

Development and Welfare Discourses, Marginality and Cultural Interventions in Mahasweta Devi's *Aajir*

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Abstract

This essay is an attempt to study the position of the marginalised communities in India caught in the web of the politics of development and welfare programmes, through a reading of the cultural and political ramifications of Mahasweta Devi's² *Aajir*³ (Devi's dramatisation of her short fiction of this title in Bengali). The objective is to show how the text is a kind of cultural intervention with political implications in favour of the marginalised – low class caste people, untouchables, bonded labourers, tribals and women. It is to demonstrate not only how the context gets embedded in the text but also how the text participates in the context in reflecting on and influencing the context, revealing the text-context reciprocity.

Keywords

Marginality, cultural interventions, bonded labourer, crony capitalism, purity, untouchability.

The aim of this essay is to study the position of the marginalised communities in India caught in the web of the politics of development and welfare programmes, through a reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Aajir*. The play *Aajir*

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² Mahasweta Devi (1926-) is a very significant literary figure in Indian Literature, who writes fiction in her mother tongue Bengali. An activist-writer she writes about the downtrodden – lower class caste people, tribals and women – for and among whom she has been working. Her writings have been translated into a number of languages and received international acclaim. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation of and commentary on her works are noteworthy.

³ "Aajir" is a Bengali term for bonded labourer. A labourer takes an advance from a landlord and in return becomes bonded to that person for a specified period. In most cases the bonded labourer works extremely long hours without any leave. In case the labourer misses a day of work, the landlord typically adds a monetary penalty to his loan. The labourer is completely dependent on the landlord for any monetary and in-kind assistance, all of which are also added onto the loan. As a result, by the time a labourer finishes the initial period of bondage, he or she ends up owing a substantial sum to the landlord, for which he has to continue to serve him. Unscrupulous landlords indulge in cheating, forgery, threat, manipulation of bonds and law to exploit poor illiterate labourers. This forces the labourer to work for more years, even for his entire life and slip even further into debt and bind his or her progenitors to bondage. The inhuman practice of bonded labour has become a historically continuous phenomenon.

addresses the history of slavery, subjugation of women and a wide range of other issues: class, caste, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nation.

The notion of the text-context continuum, opposed to that of the textual autonomy theorised in different ways by New Critics, Structuralists and Deconstructionists, has been postulated by New Historicism, which is aptly summed up by Louis Montrose's phrase "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (*The New Historicism* 21). By the historicity of texts he means that history is embedded in the text; and by the textuality of history, that history is a text. Thus, understanding of the past could only take place through the surviving textual traces. Stephen Greenblatt and others plead for a parallel reading of literary texts and contemporary non-literary texts that textualise history. History, which has been banished from textual interpretation, is brought back and foregrounded as the constituting element of the text. There is a contiguity between text and the surrounding context, between text and whatever might once have been seen as outside it. John Brannigan asserts that literary texts can affect the "course of, the social and political ideas and beliefs of their time" and thus are capable of "shaping and constituting historical change" (*Literary Theories* 418). Literature, Brannigan concludes, "can be seen as a constitutive and inseparable part of history in making" and therefore "rife with the creative forces, disruptions and contradictions of history" (418). Hence, text makes an intervention in history. This question has been given a new orientation by Edward Said, who in his *The World, the Text and the Critic*, focuses on "the worldliness of literature" (4). Said's notion of "worldliness" contests Derrida's textuality by suggesting that in the latter's notion one does not encounter "a serious study of what authority is, either with reference to the way authority is carried historically and circumstantially from the state down into society saturated with authority or with reference to the actual working of culture, the role of intellectuals, institutions, and establishment" (172). It recognises the reality that the world and we are coterminous and mutually constitutive. History, for him, is world in process, or world in process as imagined and realised by human beings who themselves are in history; there is an on-going negotiation between multiple histories and multiple worldings. For him a text is rooted in "actuality," everyday practice. He has stated that for "every poem or novel in the canon there is social fact being requisitioned on the page, a human life engaged, a class suppressed or elevated" (23). The textual engagement with "a human life, a class suppressed or elevated" is the engagement with the power structure underpinning the social inequality of the time. This paper is to demonstrate how Devi's work is a kind of cultural intervention in favour of the downtrodden.

