

CHAPTER IV

DEALING WITH FRINGES

The wheels of a cart
are bound to move up and down,
but all they have got to do
is grip the earth under them
as firmly as they can
Mother, we are people
from the backwoods,
it is an old habit with us to stitch together
our sorrows and joys with thorns.

HIRA BANSODE'S "LOOK MOTHER"

Introduction

A young girl who works as domestic help in a city utters these lines to her aging mother at a railway station while saying goodbye to her. Thousands of other women like this young girl stitch their sorrows and joys with thorns in this cruel world. Our society does not consider their stories worthy enough to be heard, to be read or to be sympathized. But despite the grim ignorance of society towards these downtrodden people, one woman writer is there, whose life's aim is to work for the betterment of the downtrodden.

When asked what she planned to do the rest of her life, Mahasweta Devi answered that she wanted to fight for the tribals, downtrodden, under-privileged and

write creatively as and when she found the time. The statement shows that Devi is a social activist first and then a writer. This fact doesn't make her writing any less important. She is the most widely translated Indian writer writing in a regional language today. She has been awarded the Sahitya Akademi, and the Magsaysay awards. Besides, she has also been honoured with the Padma Vibhushan for her activist work amongst dispossessed tribal communities. She is also the recipient of India's highest literary award the Jnanpith Award and the Yashwant Rao Chavan National Award. After visiting Palamau District of Bihar in 1965, tribal people became her primary concern. She states in "Introduction" to the *Bitter Soil*:

Shishu 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 "Palamau is a mirror of India: An Introduction" ix)

Thus Devi has used journalism as an avenue for expressing her social concerns. She is also one of the founders of the 'Denotified and Notified Tribal Rights Action Group' which works for better life conditions for India's indigenous people through education, legal intervention and community activism. Her canvas is quite vast— covering almost all categories of the marginalised. Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav in introduction to their book remark:

However, most of Mahasweta's predominant concerns – the predicament of the tribal backwaters, the exploitation of the Adivasis by the landed rich or the urban administrative machinery callously perpetuating a legacy of complicity with the colonizers, bonded

labour and prostitution, the destitution and misery of city dwellers who are condemned to live at the fringes and eke out a meager livelihood, the plight of women who are breadwinners and victims of male sexual violence, dependent widows, ill-treated wives and unwanted daughters whose bodies can fetch a price – are adequately represented through these translations.(Sen and Yadav 13)

Bitter Soil: Tales of Suffering

Bitter Soil is a collection of four stories. It includes “Little Ones”, “The Witch”, “Seeds” and “Salt” and in all these stories Devi has exposed the ugly face of exploiting agencies; the feudal minded landlords, his supporters and religious heads who are responsible for the pitiable conditions of these poor people. In her stories, she has nowhere exaggerated this exploitation since she remarks in the introduction itself:

I believe in documentation. After reading my work the reader should face the truth of facts, and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India.
(“Palamau is a Mirror of India: An Introduction” vii)

Before examining these stories, we must understand the social system prevalent in the region mentioned by Devi in this book. There, society is clearly divided into two parts. One, the exploiters who are land owners, zamindars, moneylenders and upper castes people. This class consists mainly of *Rajputs*, *Brahmins*, *Kayasth* and *Bhumihars*. On the other hand there are low caste people like *Dushad*, *Chamar Ganju* and *Dhobis*. Besides, there are tribal people like *Oraons* and *Mundas* who are also exploited like other low caste people.

The first story of this collection is “Little Ones”. The story is set in *Tohri* village which is attacked by famine. One relief officer is sent there to distribute the relief which includes food, milk, blankets and vaccines for the famine hit people. The BDO tells him about the revolt at *Kubha* village in which three government officers were killed by the *Aagariyas* of *Kubha* village and then they ran into the forest and just disappeared after that. They were one hundred and fifty people in all and none could be found. Then, the relief officer is told about some small and strange children who steal the relief material from the tents. When the relief officer comes to know that despite all his genuine efforts and impartiality, sacks of grains are being stolen from the tents, he is shocked. The relief officer decides to know the truth about the stealing of things and one night he senses something strange. When he comes to know that the tent has been opened and relief has been stolen, he feels betrayed. He decides to catch these children but when he reaches near them, suddenly a realization explodes in his mind. These were not children but adults who turned into dwarfs due to continuous starving. They were *Aagariyas* of *Kubha* village who once disappeared into jungle. Now there are only fourteen of them and rest of them have died. They are forced to steal relief to live somehow in this cruel world. The relief officer feels like a criminal to have enjoyed the blessings of civilization. He utters, Na! Na!:

Because if this is true, then all else is false. According to Copernicus, science, this century, this freedom, plan after plan. So the relief officer reiterates – Na! Na! Na! (“Little Ones” 19)

Devi claims that this change of normal human beings into dwarfs is scientifically proved. If continuous hunger and malnutrition is faced by generations of human beings, they are destined to be reduced in size and normal growth of the body. The same has happened with these *Aagariyas*. There is no way left in front of them besides stealing relief material. The relief officer is shocked to see the state of these tribals. He is ashamed of having eaten good food and having the natural growth of his body. He is not able to utter a single word:

