

RE-VISITING SUBALTEN ISSUES THROUGH MAHASWETA DEVI'S PLAY WATER

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi's handling of the irony in *Water* is effective. She uses it as a literary device to make her themes poignant and draw them into a sharper critical focus. It is typical of the playwright to bring legends, mythical figures, and issues into the current scenario and make an ironic use of those. Maghai Dome is a progeny of the legendary Bhagirath who, with his austerities, induced Shiva to allow the sacred river to descend to the mortal world for the purpose of restoring his ancestors to life, but he is condemned to pour sand on the burning pyre of his child for he "had no water to wash it down" (119).

Introduction: In the play *Water*, she invites deliberations through dramatic art form where she highlights the cruelties of upper class towards the deprived sections of the society. She strongly regrets that the harassment of the innocent folk continues unchecked in the rural areas with a hidden consent of the ruling class. The play conceptualises a bird's eye-view picture of nerve-breaking poverty, back-bending exploitation as well as fierce class clashes, suggesting the impossibility of a decent life for the poor and illiterate living in remote villages. She clearly projects the manipulative plot of the spiritual and temporal authority against the subaltern. Through a structure of historically destined roles, the typical Brahminical cultural history regulates present-day subjugation. Maghai Dome, a traditional water-diviner, re-designs the story of the legendary Bhagirath who brought the celestial Ganga down from the locks of Shiva to the earth in the Puranic legend. Maghai, who holds a strong conviction that his forebears have been ordained by the goddess Ganga to fetch her concealed resource to the surface in exchange for worship, falls into the erroneous belief of his pre-determined or pre-ordained role. Despite the fact that Maghai and his clan are denied the very water he divines, he has to carry on performing the divine rites since he is the 'Bhagirath of Nether Ganga'. Maghai's knowledge, his supernatural gift of divining water, a gift which he acquired from his ancestral lineage drives the system. The idea of his role being historically authorized legitimises the appropriation of the subaltern's expertise and its deployment to perpetuate his subordination through the authority of the establishment. In order to perpetuate the history of exploitation in the recent times, the ancient legend is pressed into service by the dominant, hegemonic powers.

The play further probes into the hidden intricacies of the rudiments of rural poverty with the devious intrigues of the local landed gentry in collusion with local village officials and the police. The cruelty which appeared in rural Bengal is conceptualised through the play *Water* through the tribal narratives and presents the widespread dismay of Indian rural poor at large. Here in this play, the readers find oppressed subaltern men and women who in spite of dispossession are vibrant and not lethargic, sensitive and caring, suppressed and yet practical, capable of expressing an urge towards the claiming agency and authority for themselves.

Interestingly, the play is concerned with what Devi calls 'the history of the present' and in its impulse of social protest. It is complementary to the plays discussed in the earlier chapters but more powerful for its scathing expose of the utter indifference of the people in power towards the suffering humanity in the rural world. In fact, the area of attack is much more defined and precise than in her other plays. The play, thus, represents Mahasweta Devi's more powerful condemnation of the prevailing social order and her unfaltering commitment and compassion for the underdog.

The setting of the story is laid in rural Bengal. The play provides us with an authentic account of the transformation of a subaltern from a traditional water-diviner to the position of a leader of the masses, breaking down all those conventional boundaries which have been devised only to deprive his class of its human dignity.

In *Water*, Mahasweta Devi selects her main story from a new viewpoint of the Hindu myth of Ganga and Bhagirath (The king who brought down to earth the Ganges from the heavens). The play is an aggressive attack on and a denunciation of the typical Hindu psyche. It explores how a sect of people through the milieu of Hindu mythology exploits the weaker section and pushes them into bonded labourers. They take it for granted and try to produce profits while not compensating them fairly. Writers like Prem Chand and Mulk Raj Anand have produced the same level of subjects. Yet Mahasweta Devi's treatment of the subject matter of this kind stands unique. Though these people are paid for their efforts and labour, they are disproportionately compensated. Such kind of deliberate subjugation emerges in the play *Water* where the untouchable (Dalit), Maghai is compelled to dig village wells by the upper caste Babus for negligible wages and sometimes no wages at all. Unfortunately, deprivation here is not only on the lines of caste but also class as these villagers are also denied work, food, clothing, and shelter. Although the village wells are dug by subordinate castes they are prevented from using them.

Maghai Dome is the protagonist of the play who is a traditional water-diviner and a pariah. The untouchables of the village are not permitted to draw water from the public wells, even though they are dug with Maghai's help. Santosh Pujari, an archetypal exploiter, is a force to reckon with in the land. He makes the innocent folk suffer for no fault of theirs. He denies what is due to them. Trading in the relief funds meant for the poorer sections, he creates an artificial famine. The villagers, with help coming from nowhere, accept whatever little amount he fixes for their toil at his fields.