The context that is transposed into Devi's *Aajir* is compounded of the continuing situation of drought and scarcity, the plight of the downtrodden, women's subjugation, the physical and cultural dislocation of the natives caused

by socio-political atrocities, mindless urbanisation/industrialisation and the elitist patriarchal norms that inform our development and welfare programmes. The development and welfare programmes in India meant for the common man are found entangled in power relations dominated and controlled by the elite group that came to power after independence. They inherited and carried on the earlier colonial structure and feudalist ideology. These programmes are usually planned at a higher level and imposed upon the local population and have little relation with the peculiarity of the local problems; they are neither based on the proper and adequate study of the local reality, situation, environment and culture nor initiated from below. They are mostly marked by the influence of interest groups like capitalists and traders and by election-winning motivation. Populist measures are introduced to influence the people in elections, but they do not lead to the real improvement or empowerment of the poor. Rather, in many cases they lull them to inaction and idleness resulting in their further impoverishment and loss to society. Lloyd L. Rudolph and Susanne Heber Rudolph call it “command polity” directed by state sovereignty and state hegemony over policy and politics, which is different from “demand polity” based on popular sovereignty (*Democracy in India* 153). This creates a gap between the state and society. Second, the intermediate institutions and organisations constituted at local levels to bridge this gap lack the required autonomy to initiate any proposal and any accountability as a control over their laxity, their acts of omission and commission. There are people who act as middlemen, pose as local representatives and garner most of the benefits and block the communication channel between the community and the government. The traders, contractors and local representatives act as middlemen-turned-crony capitalists who constitute a powerful lobby, while the monitoring and supervision remains a mere formality. The power structures at various levels seem to act separately from each other in terms of performance, following their own interest and agenda. Third, at the ground level people are not empowered enough materially and educationally or provided with the required environment and opportunity to speak for themselves. They are amorphous unorganised masses and, in the places where they *are* organised, the leadership is hijacked away by the elites among them and these elites subsequently get alienated from the masses and get allied with the powers-that-be. Because of the breakdown or distortion of communication the state remains distant from the people. The gap between state and society widens. In critical emergency situations like flood, cyclone, earthquake, famine and drought the presence of the state becomes often minimal or nil. At times the state intervention is so late that the situation worsens beyond recovery and it becomes equivalent to its non-presence. Fourth, in politically expedient situations like the National Emergency, state interference sometimes takes a demonic form, snatching away the citizen’s rights, even his right to life. Fifth, the subaltern groups like dalits, tribals and

women, already weakened by the history of suppression, face exploitation at multiple levels.

***Aajir*: Interlocking Structure of Oppression**

Mahasweta Devi's *Aajir* is a response to the recurrence of famine in several parts of India as a major cause for the perpetuation of the misery of the common man. Even though Jean Dreuze and Amartya Sen in their article "Hunger and Public Action" (*Democracy in India*) have stated that India's action in preventing famine has been better than that of China because of the political triggering mechanism – political pressure and newspapers – there is less cause for optimism. There has been periodical recurrence of famine in West Bengal, there was famine in Bihar in 1967 and 1993 and there has been drought and famine in Kalahandi in Odisha since 1985. There were food riots in Kerala and West Bengal in January-March 1966. In Bengal, in particular, public buildings were burnt, buses, trains and railway stations were attacked and several people were killed in police firing. The facts stated show that famine has not been wiped out from India and there has been constant failure of the state machinery to meet the recurring situation of scarcity. Sen has, of course, hinted at this crisis when he points out the irony in the Indian situation: "[We] have in India immense food mountains on the one hand and largest conglomeration of under-nourished population on the other" (*The Argumentative Indian* 218). Niraja Gopal Jayal in her introduction to *Democracy in India* has referred to Paul Greengard's study of Bengal that suggests that while famine relief was traditionally an obligation as part of the paternal zamindari ethos, the British rule introduced a new model of prosperity that privileged self-interest and maximisation over benevolence and redistribution. Now the famine mitigation measures are becoming short term relief oriented response doling out largesse to the affected people. The government acts only when drought or famine conditions manifest themselves, but does not care to take any contingency measures. At the intermediate level it plays into the hands of those who are locally important, and if they happen to be directly engaged in political activity their efforts enjoy greater legitimacy as being representative of popular will and they hijack away the government machinery. The nation-state, at the farthest remove from local society, assumes a supererogatory role of paternalistic benevolence that leads to negation of the rights of citizenship (Jayal 1-49). The relationship between state and society becomes exploitative, pushing the backward further down. Impoverished and distressed people become bonded labourers, sell their kith and kin or die from starvation. Devi in her play *Aajir* deals with the perpetuation of the bonded labour system, a form of slavery, as a consequence of drought and famine, and seeks to expand the term *aajir* (Bengali term for bonded labourer) to signify all forms of subjugation – class, caste, gender and sexuality.

