

Portrayal of Gender Discrimination in Mahaswetadevi's 'Statue'

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Abstract:

Mahasweta Devi being writer activist projects through her writings the status of women which is not being very different from what women are facing from the past and in a way fighting for their cause. The writer, along with portraying the harsh realities of the exploitation of the other marginalized sections of the society, also exposes the naked truth of how women, who are also marginalized in the patriarchal society in India are exploited, oppressed. Though women are given the ultimate position of goddess in our culturally rich society, they are in a pathetic condition of fighting for their natural human rights. This article projects how Mahasweta Devi has portrayed the discrimination faced by women in her short story 'Statue'.

Key words: Patriarchy, Marginalization, Exploitation, Oppression, Resistance, Symbolism, Irony, Human rights.

Introduction:

Gender marginality in India: For the society to grow in a healthy way there needs to be an equal participation of men and women. But it is very obvious from the situations and the world around that women don't get enough opportunities and freedom to participate in any kind of developmental activities. Not only caste discrimination but also Gender discrimination is one of the main reasons for such unhealthy practices in the patriarchal society. For the betterment of the society, there is a strong necessity of gender equality. The term 'gender role' was coined first by sexologist John Money in 1955. This term is used to signify everything that a person says or does to disclose himself/herself as a boy/girl. The elements of such a role includes clothing, speech patterns, movement, occupation and other factors not limited to biological sex. The difference between sex and gender is that sex means what a person is biologically and gender is what s/he becomes socially.

Origin of Gender discrimination:

The word 'gender' sociologically refers to the way the society distinguishes men and women and assigns them the social roles. The difference between sex and gender was introduced to deal with the general tendency to attribute women's subordination to their anatomy. For ages it was believed that the different roles, characteristics and status accorded to men and women are determined by sex and also that they are natural and hence unchangeable.

So, gender is seen closely related to the behaviour and roles assigned to men and women based on their sexual differences. The gendering begins as soon as a child is born in the family. The birth of a son is

celebrated, whereas the birth of a daughter is unwelcome in most of the places. Sons are given a lot of love, importance, respect, better facilities than daughters. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing and the girls are encouraged to be homebound and shy. These gender differences are created by the male dominated society for the convenience of the men.

India has clearly displayed gender equality in the fields of education, employment and health. In our country, it is a common fact that girls and women suffer from high mortality rates. The gender discrimination in the country can be traced back from early history due to several religious and socio-economic practices which have resulted in the wide gap between men and women in the society. The origin of gender discrimination can be traced to the rules laid down by Manu in 200B.C: “by a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house”. In the childhood, the girl should be under the care of her father, in youth, her husband, and in old age, under the care of her sons; a woman must never be independent”. It is also true that different customs that are centuries old control women’s lives.

While tracing the origins of gender inequality, anthropologists had agreed to the fact that women have never occupied a position of higher status or greater political power than men in any society, anywhere, anytime. In some societies, some women had an elevated status. Women had been leaders, controlled wealth, served as warriors also sometimes. But they had been exceptional. But the stark reality of the Indian society is that women do not appear to be privileged or dominant over men. Communities in which the amazons are the leaders appear only in myths. Whatever people esteem in society, men always seem to have at least as much power and rights as women, most of the time they have had more of it. This poses an unavoidable issue. It cannot be a happenstance that in every society men have had higher status than women. Ample varieties of cultures, histories, religions, ideals are found and one of the few constant factors is that women are considered subordinate. The 3 ideas of socialization, tradition and biology refer to the conservation of gender inequality.

However, it can be opined that it will never be possible to give a definitive explanation of the origins of gender inequality. The data are too sparse to decisively distinguish among the proposed explanation. The only plausible theory could be- women due to the responsibility for childbearing had a different set of roles to play than men. There was a division of labor due to this. If women got responsibility of childbearing and rearing, men got greater responsibility of hunting, fishing and war because of which they had to travel far and face dangers outside and this division of labor awarded men with superior political organization and a relative monopoly over weapons. Also, this division of labor derived from reproductive differences pushed men into leadership. But this kind of division of labour was given a n altogether a different definition according to the conveniences of the patriarchal society which is clearly visible in the short story “Statue” written by Mahasweta Devi.