He can't say a word. Standing under the moon, looking at them, hearing their laughter, feeling their penises on his skin, the undernourished body and laughable height of the ordinary Indian male appear a heinous crime of civilization. He feels like a criminal condemned to death. Pronouncing his own death sentence for their stunted forms, he lifts his face up to the moon, his mouth gaping wide. They dance, they laugh, scaly penises brushing against him, his only liberation lies in going mad, rending the atmosphere with the howl of a demented dog. But why isn't his brain sending the order for this throat-shattering scream? Tears stream from his eyes. (20)

The whole story is a clear-cut satire on the mainstream population's and government's ignorance about the terrible condition of the adivasis. The relief officer meditates:

The sight of those who come for relief, the near-naked, shriveled, worm-ridden, swollen bellied adivasi men and women repels him. He had had the impression that adivasi men played the flute and adivasi

women danced with flowers in their hair, singing, as they pranced from hillock to hillock. (2)

The relief officer has visited this place for the first time but even those people who live here are full of apathy for the tribals. None is ready to understand their struggle to survive. The jeep driver of the relief officer remarks, “Animals, all of them. When there is a famine, they dump their kids at the mission gate, they say, “Those people won’t abandon them. Somehow they’ll keep them alive. If they stay with us they’ll die.” (10)

The content of the story is not completely fictional. According to the writer, chronic malnutrition can result in stunting human bodies. She proves her point with the help of some examples and says in introduction:

What I wrote in ‘Little Ones’ is correct. Starvation over generations can reduce ordinary-sized human beings to pygmies. Of course, the starving Aagariyas are savagely angry at a system under which some people eat three meals a day while they are forced to starve. (ix)

Thus the story is an unusual narrative which describes the crippling of the tribes by the mainstream society. Many years after independence, it is shocking to see that some people are reduced in size due to starvation.

The bitterness of the underprivileged against the privileged is more clearly revealed in the story “Seeds”. Lachman Singh of *Kuruda* village represents all cruel landowners who value their labourers less than their beasts. The government also is not able to help these starving labourers. When the trickster of the village Dulan

Ganju befools such deaf and dumb ‘gornment’ by getting seeds, fertilizers and money for bullocks for an infertile land which he has never ploughed, the whole village is happy:

Everyone in the village was pleased. The government has never protected their interests. The government’s BDO never helps them with farming. Their children never get to enter the government’s primary school. Lachman Singh or Daitari Singh force them to harvest their crops for four annas a day or one meal, at gun point. The government belongs to Lachman Singh, Daitari Singh and Hanuman Misra. If such a government is fleeced by someone who happens to be a Dulan Ganju, then the villagers are bound to be full of appreciation. (“Seeds” 31)

This Dulan Ganju tries to explain to Karan who raises his voice to increase wages and exhorts the villagers to get united. He says, “Make no mistake. The entire sarkar will help Lachman. He can open fire and they won’t notice. But you raise a stick and they’ll catch you.” (33)

Lachman Singh who is not habitual to hear the voice of these ‘animals’ against him sets Karan’s village on fire. He doesn’t only kill Karan but also his calm brother Bulaki and comes to Dulan’s infertile land and asks him to bury them deep in the earth. He also asks him to make a machaan and protect the dead bodies from wild animals and threatens Dulan to take his life if he opens his mouth. Dulan is greatly shocked at the cruel behaviour of these dominating zamindars and in a state of mental upheaval thinks bitterly on the state of all persons like him:

Once in a while it is necessary to rend the sky with leaping flames and the screams of the dying, just to remind the harijans and untouchables that government loves appointment of officers and constitutional decrees are nothing. Rajputs remain Rajputs, Brahmins remain Brahmins and Dushad-Chamar–Ganju–Dhobi remain lower than Brahmin-Kayasth – Rajput- Bhumihar- Kurmi. The Rajput or Brahmin or Kayasth or Bhumihar or Yadav or Kurmi is, in places, as poor as, or even poorer than, the harijan. But they are not tossed into the flames because of their caste. The fire god, having tasted the flesh of forest- dwelling black skinned outcasts during the burning of Khandav forest, is fond of the taste of the untouchable poor. (35)

The fight for more wages continues and the torture of Lachman Singh also doesn't come to an end. He and his henchmen have decided to shut every mouth which opens against them. Lachman Singh assures the gentle SDO that everything is going fine during harvesting but as soon as SDO leaves, he avenges those labourers who raised their voice against him. Dulan is forced to dig four deep pits for four more corpses. His mind is under a heavy burden. There is no legal action against Lachman Singh. He is worried about the safety of his two sons and ponders over the situation:

Dulan wanders around with a heavy mind and looking at Dhatua-Latua, wonders if they should flee. But where can they go? Where will a Dulan Ganju be safe in his motherland of southeast Bihar? Where will there be no Lachman Singh? (42)

