsita Chanda as ‘Witch’ in the 1998 collection *Bitter Soil*. In reading the text, it shall strive to see how categories like tribal identity, caste, gender and disability can oppose or throw into question notions of modernity and dominant social and political processes.

Raymond Williams in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* has noted that “in certain areas, there will be in certain periods, practices and meanings which are not reached for. There will be areas of practice and meaning which, almost by definition from its own limited character, or in its profound deformation, the dominant culture is unable in any real terms to recognize.” (43) Mahasweta Devi’s 1979 story ‘Daini’ or ‘Witch’ addresses one such area of practice, namely the witch hunt, which is still a social reality in many parts of India but which discursive traditions of the ‘modern’ Indian nation find difficult to accommodate.

The story ‘Daini’ is set in Palamau, a tribal-inhabited district in Jharkhand where Mahasweta Devi lived for a number of years. She covered the expanse of the district on foot, living with the tribal population of the district, communicating with them and thereby gaining insight into their difficult lives. Her pain and outrage at the social injustices she perceived during her stay at Palamau compelled her to pen the stories in the collection *Bitter Soil*— ‘Noon’ (‘Salt’), ‘Bichhan’ (‘Seeds’), ‘Shishu’ (Little Ones) and Daini (‘Witch’).

In the Introduction to *Bitter Soil*, Mahasweta Devi writes, “I believe in documentation. After reading my work, the reader should be able to face the truth of facts, *and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India*...I say ‘India’ though the location of these stories is Palamau. *Palamau is a mirror of India.*” (emphasis mine) (vii) Thus, in Bhabha’s terms, Mahasweta Devi attempts to give voice to a section of Indian society that lacks means of representation which leads to a newer understanding of India as a nation. According to Devi, the understanding thus generated is not a happy one.

In the story ‘Daini,’ when famine struck the villages of Kuruda, Murhai and Hesadi, the stricken tribal people approached Hanuman Misra, a Brahman and worshipper at the Shiva temple. After performing necessary rites, Mishra informs the villagers that the famine has been caused by the presence of a ‘daini’ who was wandering around in those villages.

The ‘witch’ in the story who is hunted down and forced to flee the village ultimately turns out to be a low-caste hearing-impaired woman who also cannot speak. She had been sent to work at the house of Hanuman Mishra where she was raped by his son. Once it transpired that she had become pregnant, she was thrown out and the rumours of the presence of a witch were spread among the people of the village:

The pahaan of Tura addresses the floor. Then, lifting his eyes in the darkness- she's is dumb! She can't speak. Her body grew but not her brain! I sent her to the house of Hanuman Misra in Tahar, to work in the cowshed.

-When?

-A year ago. For the last five months there's been no news of her. Misraji says she's gone away, who knows where? I've searched high and low; I haven't been able to find her. Later I learnt that the thakur's son had spoilt her. I went to ask, and got a shoe in my face. Daini, daini, the thakur spread these stories about a daini! I never knew my Somri was the daini! I never knew!

-She's not a daini....

Go ask in Tahar. They got their son to rape the dumb, slow witted girl and threw her out. Then they spread the daini alarm, saying, don't kill her, just stone her. (Devi, 120-121)

What with a famine already raging in the village, superstition had found strong hold in the minds of the people imbuing them with a perverse violence against the witch. The pregnant girl Somri is therefore forced to live in a cave in a forest, hunting dogs and wild birds for food.

In a way, Somri is an embodiment of the tribal community of Palamau- victim of local superstition and exploitation at the hands of the upper caste. Her hearing impairment, muteness and mental retardation can be read as symbolic of the unquestioned internalisation of discriminatory caste norms and exploitation thereof by the tribal people of Palamau. It is when she decides to live in defiance of exploitation, despite being forced to recede more and more into the margins that she becomes dangerous. Her screams, an agonised language of affect, as a counterforce to the absence of the language of speech that has been denied to her, terrorises the tribal

people and Hanuman Misras alike. Such a figure must needs be controlled, ‘stoned, not killed,’ allowed a bruised, silenced existence because India of course, is a ‘unity in diversity’ and progressive laws of a modern nation do not allow for overt murder. The materiality of disability in a narrative like ‘Daini’ however, should not be overlooked at the expense of its symbolic potentials. In a narrative where caste and gender figure as ‘emergent’ categories that challenge the nationalistic rhetoric of a glorious unified nation to make one ‘duly ashamed of the true face of India,’ disability as another emergent identity category further problematizes matters. It brings to light the triple marginalisation faced by some women in districts like Palamau—by virtue of gender, caste and disability. It thereby draws attention to the disabling politics of society where the impairments of a woman who is otherwise perfectly capable of work render her vulnerable to exploitation. Somri’s story reveals a society created by the able-bodied for the able-bodied. It is this exploitative society that transforms Somri’s impairments into disability and denies her access to the basic amenities of food, living and shelter. If Palamau indeed is a microcosm of India, then the story draws attention to the reality of several marginalised communities and the layers of marginalisation even within those communities—stark reality but no solution. Although at the ending of the story, Somri is retrieved by her community and the people shun Hanuman Mishra, such a conclusion hardly seems satisfactory. As Rekha observes,

However, [after] the retrieval of Somri, now a mother at the end of the story, the tribal (sic.) are ultimately able to see through the oppressive and hegemonizing discursivity of the like of Hanuman Misras. They also resolve not to work in his brick-kilns. But this optimism is very fragile. The confrontation still lurks beneath the calm surface. Even when Somri is ultimately retrieved and reclaimed by the tribal of Tura village, she is

reclaimed more as a mother than as an autonomous individual. Woman's destiny is still bound with the destiny of patriarchal norms. Still she is treated as subaltern and a non-entity in the male dominated society. Further the upper class people think it to be their right to exploit the downtrodden. (147)

