



POSTCOLONIAL SUBALTERNIZATION OF CASTE SUBALTERNERS IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S PLAY *WATER*

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ABSTRACT

The term “Postcolonial Subalternization” has been coined in the arena of social studies and postcolonial literature. This new term encompasses all types of social changes from local to global context. Postcolonial subalternization is a process whereby certain categories are rendered destitute, disenfranchised and economically powerless by the socio-political structures of the decolonized nations. Mahasweta Devi is a crusader for the rights of the subalterns. The present research paper involves a “re-reading” of Mahasweta Devi’s play *Water* from the perspectives of postcolonial subalternization of caste subalterns. The aim of this paper is to bring forth new ideas regarding the politics of suppression and oppression, deprivation and discrimination mated out against cast subalterns. The nexus of politicians and government officials or bureaucrats strategically deteriorates the social status of Dalits or caste subalterns who are nothing but their tools to get pelf, power and prestige. Mahasweta Devi also shows that if the caste subalterns or tribal people raise their voice against the corruption or discrimination or deprivation, they are branded as Naxal and brutally killed or wiped out from the path. The neo-colonial elites always fear the upliftment of the caste subalterns as a threat to the system of social hierarchy. Mahasweta Devi appeals to the intelligencia and social activists to try their best to “learn to learn from the subaltern” so that the caste subalterns “can speak”. Through the projection of Jiten Maiti’s character, Mahasweta Devi shows the ethical intervention that social activists should take to stand by the subaltern so that they “can speak”.

Key words: subaltern, postcolonial, subalternization, caste, speak.

1. Introduction

In postcolonial theory, the term “postcolonial” is not restricted to any historical periodisation. It connotes disparate forms of representations, reading practises and values which range across both the past and the present. Though the colonialism has come to an end, the configurations of power in the colonial world have remained largely intact in the postcolonial period. Therefore, the “postcolonial” encompasses the colonial period as well as its aftermath. The postcolonial also implies a whole new experience of political freedom, new ideologies, new cultural forms, and new perspectives. In short, anything that contests oppressive structure



informed by the colonial ideologies such as racism can be described as postcolonial, even though such groups live in 'First World' metropolitan location.

In postcolonial studies, we find an ongoing attempt to retrieve histories that have been silenced or erased by both colonial and nationalist powers. This attempt is theoretically known as "Subaltern Studies" which occupy a significant place in postcolonial theory. The term "subaltern" was first deployed as a critical term by the Italian communist thinker Antonio Gramsci. He used the term to refer to the non-elite classes or the working classes (the plebeians). It is a British word (military term) for someone "of inferior rank" and combines the Latin words *sub* ("next below") + *alternus* ("every other"). "Subaltern" denotes subordinate position in terms of class, gender, caste, race and culture.

Gramsci's work influenced the leftist thinkers in the twentieth century. Subsequently, a group of Marxist historians in India in the late 1970s and early 1980s adopted Gramsci's ideas about hegemony, subordination and subalternity to contest the dominance of elitist historiographies of colonial India. Ranjit Guha was the founding spirit and editor of the first six volumes of "Subaltern Studies", published by OUP, New Delhi. Subaltern studies was an attempt to write history from below. Basically, subaltern studies deals with socio-economic, socio-cultural, and historical aspects of the society incorporating the entire people that are subordinate in terms of caste, class, gender, age, and office or in any other way. Thus, the non-elite or the subaltern who remained invisible or silent in the traditional colonial historiography got their due places.

This attempt to recover the silenced agency of the subaltern groups attracted attention from the growing scholarship on colonialism and postcolonialism in 1980s. The term "subaltern" has, thus, entered into the lexicon of postcolonial studies. It is often used here with less theoretical precision than the subaltern studies historians. In postcolonial theory, the term indicates the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margin of society. The term was appropriated, popularised and put in wider circulation by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak's essay entitled *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). She argued that all individuals should be left to speak for themselves.