His fears are justified because he has been the witness of the fatal cruelties of Lachman Singh. No father on this earth can bear the deaths of his sons. He tries his best to keep his sons away from the wrath of the landlord but all his efforts fail since the youth of the village have a strong resentment against the killings of other villagers. During the Holi festival, Dulan's son Dhatua, intoxicated with *moha*, composes a song which goes like this:

Where has Karan gone?
And Dulaki?
Why is there no news of them?
They are lost in the police files.
Where is Asrafi Hajam?
And his brother Mohar?
Where are Mahuban and Paras?
Why is there no news of them?
They are lost in the police files.
Karan fought the twenty five paise battle.
Bulaki and Mohar fought alongside their elder brothers.
All lost in the police files, lost. (43)

He has to pay the fine for this song and his revolutionary spirit by his life. Dulan finds himself helpless to protest against this cruelty. But he will not let the deaths of these labourers go waste. He sows the seeds in that infertile land where the seven dead bodies are resting. Miraculously the paddy grows in tall plants and there is a wonderful crop. Lachman Singh comes to see his harvest since he had told Dulan not to farm that land. Suddenly, Dulan grabs Lachman and pulls him down

on the earth. Now gun is there in Dulan's hand. He smashes Lachman's head with the butt of that gun. Calling him 'malik' since it is his habit, he expresses all his suppressed fury saying, "I won't let you go today, malik, I won't let you harvest our crops; won't let you shoot, burn houses, kill people. You have harvested enough." (53)

The sense of revolt can be easily seen at the end of the story. We can easily see now that the brutal and naked picture of India is so horrifying in Mahasweta Devi's fiction that any of the readers can feel blessed. This heartrending picture is not fictitious since it is based on her true experiences. She comments in the introduction, "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." (X)

The third story of this collection "The Witch" in an eye opening manner shows the tyranny of the so-called high class people and especially the Brahmins who misguide those low-class people who are already under the burden of debt. These people who consider the torture of upper class, a part of their life, sometimes wake up against them but they never dare to break the sacred rules set by these Brahmins since whatever is associated with religion, becomes so pious, one cannot think of blemishing. The centuries old Brahmin tyranny is still prevalent in some areas where people don't think of getting education since their hunger is of primary concern for them. When this hunger is worsened by some natural calamity, they are full of suspicion, doubt and insecurity. The villagers of Kuruda village think that some daini has entered their village. This concept of 'daini' is the product of

Brahmins' malice who think that being Brahmin is a boon for them and these low caste people are immersed in utter sin.

The incidents following this prediction are full of light humour but the undercurrent tone is of utter pain and distress. How a Brahmin shows his supremacy is clearly seen when Hanuman Mishra explains the matter of sin to these so-called low caste people and says:

They are great sinners. Or else, during the Naxal upheaval, JP movement, Emergency, why would the police ransack their villages? How come they did not touch the higher castes? They are big sinners, these Ganju, Dushad, Dhobi, Oraon and Mundas. The last two groups are the worst. Today, they worship their own barbaric gods, tomorrow Jesus in the Missions, the day after, the Hindu Gods. They show no discretion in the matter of worship. So they get no protection or patronage from any particular god during famine-drought – police attacks. They must be major sinners, Or else why would they die in famines or floods? They are not ashamed of begging. They are borne idle, yet say they can't get work. ("The Witch" 59)

The story is also a powerful projection of the poverty and harsh circumstances which these poor people undergo. Even the weather does not sympathize with them. The story opens with these grim lines:

No rain in the month of Chaitra. A fiery Baisakh and Jaisthya come and go, and the monsoon month go. Ashad is as fierce as Dhumavati

clouds play hide and seek. Kuruda's philosophical pessimist Budhni Oraon says with grave satisfaction- Oh, this time we will have drought for sure, and famine as well, I just know it. (57)

First, the famine and second the superstition of daini caused by the priest make their situation even worse. The mainstream society can never understand the plight of these poor people:

Those who provide relief, like the relief officer, mission workers, the sadhus of the Seva Sangh, all noticed the suppressed violence and hardness in the eyes and the faces of the downtrodden. Eyes as restless as the tide, searching for something. Very surprising. Because in their experience the adivasis of these areas are by nature totally unfeeling. During a famine, they abandon their children at the mission gates and disappear. If their village is burnt down, they don't return to it in a hurry. If explanations are sought, they say – The children will die if they stay with us; at least in the mission they'll stay alive. (62)

Devi, very satirically, unveils the hypocrisy of middle class people and especially the Brahmin priests. Whereas the poor of the same area are starving to death, Hanuman Mishra is planning to waste many kilograms of ghee.

Hanuman Mishra is desirous of feeding a sacrificial fire with one *quintal* of *ghee* over seven days; and that the white secretary of the 'Krishna Consciousness' *ashram* in Patna has offered to provide the required *ghee*. On one condition. As the *ghee* is poured in, the praise

of Shiva, *Shivastotram*, is to be recited in a low key. Because, at the same time, these people will be playing ‘Lord Krishna, where are you?’ in their *station wagon* parked outside. This has put Hanuman Misra in quandary. He has no quarrel with Krishna *sangeet*. (64)

Bisra Dushad of Burudiha was a man of skills. He knew the medicinal value of all herbs and plants. He was a water diviner. Villagers of that area were highly dependent on him. But such a man committed suicide because he killed his only possession, a black cow, thinking of it as a daini. Without the cow he would never be able to pay his debt and survive, so he committed suicide. Even the writer cannot help making a comment on the poverty of such destitute people.