Enslavement of Body: Bonded Labour System

The Bonded Labour Abolition act was passed in 1976 but still the practice continues in different forms and guises. A large number of people from famine-drought affected areas migrate to relatively prosperous states as bonded labourers as evident in Kalahandi, Balangir and Koraput districts in Odisha province. A product of such situations of famine in Devi's play is Paatan, a bonded labourer. The bonded labourer Paatan traces his slavery to one Golak Kura, one of his earliest ancestors living in the ancient Ayodhya Hills,⁴ who once for the price of only three rupees sold away himself and his wife Gurabi Dasi to a money lender Ravana⁵ and bound his progeny to perpetual slavery to Ravana and Ravana's descendants. The play here addresses the oppositions between the central part of Ayodhya – rich and prosperous, glorified in the epic *Ramayan* – and its periphery, the Ayodhya Hills, constantly afflicted by famines and drought, between the capital and periphery, and, by way of an ironic implication, between the *Ram Rajya* which Gandhi dreamt of and which was accepted as an ideal for our development and welfare policies, and the ground level reality. At the beginning of the play, the *dbol* player announces the genesis of this commodification and enslavement of the human body:

Look at this man, everybody! Born in a land of famines, nurtured by famines
Golak Kura scared of famines has now doomed his ancestors to the lives of
Aajirs. (4)

A *dbol* player has been rightly chosen by Devi as expositor of the heritage of bonded labour, for as a member of a marginalised untouchable community he shares the sufferings of the downtrodden and, as a folk artiste, a drum player has the insight and ability to express this history of slavery and suffering. He acts as a chorus in the play. Usually employed to make royal announcements, the *dbol* player here by announcing the arrival of the bonded labourer Golak, underscores the irony that springs from the discrepancy between the declamatory manner of announcement and the subject of dehumanising slavery. It creates a sense of absurdity, a mixture of pathos and ridicule that characterises the situation of the downtrodden. It points to the gap between pious intentions expressed in our constitution and their translation into reality. The act of selling oneself and one's wife, that too in Ayodhya, alludes to the myth of Raja Harischandra,⁶ who sold himself and his wife to keep his oath he

⁴ Ayodhya was the kingdom of Lord Ram Chandra, the protagonist of Valmiki's epic the *Ramayan*, worshipped by Hindus as an incarnation of God. The projection of Ayodhya as a land of good governance is deconstructed in the play.

⁵ Ravan was the demon king of Lanka, who kidnapped Ram Chandra's wife Sita. Ram Chandra invaded Lanka, killed him, rescued Sita and freed the earth from the tyranny of demons.