Subalternization is generally a process through which certain identities are centralized and certain others are subalternized or marginalized. Subalternization in the colonial period meant marginalization of non-white races by European colonial masters. But after decolonization it is found that the dream with which millions of people had participated in the independence movement turned to ashes. The discrimination on the basis of religion, class, caste, gender identity remained intact and continued with new force and form. Most of the politically independent inhabitants were unable to take a fresh breath in the air of free country.



Postcoloniality, unfortunately, has become a continuous process of subalternization for many. The new elite took the place of the colonial masters. Democratic approaches have failed, and social and economic emancipation have slipped across the horizon because many people find themselves colonized by the new powers. Such processes are theoretically termed as “postcolonial subalternization”. According to P.K.Nayar:

Postcoloniality brought in its wake a new process of exclusion, where by certain groups/classes dominated other ethnic group, communities, races, and class, who, therefore, became disempowered, colonized, and marginal (even) in the independent nations ... a process that I call postcolonial subalternization – a process captured and critiqued in many discursive and non-discursive texts of the 1980s and after, from Africa and Asia

(Nayar 2011: 69).

Therefore, “Postcolonial subalternization is a process whereby certain categories are rendered destitute disenfranchised and economically powerless by the socio-political structures of the new nation-state. It is a process of disempowerment”. (Nayar 2011: 100).

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, too, speaks of postcolonial subalternization in her own way. Stephen Morton in his book on Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak writes:

The effects of European colonialism did not simply vanish as many former European colonies achieved national independence in the second half of the twentieth century. Rather, the social, political and economic structures that were established during colonial rule continued to inflict the cultural, political and economic life of postcolonial nation states ranging from Ireland to Algeria; from India to Pakistan and Jamaica to Mexico... Spivak emphasizes how anti-colonial nationalism assumed a distinctively bourgeois character, and was thus perceived by many to reproduce the social and political inequalities that were prominent under colonial rule

(Morton 1-2).

Mahasweta Devi exposes the real socio-economic scenario of postcolonial India in her Introduction to *Agnigarbha (Womb of Fire, 1978)*, a collection of her long short stories:

The exploitation of the starving peasants continues unabated Rural India has the appearance of an enormous graveyard The economic gains that the country has achieved since independence have not benefitted the middle classes, the workers and the



agricultural labourers. The rich have become richer The middle class have become poorer, After thirty one years of independence, I find my people still groaning under hunger, landless, indebtedness, and bonded labourer. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constrains, is the only source of inspiration of my all writing. All the parties... have failed to keep their commitments to the common people.

(Devi 2011: IX-X)

This is nothing but postcolonial subalternization. The neo-colonial government, in the name of welfare state, has been betraying the people. We find a line of continuity between the colonial and postcolonial, where both are linked by crime, immortality and corruption. Mahasweta Devi has dexterously dissected the soul of modern Indian society in her play *Water* to portray the naturalistic picture of the caste subalterns and laid it bare before readers for their assessment, consideration and follow up action

2. Objectives of the Study

- i. To gain familiarity with the different and new forms of subaltern group in modern society.
- ii. To investigate their exploitations, as well as socio-economic, political, and psychological aspects.
- iii. To find out why the caste subalterns cannot speak or raise their voice.
- iv. To show the genius of Mahasweta Devi in dissecting the society to present postcolonial subalternization.
- v. To carry forward overtly the message of Mahasweta Devi for the welfare of the humanity.

3. Significance and Relevance of the Study.

- i. The postcolonial subalternization in Mahasweta Devi's play *Water* will open up new vistas for the social scientists in studying social relationships.
- ii. Empathy and sympathy may be roused in the heart of the privileged section for the caste subaltern.
- iii. Various social problems and developmental issues can easily be understood by this study.
- iv. This critical discourse will create awareness among the students of literature for future research.



4. Methodology.

The methodology applied in this paper is analytical and is based on both primary source (i.e. texts) as well as the secondary resources available in books and journals. While re-reading the text, theoretical and critical aspects such as – Feminism, Postcolonialism, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction, Marxism, and Humanistic Criticism have been kept in mind.

5. Analysis and Findings

Jiten: ... there's caste discrimination. Santosh doesn't let the *doms* have water.

SDO: No, there isn't Officially speaking, there isn't Unofficially speaking, I'll admit, it's

there. It's there in the blood of the people ... how can you get rid of it?