Poverty and destitution, to the Birsa Dushads of this world, are as inevitable and all-pervasive as the air and the sky. Birsa had no particular grouse against the lack of an easy life. Neither he nor the others had such a life. In the *communism* of poverty, the Dushad-Ganju-Oraon-Munda belong to the same class, they’re ‘*comrades*’. (67)

In the search of so-called ‘daini’ who is responsible for children’s death, famine and some other strange incidents, they are not only suspicious about others but also about themselves lest a ‘daini’ should enter their bodies. And one day ‘daini’ is seen gnawing the raw flesh of a bird in the heart of Kuruda river. Although Hanuman Mishra, the Priest has told them not to kill the daini they ask, “Everyone has the right to kill us, why can’t we kill the daini.” (76)

Then forgetting their starvation, they start searching for daini and having found her, they start stoning. The supposed daini leaves that place and enters Hesadi village. Now Hesadi village is full of fear and strange notions. After some tragic events again the search for daini is begun. Over a hundred people including the Pahaan (Priest) of Hesadi village and the Pahaan of Tura village enter the jungle. They see daini whose limbs are not natural. Her voice is also unnatural and she always utters ‘Aan –aan.’ Since she has also been seen eating the flesh of birds, her being a daini is confirmed. She enters a cave and all villagers decide to fill the cave with smoke so that she can come out. Something unbelievable happens. Her screams stop and the sound of a new-born child comes out of the cave. At this, the pahaan of Tura village has a realization, he runs into the cave and starts crying ‘Somri’. Everyone is startled at his behaviour. Inside the cave, he explains the matter to Mathur and says:

“My daughter” The Pahaan of Tura addresses the floor. Then lifting his eyes in the darkness- ‘she is dumb’, she can’t speak. Her body grew but not her brain! I sent her to the household of Hanuman Mishra in Tahar, to work in the Cowshed. When? A year ago. For the last five months there has been no news of her. Misraji say she is gone away, who knows where? I’ve searched high & low, I have not been able to find her. Later I learnt 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! (120)

Thus the story “Witch” shows the hypocrisy and ruthlessness of so-called Brahmin Hanuman Misra who turned a living human being into a daini because her son had molested a dumb innocent girl. Mahasweta Devi urges in the introduction:

So the sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies: The feudal-minded landowner, his henchmen, the so-called religious head of the administrative system, all of whom, as a combined force, are out for lower-caste blood. (ix)

The shortest story of this collection “Salt” most elaborately deals with the root problem of these downtrodden people whom neither the police nor the government are able to understand. When the villagers of Jhujhar village refuse to do wageless labour or begaari for Uttam Chand, the moneylender Baniya, he vows to avenge them by stopping the supply of salt in shops for them and says:

Not by hand or by bread, *nimak se marega*, I’ll kill you by salt, Uttamchand bania had said. He was the bania, the trader- he was also the *mahajan*, the moneylender; and for many generations, his family had ruled the Jhujhar *belt*. That the local Oraon and Kol peoples would say ‘no’ to him was unimaginable. (Salt 124)

The *adivasis* who are forced to do *beggary* for the bania were actually the real owners of the entire forest region but the forefathers of Uttamchand entered the area and drove out the *adivasis* land by buying that at a very cheap cost. The writer comments,

Adivasis then were as wary as they are today of accounts-documents-deeds-laws. Hence the *adivasis* of Jhujhar don’t even know when

they once owned their own land. When they could bring the harvest of their own labour home. (125)

These poor people even don't know that wageless labour (*begar*) is illegal. The entire village is bound to serve Uttamchand for some unrecorded debt of their forefathers. Every year, at harvesting time they walk twelve miles to Uttamchand's village. When all the young adivasis in the leadership of Purti Munda refuse to do wageless labour (*begar*) to Uttamchand, he is helpless in this matter but vows to avenge them in a different manner by refusing them the salt.

The shop of the bania is the only buying place within these poor adivasis' reach. It is not possible for the poor villagers to pay the fair for the bus and go to the town to buy salt. Somehow they manage for some days. Their situation is so pathetic without salt that they think that doing wage less labour was better than this.

To the villagers of Jhujhar, those days of wage less labour, with no rights to the crop, seem happier by comparison. They mentally weigh the losses and gains. Dark, dirty lumps of salt prove much heavier in the balance; while an end to wage less labour, and the right to a share of the crop, come out lighter. (129)

Everyone who tries to help these adivasis is convinced by the bania that it is not his fault rather the problem lies with the adivasis. A young person from the city argues with Uttam Chand but has to accept defeat.