⁶ King Harish Chandra, an ancestor of Ram Chandra, incurred the wrath of the Sage Viswamitra for freeing a group of women entangled in the plants and creepers in the flower garden of the sage,

made to Rishi Viswamitra. This myth has several ironical implications: first, in the past a king could accept the life of a bonded labourer for the sake of piety, whereas present day rulers are ruthlessly acquisitive and materialist, as exemplified by Maatang, the descendant of Ravana, in the play. But in the case of Golak the question of honour and pity is irrelevant; it is a case of prenatal slavery; his body and life have already been sold or pawned. This difference introduces the sense of irony. The other implication is also ironical and suggestively indicts the patriarchal myths that celebrate Harishchandra's act of selling his wife, Rama Chandra putting his wife Sita in a fire-ordeal and Yudhishtra staking his wife in a game of dice. It turns woman into a commodity, denying woman ownership and control over her body. Here Devi shows the connections between myth and history to assert that the history of bonded labour can be traced to antiquity, beyond recorded history. The myths of Harishchandra and Ram Chandra are parodied in the story of Golak Kur and Paatan. The traditional interpretation of myth as universal, archetypal and non-political is questioned. Robert Graves states that myths are justifications for an existing social system. He says that it can be a politically coded message regarding certain distinct attributes or social make up of a people. Hayden White calls it a mode of discourse. As discourse is governed by power relationships, questions are raised as to who might have devised these myths, and for whom, and who defines universalism. It is political, a construct of the dominant order to justify itself and perpetuate its power. Myths of Harishchandra, Ram Chandra and Yudhishthira can be called upper caste class patriarchal constructions.

That Golak Kura is *nurtured* by famine is very ironical, implying that the continuing condition of famine forces poor people to become bonded labourers. People are often slaves not owing to themselves but owing to others, their forefathers. They do not know what is written in the bond that binds them, what are its terms and conditions, how far and how long it is valid. Generation after generation, they are kept in prenatal and perpetual bondage. The kinship bond is used and exploited to lend force and continuance to the legal bond. Their situation can be well compared with that of the blacks in America who had been bound to slavery down the generations. Golak's descendant Paatan finds himself in a bewilderingly incomprehensible world of suffering, not responsible for his own suffering and not being aware of the form and shape of the agent that makes him suffer. He is in a Kafkaesque world

who, incensed at the constant stealing of flowers from his garden, had used his power of mantra to catch them. Then, Viswamitra, after binding the king to a sacred oath of promise, asked him for a donation (*dana*) of his kingdom Ayodhya. After getting the kingdom, the sage asked him to pay him *dakshina* (the amount to be paid with the donation according to the custom) of one lakh gold coins, for which Harish Chandra had to sell himself, his wife and son. The play interrogates the Brahminic and patriarchal ideologies.

that provides him no specific information and reason for his suffering, while this lack of knowledge about the reason makes the suffering more acute.

Crony Capitalists and Welfare Programmes

Maatang is the present day incarnation of Ravana, a slave owner who indulges in the heinous act of swindling poor illiterate people through usury, forgery, land grabbing by using foul means, filching from government relief and illegally brewing liquor. Though he appears to be a medieval figure, the references to the present situations position him in the contemporary context; he combines in himself the zamindar of the medieval days and the present day wily middleman-trader-politician, who can be described as crony capitalist. Welfare programmes are waylaid by this group. Maatang literally means “elephant,” signifying the swelling rank of middle men who fatten themselves by exploiting the poor and swindling away the government money meant for the poor.

Sale of the Female Body

The situation of Maatang's wife is an example of the distressed sale of the female body caused by famine. Though she is much younger than Maatang, and he is impotent, she has been married off to him in exchange for the grant of a share to her poor share-cropper father in his crop-land he has been tilling, as well as the grant of jewellery to her. This could be a textualisation of the newspaper reports coming out about the distressed selling of one's female kin in some parts of India, recently in Kalahandi district in Odisha.⁷ Following New Historicism, a parallelism between the play and non-literary texts of the time can be read into the play. Maatang believes that by marrying a young buxom woman he can be cured of the infertility he suffers from. The young Mistress thus deprived of her freedom and sexual satisfaction in her relationship with her husband longs for Paatan, his well-formed body and his abounding energy. Paatan's energy and vitality pose a challenge to the sterile and anti-life ideology of Maatang. Maatang's desire to marry, have a family and a son of his own to inherit his slave trade makes him more aware of his gnawing sense of impotency that he desperately tries to hide by marrying a young woman and flaunting his authority over Paatan by beating him up. Beating is to reduce him to the body, a beast, “a horse” (42) and smother the spirit Maatang fears.