Jiten: Do something about it.

SDO: It's no use. Laws are made because they have to be made. They are never enforced. ... who the

hell am I? I'm powerless. If I threaten a moneylender, the minister will jump on me. ... I

can't do a thing. (Devi 173-174)

This conversation, an excerpt from the play *Water* by Mahasweta Devi, between Jiten Maiti, a teacher of Primary School at the village Charsa and SDO (Sub-Divisional Officer) is a heart-rending reality in postcolonial Indian milieu. A Government Official of SDO rank admits that he is powerless and he cannot do anything to the complaint lodged by Jiten Maiti against Santosh Pujari, a Brahmin by caste and head of *Panchayet*, about not permitting the lower-castes to draw drinking water from government wells. The SDO officially denies any kind of caste discrimination but he unofficially admits its existence. These official reports or records and unofficial realities are the kernels of postcolonial subalternization of lower-castes. The intellectual government officials and bureaucrats are mere puppets in the hands of political leaders and ministers. Laws are made in Parliament or in State Assemblies as an eye wash of people because implementation of law requires the prior permission of political leaders.

The play *Water* kaleidoscopically presents the picture of the subalternization of lower castes and “the history of the present” (Bandyopadhyay XV). *Water* was originally written as a short story in Bengali entitled *Jawl*. Later, it was translated into English with its excellent dramatic form in 1977. The play dramatizes the sufferings of lower castes and tribal community



for their drinking water. The world of this play is a postcolonial Indian village which may be taken as a microcosm of Indian villages. In this village named Charsa Santosh Pujari is a *Brahmin*, and the Maghais are the *Domes*. The other untouchables are the *Chandals*, the *Keots* (fisher-folk caste), the *Tiors* (low-caste agricultural labourers), the *Dusads* etc. Jiten Maiti, the Primary School teacher, is a Mahishya (a Bengali Hindu agrarian caste). The play is about Maghai Dome who is a water-diviner. Santosh Pujari, head of *panchayet*, uses and misuses water of the *panchayet* wells for his own purposes at his will. The lower-castes, on the other hand, are not allowed to draw water from the *panchayet* wells to quench their thirsts. It seems that the resources of the earth are meant for the upper castes and the elites. Maghai possesses that wisdom and metaphysical quality which helps him to detect places from where water can be drawn in scorching summer. Santosh Babu always uses his water detecting intelligence to dig up new wells in the *panchayet*. Maghai, however, fails to provide drinking water for his low caste brethren. Dhura, son of Maghai, openly accuses Santosh Pujari:

Dhura: ... We never get water. You never give us water. Why talk rubbish, Thakur?

Santosh: (*raging*) Whom have I refused water?

Dhura: (*in a rage*) The doms, the *chamars*, the *chandals*, go without water.... The *panchayet*

wells are supposed to be for the public, yet, we're denied access to them. In the daytime,

they are for washing your cattle, in the night we try to steal water, and you set your dogs

lose on us. It's the government's well, yet stealing is the only way we can get water from

it. It was my father who located every one of them.
(Devi 152)

Though officially there is no untouchability in decolonized India, it is very much in practice in many villages of our country. Being a Brahmin, Santosh Pujari believes in and practices untouchability to make others subaltern or sub-human.

Santosh: But Maghai, we worship our gods in our houses and you eat pigs and fowl. Now tell me, isn't

it the water polluted if you touch it.
(Devi 138)



These are the lame excuses of upper castes to maintain social hierarchy and hegemony. In this decade of 21st century, there are numberless villages in India where caste subalterns are not allowed to draw water from *panchayet* well. K. Stalin in his Documentary Film *India Untouched: Stories of a People Apart*, winner of several National and International Awards, has shown the existence of untouchability in drawing drinking water from government wells in Indian villages in this century. Mahasweta Devi wrote the story *Water* forty-five years ago. Unfortunately, the postcolonial subalternization of caste subalterns in drawing drinking water from *panchayet* wells still continues unabated.