The youth concedes defeat and comes away with the good intention of arranging to start a people's shop in the Jhujhar belt at the first opportunity. The intention stays with him for a few days. Then he

goes off elsewhere to settle a dispute over an illicit liquor shop, and forgets all about Jhujhar (135)

Now the adivasis who refused 'begar' for this baniya, are in dire need for the cheapest commodity of India. The officials of the forest are also convinced by Uttam Chand that they are only troublemakers. The adivasis are ready to sell their crops and even their pet chickens in exchange of salt. Now Purti has only one option and that is to steal the salt earth from the forest which is given in plenty to elephants. Purti tries to gather this salt mixed with earth when the elephants leave the place in the evening. His only problem is '*ekoa*', the elephant who has been driven out of the group due to his bad behaviour.

After all the elephants have left, an old tusker arrives. With due warning. He shows no sign of domesticity, though elephants, as a rule, are family minded animals, *Ekoa!* Purti says to himself, and clings to the tree in fear. Some young elephant has driven him away and taken over as leader of the herd. Such elephants are called *ekoa*, and the *ekoa* is highly *avoidable*. There's no knowing what the *ekoa* will do. Exiled from leadership and from the herd, his behaviour turns irresponsible. (136)

This *ekoa* elephant starts behaving in a strange manner. The whole forest department is in tension over *ekoa's* behaviour. The forest department is not able to understand that the elephant has sensed the stealing of salt earth by the tribals of Jhujhar. They are not able to warn Purti and his friends who in fear of being caught

always avoid them. One day *ekoa* reaches even Jhujhar village. The village elders warn Purti saying:

An elephant is an ant-an elephant is a butterfly- an elephant is the breeze! Such a huge body, but when it wants, it can creep up unnoticed and squash your head with its foot, and you won't even know. You fool! You shit-eating insect! You didn't see him, he saw you. Why else would he come? (141)

But forgetting the advice, Purti and his friends try to steal salt earth again and this was the greatest mistake of their life. They were killed by *ekoa*. In all the four stories, the outer world or the mainstream society is not able to understand the plight and sufferings of these people. None can imagine that human beings can be in such dire need of salt earth which is even available in plenty to animals. Purti and his friends lose their lives trying to steal salt earth. The outside world's comment is:

They died trying to steal the elephant's salt earth! These few words uttered by the daroga becomes their epitaph, and it is proved finally that the inhabitants of Jhujhar can by no means be trusted. The herbivorous animal needs salt, and now man steals even that! This unnatural act reminds them once more of how difficult it is to protect wild animals from the greed of humans. (144)

The writer raises a question on the system which cannot provide even the basic necessities to these people. After working for whole of their lives, they are in the grip of a selfish system even in the post-independence India. The writer comments through the village headman:

But the underlying truth seems to be something else. All this because of mere salt! They could not get salt. If they could buy salt, three men and one elephant would still be alive. Someone else was responsible, someone else. The person who would not sell the salt? Or some other laws? Some other system? The law and the system under whose aegis Uttam Chand's refusal to sell salt is not counted as a crime? (145)

Thus the beautiful picture of India progressing and developing in leaps and bounds seems to be totally fake after realizing the pain of these so called low caste people. These poor people of that area don't even know that India is now independent. They think that only the name is changed because for them the situations are as ever. They don't know that *bet begari* or wage less bonded labour is also illegal and even if they come to know, they can't be free from the clutches of the blood-suckers like Hanuman Misra, the Uttam Chand and the Lachman Singh. They are tortured, exploited and even killed for the sake of petty selfish motives of upper classes. One is full of anger not only towards these landlords but also towards government who works as a puppet in the hands of these rich and the privileged people. Like Prem Chand who describes the lives of poor farmers most poignantly not even being a part of them, Mahasweta Devi, although belonging to high class society, reaches to the very core of the root problems and sufferings of the marginalized. She urges in the introduction:

For I believe in anger, in justified violence, and so peel the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the Government, to expose its naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation; and

place this India, a hydra-headed monster, before a people's court, the people being the oppressed millions.

I have not written these stories to please any readers. If they get under the skin of these stories and feel as the writer feels, that will be reward enough. Incidentally, 'Seeds', 'Little Ones' and 'Salt' also feature my experiments with a language which is brutal, lethal at times. This was needed. These stories, written in the 80s, are becoming contemporary realities every day in India. Whatever is written in these stories is continuing unabated. So where is the time for sleep? The situation demands immediate response and action.