Portrayal of Women in ‘Statue’

In ‘Old Women’ which is a collection of two short stories (‘Statue’ and ‘The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur’), Mahasweta Devi’s trenchant pen delineates the ruthless reality of the socio-economic oppression within which the old women had to survive. Dulali, who is the protagonist in the story (Statue) is married at the age of 12. She belonged to the lower caste Bhunya family. However, they were well to do family, though low caste. This story picturises the life of Dulali from the early 20th century onwards. During this period, child marriage was rampant in the country. Unfortunately, she becomes a widow soon after her marriage and there was no concept called ‘widow remarriage’. Dulali

becomes a victim of these social evils for no fault of hers. Even her family members become her enemies when they come to know that Dinu Thakur, a Brahmin boy is ready to marry her. They had always wanted to see her in widow's white clothes. Right from her childhood she had accepted her fate as a part of her life and believed that nothing can be changed at any cost.

After becoming a widow at the age of 12, she was not allowed to go for any marriages or any auspicious ceremonies. Once when she went to attend her special friend's marriage, 'Out, out! ... Duli! You're not to see a wedding, dear, you're not to join in the wife-rites.' (pg.30) was the response she got from one of her relatives. But being a small girl, she was unaware of all these practices and becomes so upset thinking that she is being punished for no fault of hers and very innocently comes and asks her mother, 'Why did you have my wedding, then? I wouldn't be a widow if you'd done it later. I couldn't see Kusi's wedding.' (pg.30). Nobody within her own family either understands her loss in life or tries to fill the gap. When Dinu expresses his feeling of love towards her, 'fear entered Dulali's heart' (pg.32) and she started wondering 'What is love like? Love means violence in the community, death?' (pg.32). She was scared of even the natural feeling of love and affection as she had seen terrible results of love between even husband and wife amongst her own relatives. 'Dulali's first cousin loved his wife, so his mother treated her daughter-in-law with incredible cruelty.' (pg.32)

Dulali always had heard her father saying 'What's the use of so much love and friendship? You've come to work in this world, do it. Marrying, having children is also world's work. There is no good in loving.' (pg.32) Brought up in this kind of environment, where women are considered as only a working machine or a child bearing machine, Dulali thinks that it is a sin to love or marry a widow. Without realizing that she is the victim of the situation, she taunts Dinu – 'Aren't you afraid of sinning?' (pg.38) when he said that he wanted to marry her. When Dinu tried to convince her that 'Widow can remarry, by law' (pg.38) Dulali doesn't agree saying that 'Our castes don't match, I'm a widow' (pg.39) and hence he should leave her alone and go away.

Her mind is full of one thing that she is a 'low caste, and a widow' (pg.35) which she thinks is a social stigma. When her father came to know about Dinu's wish to marry his daughter, in the name of affection for his daughter, talks as if it is a great sin to love and marry and that his daughter doesn't have any share in this sin at all – 'My darling never wore a bit of colour since childhood, she's never even raised her voice.' (pg.41) Being her own father instead of feeling bad and sad for her fate, he feels proud that she has followed the custom of widowhood and feels still more happy that she has not crossed her limits of being a girl in this patriarchal society. Even at such a young age she had understood the ways and expectations of the family members and the society. This is obvious when she tells Dinu that 'a marriage between you and me is not to be, Dinu. As long as I live, I'll have to depend on my father or my brother...' (pg.42) She had got in her mind that a woman can never be free to think or act by her own free will at any point of time and that she has to depend on father in childhood, husband after marriage and son in old age in this male dominated society.