As head of *panchayet*, leaders like Santosh receive Government Relief Materials such as rice, *chida*, molasses, seeds, paddy, kerosene etc. meant for the poor, the caste subalterns, tribals or the affected people. The upper caste leaders keep for themselves a large amount of relief materials greedily without distributing them to the poor and the caste subalterns.

Maghai: It seems it's only the water in the well that gets polluted! Santosh, you won't give us the

kerosene due to us against our ration cards and because of that our people die of snakebite. You hoard and trade in drugs that the government sends for us. The government

doctor sent to treat us visits your home alone and the village goes without treatment.

Phulmani: ... we know nothing of the government's law for us. We know only you. You act like

the government's son-in-law. (Devi 139)

Santosh collects relief materials and medicines and hoards it to create an artificial famine so that the caste subalterns of Charsa village always obey his hegemonic power. The leaders like Santosh are great orators but notorious activists. As a shrewd political leader, he creates news by appearing benevolent to the lower castes. He uses the relief materials for his political campaign.

Dhura: The bastard draws the relief, draws a lion's share out of it for himself, gives the rest to his

brother-in-law and then there is nothing for anybody else. At puja time, he feeds his servants



and farm labourers and has it photographed for the newspapers, so that he can claim that he has

fed so many people.

(Devi 149)

Several researches and reports show that the numbers of the family of head of *panchayat* are the “multiple beneficiaries” of the Welfare Schemes of Government. Relief materials are still misused or politically used for the purpose of subalternization or wielding hegemonic power.

Santosh Pujari threatens the villagers that if they raise their voice against his corruption of relief materials the police would be suspicious. Here, the suspicion is that the villagers of Charsa have become Naxal. In reality, Santosh Pujari will deliver false report to police and the police will dance according to his tune. Phulmani, the mouthpiece of Mahasweta Devi, clearly discloses the secret plan of Santosh Pujari – “This man here will run to the town and tell the police that the lower castes of Charsa have all turned Naxals” (Devi 137). At the beginning of the play, there is a brief discourse on the Naxal Movement in Charsa and Patul and the killing of three naxals by the police.

The conversations at the outset of the play takes the readers to the social politics of keeping the lower castes under threat of banding them as Naxals and thereby subalternizing them in many Indian villages like Charsa. No character of this play is conspicuously a Naxalite but the shadows of Naxalism pursues the villagers. The persons like Santosh Pujari always keep good rapport with the police, SDO, BDO or local administrations and they use respective measures to coerce the lower castes or tribals into submission. The caste subalterns are given unjust wages by Santosh but they are afraid of protesting for fear that they might be accused of being Naxals or they might be replaced by labourers from the town. In both the cases, they have to lead their lives without food. Dhura, a young blood of Charsa, tells his father about the reasons of being “silent” and leading a life as a sub-human or subaltern.

Dhura: Mother scared for me. You’re scared for your ancestors and I’m scared of hunger. We don’t get

enough to eat, and that’s scary. That’s where all our fears begin, know that with a full stomach,

Father, there’s no fear whatsoever.

(Devi 145).

Really, a person walks on its stomach, as said by Napoleon Bonaparte (1769 – 1821). Naturally, subalterns like Dhura or Maghai cannot raise their voices in empty stomach. The one thing which is most dreadfully real is the hunger gnawing at one’s stomach. “There is nothing more real than



hunger” (Devi 144). This is the observation of an old man, Maghai, whose voice has been strangled by the postcolonial exploitative mechanism of decolonized India. Santosh Pujari knows that no daily food means no voice or no protest. Really, subaltern cannot speak with empty stomach. Any resistance to this postcolonial exploitative mechanism meets with tougher challenges, accusation of being Naxal and then killing brutally. At the end of the play, the resistance of the villagers against Santosh results in branding the villagers as Naxals, killing Maghai brutally by the police and arresting the villagers.

Invoking custom is a strategy by the upper castes to coerce the caste subalterns into subalternization. “Customary law is notorious for its gloss over local servitude of gender, age and status but it is customary, thereby accepted by all” (Anderson 165). Santosh as a shrewd Brahmin reminds the caste subalterns of Charsa what is “morally imperative” for them. Santosh tells the villagers that they themselves are responsible for the drought and famine because they have deviated from their moral behaviour by not giving free labour for their master’s religious projects. It is a sin which is responsible for famine and drought. Thus, an artificial famine may be utilized for subalternizing caste subalterns.