(Introduction x)

Five Plays: Subalternity Dramatized

Theatre is and has always been a reflection of this complex world, complicated human beings and the gamut of human emotions. It is a mirror of man's hopes, values, feelings, ambitions and struggles. For Antonio Gramsci, theatre is as important as economy in the development of society. For Mahasweta Devi, theatre is only a means to reach the masses and give them her message. In all her works, Devi has unveiled the ugly faces of the exploiters, the feudal minded landowners, his supporters, and the religious heads who are responsible for the pitiable conditions of these poor people. She is not only an author but a social activist and a humanist also. Hence, Devi's oeuvre is about common men and women and she writes about them having an explicit agenda in her mind since:

...for Mahasweta Devi they are neither figures nor statistics, nor a mere percentage of this fat subcontinent, they are her India, the real India to her. Their slavery is sufficient proof that the war of independence is still to be fought and won. (Jaidev 5)

It is with this purpose that Mahasweta Devi transformed her novel and stories into plays. Marginality is a sociological term which describes the situation of groups of people who are excluded or persecuted by the dominant culture or power in a community. They are the people who make the core theme of Devi's books. How much she has been successful in her task is clearly evident from an excerpt from the paper of Sonali Jain which includes a remark from Vijay Tendulkar about Mahasweta Devi:

I have had the occasion of meeting the celebrated author Mahasweta Devi only twice. The first was a peaceful meeting, and in the second, I couldn't help the tears in my eyes- the evening of the Katha Chudamani award, 1999. On the occasion, the veteran playwright Vijay Tendulkar spoke of Mahasweta Devi's commitment to writing as remarkable, always potent, suffusing guilt in him. A guilt of only being a man of words, of his incapability of real commitment towards the deprived and the marginalised. He said "I would be less guilty even if I could whole heartedly take responsibility of one poor family, I can only be in awe of Mahasweta Devi. I am extremely inspired by her work." (qtd in Hazar Chaurasi ki Ma: A Psychoanalytic Reading, 190)

1970s had an important influence on her works. She herself asserts in an interview given to the translator in April 1983 and included in the introduction of the *Five Plays*:

The Naxalite movement between the late 1960s and early 1970s with its urban phase climaxing in 1970-71, was the first major event after I had become a writer that I felt an urge and an obligation to document.
(qtd in introduction viii)

This leftist militant movement started in Naxalbari region of West Bengal and began as a rural revolt of landless workers and tribal people against landlords and moneylenders. Student groups of urban area were also attracted towards this movement. According to Mahasweta Devi, the theme of this play was the awakening of an apolitical mother. The play was also adapted in a film by famous filmmaker Govind Nihalani. The story revolves around an upper middle class woman whose life is shattered when her son is killed for his alliance with the Naxalites. Mahasweta Devi herself translated this play from the Bengali version '*Hajarchurashirma*'. Although Sujata is not marginalized in terms of class and caste, she is marginalized in her own group. She is the mother of the protagonist of the play Brati Chatterjee who helps the Naxalites, is labeled as a rebel and is killed in an encounter.

Sujata is a traditional mother who loves her son but does not know anything about his ideology. One morning she gets the shocking news that her son is lying dead in the police morgue bearing the corpse no.1084. She tries to know her son's

ideas and values after his death and in this process she gets alienated from her own hypocritical society.

Although Sujata had four children but she shared a special relationship with her son Brati who was always against the value system of his family. When he is killed mercilessly for his alliance with the Naxalites, the father refuses to go to the police station. Throwing away all social pretensions, Sujata goes to the police station. After the death of her loving son Brati, she tries to peep into his past and she meets Somu's mother who she thinks knew Brati better than her. We come to know about the brutal killing of Brati and his friends. Somu's mother tells Sujata:

Somu's father ran all the way. He had such faith in the police, but they would not even take down his complain. They didn't do a thing. They only sent their vans when it was all over to collect the dead bodies. When it was all over, he had run to the police headquarters at Lal Bazar too (*she shakes her head again*). They did not do a thing. That was more than he could bear, and he died of the shock. O God! Is there no justice in this country? God! No justice? He went on and on asking till he was dead. (Mother of 1084, 22)

Sujata also needs Brati's beloved Nandini and hears the tales of horrible tortures she had undergone. Nandini contemplates on the prevailing conditions of 1970's and remarks, "People think that we hate whatever exists (*smiles*). But some day there will be people who'll say that behind all our apparent hatred lay a craving to love and to revere. (26)

Nandini is surprised to know that despite the killing of hundreds of young persons and unjustified imprisonment of thousands of men, the outside world is so calm and busy in its daily senseless chores. They have no feelings for the persons who underwent the tortures of the state and the police for a cause. Nandini herself suffers from poor vision because of the tortures of the police. She has now no future ahead of her. She remarks:

How can you be so smug and complacent? With so many young men killed, so many imprisoned, how can you wallow in your complacency? It's your 'all's right with the world, let's go on nicely' that frightens me most. How can you carry on with your pujas, concerts, cultural festivals, film festivals, poetry fests? (35)

The play is also a strong criticism of the pretensions of high middle class society. In the beginning we see that when Brati's father comes to know of his son's death, he is busier in protecting his reputation rather than going to his son's dead body. The whole family, except Brati's mother, considers him to be a black spot on the family's reputation and calls him the misguided youth. They even invite Sarol Pal from police department to their home who was somewhere responsible for the brutal killings of young men. He even refused to hand over the body of dead Brati to his family.