Maghai knows that he is a water-diviner. He has the ability to identify the available source of groundwater. Even though he identifies the water, he is disallowed to take water from his own identified sources. For this, he becomes rebellious and defiant. He gives value to the teacher who advises him to build a dam across the river Charsa which runs by his hut, "every monsoon she overflows her banks, yet it never struck me with that this river could give us water, in days of drought" (139). Nevertheless, Santosh and his caste brethren threatened as they are by the adventure of Maghai, have the authorities believe that all the outcasts have turned Naxals and Jiten is the main instigator. Thus, the play comes to an end with the authorities breaking the dam and killing Maghai who is later seen being swept away by the waters of Charsa, his beloved. Compared to other plays of Mahasweta Devi, *Water* is a moderately extended play with a well-knit structure of fourteen scenes. All these scenes are connected logically with one another highlighting her social accountability. The stage is free from the conventions of all the external trappings of a conventional theatre.

The villagers adore and address Maghai as Bhagirath. They believe in the fact, that he has the visionary power of identifying the source of groundwater. In spite of being subjected to denial of the fruit of his own endeavour, he continues to do the job for keeping alive his ancestral tradition. Here, Maghai resembles Paatan of *Aajir* and Chandidasi of *Bayen* who have been exploited and are compelled to follow the traditions of their ancestors. Thus her plot construction takes us to the roots of the problem of complete ignorance on the part of the so-called ideas of progress.

When the villagers are facing the sufferings, Jiten Maiti comes to liberate the villagers from their hardships. Jiten Maiti, is a social worker and an idealistic teacher, who comes to their rescue and develops a kind of affinity with the villagers. He lives with them and shares their joys and sorrows. Therefore, Santosh the landlord of the village sensed a threat from Jiten Maiti and his ardent activities. Having sensed danger from his activities, Santosh motivated the authorities to act against Jiten Maiti. At a certain point in time, he realised that it was a tough task to bribe him.

Maghai Dome's job of identifying the groundwater resources continues endlessly. His choicest blessings are there on the villagers whenever a new well is to be dug. Having been compelled to follow the tradition started by his ancestors, he is caught in a predicament like that of Paatan and Chandi in the preceding plays. However, unlike the attitude of many wage earners, he is neither bound to any external force nor gave up the roots of his ancestral profession. He is rather revered by all the people of his village for his extraordinary skills of water divining for which he claims a mythical-traditional sanction as Bhagirath of the nether Ganga. He feels proud of having inherited the secret knowledge from his great ancestors. He tells his son Dhura: "So the nether Ganga flowed into the secret depths of the mother Earth. My earliest ancestor had come all prepared to offer puja to the holy river at her advent. But by the time he arrived, Bhagirath had already left with Ganga. So he stuffed himself up with booze, gathered the entire offerings he had brought with him to offer to the holy river, and offered puja to the nether Ganga. "... the mother deity of all the hidden waters, spoke: You're my chosen priest. I'm the goddess, the nether Ganga, whenever men dig for a well or a pond, you'll gather the offerings, pray for water, and go around looking for where the water lies hidden till I tell you where to dig"(111).

The other critical attention that the play acquires is a metaphysical dimension, which results in an unavoidable conflict between the oppressed and the oppressor and eventual defeat of the latter. Struck by consecutive draughts, natural as well as man-made, the life of the rustics becomes miserable and they turn for help to Santosh Pujari, an orthodox Brahmin by caste and a typical exploiter for whom, "the shadow of a dome pollutes his pitcher and he'd throw away the water" (104). Maghai Dome, who is a water-diviner claiming to have mythical-traditional sanction as Bhagirath of the nether Ganga is forbidden to draw water from a well which has been dug with his help.

The playwright passionately emphasizes that the subalterns must protest and initiate resistance to change all this. The outsiders, even when they have good-intention, can help but not make the first move by themselves. The collective effort of community is the need of the hour. Organized group action by the people left out of the development process is the only way for them to get what is their right as citizens of India. Her belief in collective action is basically the outcome of her disillusionment with the present system. She feels that the problems of marginalized communities are not addressed in the present oppressive and corrupt system. An individual alone cannot bring any change. Hence, it becomes imperative that people unite and analyze their situation and problems, put pressure on the authorities and make a collective effort to solve them. It may be viewed that the play *Wright Mahasweta Devi* is not simply a defender of the deprived or a flourishing ingenious writer but also a truthful and untiring narrator of the world of the subjugated. What makes her a unique writer is her power to mix realism with melodrama, irony with indifference and the documentary with creativity to fabricate a magnificent and remarkable blend that defies any time-honoured form. Her endless battle for the dispossessed and the subjugated is carried out in the play *Water* which has created a great impact.

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