The upper castes thrust customs and rituals upon lower castes to sustain the power play in social hierarchy. Dipesh Chakraborty in his book *Rethinking Working-class History* superbly says, “To speak of custom means to identify that range of activity, called privileges by the masters, assumed as rights by the slaves who flowed from the master’s knowledge that the violation of norms would carry an unacceptable level of risks.” (Chakraborty: 180). It is also the custom of a Brahmin that the “shadows of a dom pollutes his pitcher and he throws away the water” (Devi 143). Therefore, social and religious customs are framed by upper castes as a tool to maintain their supremacy and to subalternize the caste subalterns.

In the end of the play when the villagers ultimately succeeds in constructing a dam at the instructions of Jiten Maiti to store the water of the river Charsa for the use in summer, Santosh Pujari cannot digest the achievement of the villagers. The construction of dam means the villagers would not suffer from drinking water and they, consequently, may deny his authority or power. Like a political leader, Santosh says in public that the dam is a good thing for everyone and he does not mind if it helps the villagers. He, however, secretly nurtures violent anger against Jiten Maiti who, in spite of being a lower caste, dares to threaten his dominance over dalits of Charsa. It is unbearable to Santosh that the dalits are quenching their thirsts with plenty of water from a “lovely dam”. Therefore, Santosh plans to demolish the dam and all those men to be arrested as Naxals. He visits the district authorities and complains against Jiten Maiti and against the construction of dam.



Santosh: Jiten the teacher has incited the doms and Chandals into building a dam on the river Charasa.

SDO: As long as you're there, I don't need to post an informer in the village. I'll except regular report
from you.

Santosh: I feel for Maghai.

SDO: ... His son had helped the Naxalites

Santosh: Jiten the teacher is all rotten inside. Educated mahishya by caste, had no business to
serve the casteless!

SDO: It is useless really, no good to anybody, it's better to keep people just where they are, as they are.

(Devi 190 –

191)

It is shameful that an SDO can talk like this about lower castes. To him, it is useless providing drinking water to the untouchables. Really, this is nothing but postcolonial subalternization in decolonized India. We salute the freedom fighter Jiten Maiti who had been in the Hazaribagh "Prison in 1942 as a political prisoner" (Devi 174). He is the follower of Mahatma Gandhi. He lives with the *domes* and the untouchables, and teaches their children. He complains the SDO about Santosh's corruption of relief materials and the plight of the villagers; but the SDO seems to care a fig for all that Jiten tells him. It is unfortunate that the upper caste SDO has no intention to solve the problems faced by the lower castes. He, on the contrary, advises Jiten to take his transfer to Patul, "I can do a thing. If it hurts you to see the plight of the lower castes, why don't you get transferred to Patul. It's a prosperous village, with an upper-caste majority. (Devi 174). Santosh also tries to bribe the honest Jiten Maiti; "Well let's make a deal. From the next relief grant, let's split sixty-forty, big amount for you." (Devi 175)

But the freedom fighter Jiten does not walk on the trodden path of the British Colonialists. These neo-colonialists like SDO or Santosh cannot buy a true patriot. Being defeated Santosh Pujari and SDO plan differently to prove Jiten a Naxal mastermind and thereby to wipe out the obstacles. The SDO and Santosh inform the police officer that Jiten has incited the *doms* and *chandals* into building a dam. "He is manufacturing superguns, live ones, human ones. He's training cadres for the struggle, and the *dom* and *chandal* men have begun fighting for their rights." (Devi 193) Their plan is to demolish the dam which may solve the problem of water of the villagers. The nexus of Santosh, SDO and police visit the village to demolish the dam



when they villagers would assemble to inaugurate it. The SDO also orders the police “to open fire at the slightest provocation” (Devi 193).