In the process of finding her son, in fact, Sujata finds her own dignity. From the role of a neglected mother, she gets the role of self-asserting woman. In the very end of the play, Sujata's speech confirms her awakening as well as her revolt against the system and values of her society:

Still in uniform? Still on duty? Mass action again in Baranagar?
(Turns to the dancers, all absorbed in their whirling movements).
Still the Black Maria, the revolver in the holster, the helmeted
policemen within the van? Where's the job this time? Where will the
siren screech? Where will the streets resound to the pounding boots,
the threatening van? Where will bullets pierce the wind? Where-
again? Where will Brati run to? Where *(Addressing the audience)*
Why don't you speak? Speak, for heaven's sake, speak, speak, speak!
How long will you endure it in silence? Where is the place where
there's no killer, no bullets, no prison, no vans? *(Goes Round the
Stage, 41)*

The next play "Aajir" by Mahashweta Devi dramatizes the social evil of bonded labour still found in the remote areas where bonded labourers don't even know that it has been considered a crime in independent India. Many people serve as wage-less labour because their ancestors took some loans from the rich people. N. D. Kamble remarks in his book about bonded labour.

In practice bonded labour in India is the culmination of debtor-creditor relation into slave-master relation. But the bonded labour is an outcome of socio-economic system prevailing in India. Some people who were deprived of socio-economic and political power had to depend on those who enjoy these powers. Criminal poverty of vulnerable sections exposed them to exploitations in the built-in mechanism of socio-economic system. Economic dependence and

poverty of the underprivileged section of the society forced them to be slaves. (Kamble 3)

“Aajir” is the story of a slave called Paatan whose ancestors signed a bond of slavery. He is not allowed to fall in love and marry. In Bengali, the word Aajir stands for one who has sold himself for some amount of money. Paatan’s ancestors Golak and Gairabi sold themselves for just three rupees. They also sold their coming generations for the same amount. Thus Paatan loses his freedom in the hand of Maatang. The play begins with Paatan introducing himself,

“I am an aajir. *(Pause. Then he shouts)* Sirs, my dear Sirs,

I’m an aajir. Ages ago, in the hoary past there was once a terrible famine in the tracts of our Ayodhya hills. And then.... *(He breaks in to a dance with an imaginary drum, beating it as he rotates in a circle, singing)*

It began with the drought, with the crops drying up in the fields, and hundreds dying of hunger, and all the rice and all the grain piling up in Raavan Shunri’s granary, tell my forefather Golak Kura, to save his life:.....*(pauses, then in a wail, in prose)* sold himself and his wife Gairabi Dasi away for only three rupees...he sold away all his descendants too at once... *(pause, points with finger, to show)*. This is how it was. (“Aajir” 45)

Now Paatan whose ancestors sold themselves for just three rupees, serves Maatang and his wife. Maatang beats him every day and does not allow him to marry. His wife who is not able to beget child from Maatang, casts her eyes on Aajir

Paatan and wants to have a son from him. But Paatan regards her as a mother and avoids her cravings for him. One day, she persuades him to bring a gypsy women to her home who will give her some potions. Paatan falls in love with this woman and wants to flee with her. He could not succeed in his plan because the mistress of the house tells the whole plan to the mob. The mob catches him and beats him very harshly. His fate is uttered by the mob in these lines.

(They encircle Paatan, point at him and sing in malicious glee.)

The world's not for you.

The gipsy woman's not for you.

As long as the aajir's bond's there,

You're just a maimed beast,

And Maatang's your God.

The gipsy woman's not for you.

The world's not for you.

Life's not for you. (61)

They all consider Paatan not a human being but an animal. They find a sadistic pleasure in his suffering and say:

We'd love to see his blood. Famine and drought scorch our lives. The world scorched. We haven't slaughtered a buffalo for ages. We'd love to see the aajir's blood....VOICE *(on tape)* We'd love to see his blood, Aah! Tied to the post, the aajir will be whipped, and we'll watch the sight. What a sight....

Paatan screams like an animal in pain. (62)

He is beaten up very harshly by the mob and his master. The rain starts and he is tied up to a post. The mistress of the house comes to him and persuades him to elope with her. She tells him that if he agrees, she will give him the Aajir's bond. Freedom is only a dream for Paatan. To get it, he elopes with the mistress. In the way, when he asks for the bond, the mistress reveals the fact that the bond had long been turned to dust. Paatan do not believe her and thinks that she has double crossed her. He came with her only in the hope of getting freedom from that bond. He strangles her to death in a fit of anger. The crowd with Maatang enters the scene shouting that there is no freedom for the slave. Paatan admits that he has killed the mistress for not giving Aajir's bond. At this, Maatang reveals the secret saying, "How could she? I haven't seen it myself, my father hadn't seen it, it had turned to dust long ago in this gaamchha in which it had been once upon a time...." (67)

Paatan, although a murderer now, is relieved because all his life he craved for freedom and he is free from the bond now.