Jyoti Syal, in her reading of the story further notes:

The voice of the narrator becomes the voice of the collective conscience which asks us all to confront what it means to be a low-caste dumb (sic.) woman in a society dominated by the rich, and the powerful...Finally, the author declares that this is nothing less than a war for the rights of the dispossessed which has to be fought on all fronts: social, economic, as well as political and this war is also for liberation from all types of fear, which is the right of every man, woman and child:

We are fighting a great war. War against superstition (you see, the society thinks of them as criminals); war against atrocity (because police and public both kill them cruelly); war against a system which allows these things to happen. So, this is really a war of liberation. My reading is, India cannot be called really independent because these people have been kept in bondage. Also because this basic war was not fought. That is why this so-called image of India is crumbling down on all fronts. That's all.(151-152)

That this war shall have to be fought by the tribal people of Palamau themselves is also made clear by Devi as she ruthlessly satirizes the European social worker and critiques the well-meaning Indian intellectual. In the hands of one Kurt Muller in the story, the tale of the Indian 'daini' "turns into a lurid tale." Several photographs are attached with the article penned by Kurt Muller. The photographs are of 'sevika' Aileen Bharati, who had been 'painted black' and was

photographed holding a roast chicken in her hand. The photographs were so realistic that she landed a lead role in the movie *The Witch* that was to be made based on the article. Characters like Kurt Muller, Aileen Bharati and Peter Bharati in the text are caricatures of Edward Said's orientalist— creating for their own benefit an exaggerated, distorted 'reality' of the oriental (here, the tribal population of Palamau) in which the voices of the orientals themselves are silenced. Mahasweta Devi leaves no stone unturned to expose the elaborate hoax such Europeans undertake in the name of social service, their dishonest means of data collection and unethical yellow journalism. As opposed to this, the figure who represents the Indian intellectual in the story, Sharan Mathur, "is extremely honest, hardworking and ambitious." (Devi 88) He is a schoolteacher who is also working on the Kol rebellion for his doctoral thesis. As he roams from village to village in search of material, he is well aware of the social and geographical dynamics of the villages mentioned in the story. However, despite being respected by and friendly with most of the tribal people, Sharan Mathur is sensitive to the fact that being caste Hindu, there existed an interminable divide between them and him. For him, the difficulties of the lives of the rural tribal people, their hunger and anger were not lived experiences. This perhaps causes deep anxiety in Sharan and the narrator alike regarding the use of tribal stories and history for the purpose of a degree, a doctoral thesis. The narratorial voice evocatively offers insight into Sharan's psyche:

Suddenly Mathur understood. These people have no niche in the man-made economic cycle. Brick kiln-*colliery*-Bokaro steel-timber industry-railroad-crops, fields—everything has made them redundant—

Nature is their only hope. If it rains, crops grow, the forest flourishes, roots and tubers are available, there are fish in the

river. Nature's breasts are dry with no rain. So they hold the *daini* responsible and are angry. The people of Bharat don't want them. If nature, too, turns away, they will be wiped out...

Mathur understands why they are angry. Despite this knowledge, he won't be able to meet them as an equal on their mental plane. Like them, he is a local boy. But Mathur holds the butt of his gun in his hands. Its barrel aims at their chests. Caste Hindu versus adivasi. It is impossible for the killer to drop the gun, link hands and become one with the *target*. (Devi 118)

As an academician, Sharan arrives at a theoretical understanding of the social, political and economic reasons behind a witch hunt in a place like Palamau. The tribal population has been relegated to the margin in all these three spheres. They have been denied a voice and means of representation. They have no other way but to take recourse to superstition in order to explain the wretched condition of their lives. Just as they are attacked by the powerful dominant structure of the nation, they in turn, unleash their violence on people more defenceless than they. As a responsible intellectual, Sharan is aware that he is complicit in this politics of marginalisation.

In a cultural materialist approach to reading the text, passages like this rupture the rhetoric of glorification and unity that governs nationhood and an alternative picture of India—the India inhabited by tribal populations, by the disabled—enters into discourse thereby throwing into question terms like 'modern' and 'developing' that are often used to describe the nation today.

By the end of the *Daini* episode, something changes in Sharan, a change that he cannot articulate but can only express through tears. This change makes him realise that his academic pursuit, his life as an intellectual made his feelings run 'parallel' with the feelings of people like the *pahaan*. While there would always be camaraderie

and mutual respect, ‘Mathur and *pahaan* are like the river and the railway line, if they meet at some point, disaster is inevitable.’ (Devi 116) He continues to teach in Tohri and visit villages like Murhai and Hesadi to bring people medicine and talk to the *pahaan*. His realisation makes him finally abandon his idea of a doctoral thesis and a subsequent career in America. This kind of intellectual pursuit—the milking of stories from marginalised people by expressing transitory solidarity with their cause, the narrator seems to indicate, runs close to being as exploitative as the orientalist pursuit. In doing so, she perhaps questions the ethics of the likes of the social historian, the ethnographer, the student of law and so on. How humanitarian are the tools of research in the Humanities and what does such research translate into in the lives of those researched? These are questions that continue to be asked and sensitive researchers have perhaps arrived at only an extremely tenuous peace with themselves regarding the answers.

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