Thus, when the subaltern begin “to fight for their rights”, the neo-colonial elites crush them down to maintain hierarchal order and to continue subalternization. When the police begin to break the dam, Maghai rends the sky with his call “No-o-o-o! Forward, everyone! We’ll crush the bastard with this pole” (Devi 196). The police enter and beat the villagers mercilessly with the butts of their rifles. Jiten, Dhura and some others try to hit back: “kill the bastards! Kill Santosh! The bastard couldn’t stand the *doms* building a dam by themselves and he had to set the police on us. Kill!” (Devi 197). The scene transforms into a brutal attack and resistance. A policeman brings down a crushing blow with the butt of his rifle on Jiten’s head and he falls to the ground. A moment later, Maghai is seen on the stage tottering with his hand on his bleeding chest. He on the verge of death declares, “I’ll die, but not before I’ve killed... I can’t let them carry me as a corpse into their bloody morgue. My last journey will be with the water...” (Devi 197 – 198).

The police have killed Maghai and wounded seventeen villagers. The SDO orders in official tone “put them all in the police van” (Devi 198). The play comes to an end with Maghai being carried away on the chest of rising and gushing waters of mad Charsha.

6. Conclusion

From the discussion on Mahasweta Devi’s *Water*, it is found that the nexus of government officials and politicians keeps alive the subalternization of caste subalterns in postcolonial period just as the nexus of English educated upper caste (Brahmin) Indian elites and the British colonialists sustained the subalternization of lower castes during the colonial period for their vested interests. False official reports or records and unofficial realities are the kernels of postcolonial subalternization of lower-castes.

The upper caste people always want to preserve the caste system to maintain social hierarchy and hegemony. Mahasweta Devi also shows in this play that the upper caste elite political leaders take up another strategy to subalternize caste subalterns. They create artificial famine during drought or natural calamity or during any other emergency. Though the play was written forty-five years ago, the situation has not gone through any positive change at the beginning of the third decade of 21 century. The relief materials of cyclone, flood, drought or corona pandemic are still misused or politically used for the purpose of subalternization or wielding hegemonic power

The subalterns or the beneficiary are well aware that the government needs to protect the intermediaries (like Santosh Pujari) to “chart an unsteady course” what Partha Chatterjee



calls “politics of governmentality” (Chatterjee 1997: 254). This “politics of governmentality” is the fountainhead of postcolonial subalternization of different subalterns including caste subalterns.

Thus, the nexus of politicians and government officials or bureaucrats strategically deteriorates the social status of Dalits or caste subalterns who are nothing but their tools to get pelf, power and prestige. Mahasweta Devi also shows that if the caste subalterns or tribal people raise their voice against the corruption or discrimination or deprivation, they are branded as Naxal and brutally killed or wiped out from the path. Santosh, as neo-colonial elite in decolonized India, learns from the British colonial masters that violence is the most common means of imposing order, ruling the mass and depriving them of their rights. Naturally, he keeps the villagers on threat on the suppression of being Naxals. He blindly follows the customs of the British Colonialists and “steps into the shoes of the former European settlement.” (Fannon 122)

Thus, this study shows that whenever the subaltern try to speak or raise their voice or “fight for their rights” they are threatened and silenced. In the present play, the caste subalterns of Charasa village are crushed down by declaring them Naxal and thereby silencing their voice using the state machinery of police force. The neo-colonial elites always fear the upliftment of the caste subalterns as a threat to the system of social hierarchy. Naturally, the caste subalterns “should be left where they are as they are”, in the words of SDO. In this way, postcolonial subalternization would continue generation after generation “through nations trek from progress”. (Owen, *Strange Meeting*, Line - 29)

Mahasweta Devi projects Jiten Maiti, a teacher of primary school, as a social activist and as a good angel for the caste subalterns. Jiten Maiti is a role model for those who want to work for the subalterns. Jiten belongs to a upper caste community but he amalgamates himself with the *Domes, Chandals, Keots, Tiors and Dusads* of Charasa village. He earnestly tries to “learn to learn from the subaltern” so that the caste subalterns of Charasa village “can speak”. Therefore, through the projection of Jiten Maiti’s character, Mahasweta Devi shows the ethical intervention that social activists should take to stand by the subaltern so that they “can speak”.

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