Like everyone else in the world, I was a free man (*stating a fact*), and I alone didn't know (*looks at the dead woman lying at his feet*). This luscious was for me. I didn't know (*looks around*). What are you waiting for? The police station's quite far. Come, let's start moving (*Mob comes closer to him*). I alone didn't know (*Raises his head and stretches his hands out in regal dignity*). (68)

Guru Charan Behera in his paper "The Politics of Class, Caste and Gender: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's "Aajir"," remarks:

The play does not end with doom; it ends with an awareness of the falsity and illusion, on which a slave's life is based. Not only his life but lives of his ancestors have been a mockery. He is confronted with what Althusser calls an "absent cause", or what Lacan terms "Real" to characterize history, represented here by the elusive non-existent bond. (92)

Mahashweta Devi has always attacked on the superstitions of the marginalized which make them more miserable. The lack of education and the hard conditions of life make the poor people suspicious of their surrounding and they feel some kind of psychological relief in imposing the reasons of their miseries on some vulnerable victim especially the woman. Regarding 'Bayen' Samik Bandyopadhyay in his "Introduction" to *Five Plays* notes:

The metaphoric core of Bayen, in which a mother is branded as a witch and separated from her son till the latter acknowledges the dead woman as his mother, lies deeper than the obvious protest against the inhumanity of superstition. In the one scene in which the son confronts the witch-mother who herself fears the confrontation more than the son, Mahasweta touches the larger space of the social spaces that separate mother and son in a male-dominant system. (Introduction 13)

"Bayen" is the story of a 'Dom' Chandidasi Gangadasi who buries dead children and guards their graves. She marries Malinder Gangaputta, an attendant at morgue. They have a son called Bhagirath and live a happy life. After burying

children, Chandidasi's job is to guard the grave the whole night from the jackals. For this purpose she has to stay away from her suckling son, Bhagirath. She talks to herself by night and wants to go back to her loving son. Her society starts thinking that she is talking to dead children and she is also sucking them. Her own husband declares her to be a Bayen. A Bayen is a woman, who if casts an evil eye on any child, it will die surely. The whole scene of declaring Chandidasi a bayen is quite moving and shows the stone-heartedness of the male-dominated society.

“MOB (*awestruck, they point their fingers at her*). You're a bayen.

CHANDIDASI (*her eyes wandering from face to face, in sheer bafflement*). I came to guard the grave.

MOB (*rising above their awe to savage violence*). Yes you are a bayen.

CHANDIDASI. No, no I'm no bayen.

MALINDAR. Then who was it with whom you were so lovery dovey? (*His voice mounts*) Why is your sari dripping with milk? Whom were you suckling? For whom was the lullaby?

CHANDIDASI (*pleading for mercy*). I'm no bayen. I've a suckling child, and that's why my breasts ooze milk all the time. Gangaputta, you know it's true. Why don't you tell them?

Her own husband does not support her and considers her as a bayen. She is stoned and is forced to live away from the society. She recalls her son every moment and cradles an imaginary child in her lap. She is given only a little ration on every Saturday and she has to live all alone avoiding any human contact. One will die if one sees her shadow. But this same impure bayen saves everyone from a horrible

disaster. The evil-minded people who declared her as a bayen are now trying to stop the train and rob it. But the so-called bayen stops them, makes them run away and sacrifices her own life to avert a disaster. When the railway guard asks about her identity, her son comes forward and says:

Yes, Sir. (Guard takes it all down) My name Bhagirath Gangaputta.... Residence, Domtoli, village Daharhati... My mother (pauses for a while, then very distinctly).... My mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi (suddenly breaks into loud weeping)... my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi, Sir. Not a bayen. She was never a bayen, my mother. (122)

Thus we see that a completely normal human being and a loving mother can be turned into a witch in this male-dominated society. Due to illiteracy and superstitions, society finds a scapegoat for all their misfortunes. Vandana Gupta in her book remarks:

Bayen reveals the vulnerability of the tender maternal sentiments in the face of dogmatic, superstitiousness of a male dominated social system. In the assertive, self-willed Chandidasi's persecution and ostracisation by labelling her a 'witch' the low caste patriarchy finds a way to eliminate the threats to the power-status. The outcaste paternalists, themselves victims of upper-caste oppression, attempt to reduce the threat to the stability of the "given" social codes of gender dominance by victimizing their own woman. The unacknowledged fear of female agency, guised under the authority of a people to judge

the ethicality of an individual, leads to Chandi's estrangement from her son and her husband. (Gupta 42)

"Usrvashi O Johnny" is the story of a ventriloquist whose throat cancer becomes the metaphor for the suppression of democratic rights during the period of emergency in India. In "Water", a traditional water diviner's instinctive understanding of the processes and movements of nature is turned into a medium for the rise of a new consciousness that empowers a community to contest a dominant, class-defined system.

In "Water", "Aajir" and "Bayen", Mahasweta Devi presents the dramatic device of a character, who enacts the happening in the past. "Mother of 1084" is the story of one day but it covers the span of two years.

Thus all the plays in the *Five Plays* by Mahasweta Devi takes up those issues of the marginalized which the mainstream theatre was not able to tackle with as she herself asserts:

I have never had the capacity nor the urge to create art for art's sake. Since I haven't ever learnt to do anything more useful, I have gone on writing. I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation. (qtd in Introduction to *Five Plays*, xv)

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