Though she had lived according to the expectations of her family members, she was ill-treated by the same people who called themselves her kin when they heard that Dinu wanted to marry her. She was 'thrown in a corner with less power than field-cattle' (pg.26) and she had been living her life the same way till her old age. Her own brothers and sisters-in-law had kept her as an outcaste within the family and marked her as misfortune in the Bhunya household. Even at the age of 78, she was earning her keep. She had grown so decrepit without proper food and care that she had started liking fire's warmth all the

time. 'For lack of blood feels chilled all the time. She sits by the fire even in Baishakh and Jaishtha, the high summer months' (pg.14).

But, she never protested for anything. 'She forgot to protest against others' behaviours towards herself. She has accepted hunger pangs as chronic and unalterable realities.' (pg.13) She was reduced to such a level that she had to collect food which would have been kept as the offering at the shrine to satisfy her hunger. Nabin, her nephew was the only person who understood her problems and used to help her now and then. Very different from other members of the family and other men in the society, Nabin used to feel very bad about the condition of his 'Pishi' that he used to feel 'Pishi has survived so desperately for so long, anyone else would have died... Pishi has borne injustice all her life.' (pg.15) Though Dulali belonged to the low caste Bhunya family, her father was a landowner.

Though, she had not much caste related problems, her problems as a woman inside the family was not less. She was marginalized within the family. She was not given any kind of concession of the sound economic condition of the family because of her gender. 'Dulali is made an outsider at home...she is not allowed to enter the household.' (pg.47) Till the old age of 78, Dulali had been made to lead life the same way. Nabin flares up with anger whenever he sees his aunt. 'Pishi complains about nothing. Pishi came only to endure. It's as if even evil treatment she received at the hands of Nabin's father and brother was her due' (pg.59). Everything she had accepted as her fate. This reminds us of the theory of 'fatalism'.

At a later stage when the government wanted to raise the statue of Dinu who was considered to be a freedom fighter when alive, Dulali was threatened not to talk about him or her relation with him to anybody who comes to ask her. Everyone except Nabin thought that it will be a threat to the development of the village if Dulali tells the truth about how Dinu was killed (he was considered as an anti-social element for his activities against social injustice) or how their relationship was not accepted by the community and their own families. Her brother came and told him that 'whatever happened, happened then, All the disaster came from you... If you try to say anything, remember you'll have to get out.' (pg.61) Dulali recalled how she was considered 'poison in the Thakur house, for Dinu's death. In this family Dulali is poison, for the divine rage, Brahman's rage.' (pg.66) Right from her young age, Dulali was suppressed for different reasons of societal norms and never allowed to think for herself. She was brought up in such a kind of environment that she was unable to take decisions for herself. But in her old age, whenever she used to think of the outcaste treatment that she got from the family members, 'day and night she thought, why didn't I listen to him, why didn't I leave, he had said there is a huge world outside Chhatim. She'd think why, for whose pride and respect, did I say 'no' to him?' (pg.47) But she could neither get any answer, nor was there any use of those thoughts. Her life got wasted and withered with lot of torture and injustice even before she could understand what life is all about.

Conclusion:

As time and generations passed, the inequality has taken different shapes according to the conveniences of male members of the society. Nevertheless, there are many healthy decisions and steps being taken by individuals, groups, and government at large to reduce the hiatus between men and women and thus reduce gender discrimination. Further, there existed a group called Subaltern Studies Group which not only kept trying to reduce the effects of gender discrimination but also started giving their voice to the voiceless i.e., subaltern or marginal group of people through their writings.

Several development critics like Ashish Nandi who is a political psychologist, a social theorist, cultural and political critic, Vandana Shiva, who is a philosopher, environmental activist, eco-feminist, Partha chatterjee, who is a subaltern studies and post-colonial Professor, Ranajit Guha, who is a historian and greatly influential in subaltern studies group have involved themselves in subaltern studies and have been speaking about the kind of shameful democracy the country has.

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