The Mistress finds an affinity with Paatan; she feels that they belong to the same class: “Your master has made an *Aajir* of you and of me, too,” she says, as she is a woman and has come from a poor family (46). She wants to release herself from the degrading process of commodification and assert her live vital self. But she knows that the present social gap between the two, because of her

⁷ There were newspaper reports about starvation deaths in Kalahandi district, Odisha and about a tribal woman forced by hunger to sell her young sister-in-law.

position as the wife of the zamindar, is a hindrance to their union. Bhumihari Das, the maid, also has an eye on Paatan and he is attracted to a gypsy woman. The Mistress's attempt to procure a magic potion to entice and possess him demonstrates her desire for freedom and love, for control and possession enmeshed in the power relations involving class, gender and sexuality.

Collective Ownership of the Female Body

While the case of Maatang's wife stands for the individual ownership of the female body, that of the town whore Punnasashi exemplifies the ways in which the female body is collectively owned, used, distributed and dismembered. The system of town whore is an instance of the institutionalisation of the sexual subjugation of women. It is a medieval patriarchal practice that legitimises prostitution for the pleasure and power of the dominant class. Devi uses this medieval practice as an analogy for the ways in which women from poor and marginalised communities like the tribals take to prostitution forced by poverty, often lured and forced into prostitution, purchased and sold by flesh traders in the flesh market. In her short stories she has laid bare such a net of designs and practices victimising poor tribal women, exposing the failure of development and welfare programmes to reach down to them and provide social security to the deprived section of the society (see her short story collection, *Imaginary Maps*).

In another sense, Punnasashi stands for open, free, vital sexuality in opposition to the dull, atrophied and impotent sexuality of Maatang representing the males of his community. Afraid to meet the erotic demands of his young wife, Maatang regularly visits her to nurture an illusion of his masculinity appreciated and praised by her in exchange of money. When his wife complains about this, he abuses her as a whore, using the notion of chastity as a patriarchal instrument of control. It points to the irony that while female transgression is punished, male transgression is praised as a sign of virility, foregrounding the objectification of woman as commodity to be owned, possessed and exchanged. An obnoxious practice of the patriarchal oppression is presented in the episode in which, forced by custom, the town whore, in order to bring rain to the drought parched earth, has to go naked in the dark night, a pitcher on her head, go from door to door praying for water, and leave the pitcher behind the king's lake and return home unnoticed. Punnasashi articulates the irony beneath this degrading practice:

Why do you draw the dust from my courtyard for your puja? The famine and drought came again and again? And the whore has to strip naked and call for the water to bring the rain down on you. (51)

This refers to the tradition of bringing earth from the front yard of a prostitute's house and mixing it with the clay used for making the idol of Goddess Durga to be worshipped during *Dusshera*.⁸ These two conventions juxtaposed together expose the hypocrisy of the dominant order and lay bare the contradictions in the convention and the structure of the authority patronising it. The convention associated with Durga Puja is a combination of the sacred and the profane – carnivalque in nature, as Bakhtin has theorised – signifying the elevation of the low and the trivial and the pulling down of the high and the spiritual to the level of the low and the material. What has been considered sacred is subjected to intensive interrogation through the critique provided by the tradition itself. The radical ambivalence of woman's position is suggested by this episode, in which woman is victim as well as life-giver. She can be compared to Jasoda in her story "Stanyadayini" – the former is allegorical, while the latter is realistic (*Imaginary Maps*).

As Luce Irigaray suggests, a woman is divided into "two irreconcilable bodies: her 'natural' body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is particularly mimetic expression of masculine values" (180). It is her "natural" body that Punnasashi defends: "Isn't whore's body a human body at all" (50). The body becomes a site of contest. In the end, this dark ritual is disturbed, when Maatang's wife steals the bond to free Paatan; with the bond she runs away with him, when they see and are seen by Punnasashi, which symbolically destabilises the hegemonic order they have been serving and fighting.

Denotified Tribes and the Welfare Discourse

Another marginalised group represented in the play is the Gypsy tribe. Gypsies are nomads, categorised as denotified tribes (DNT), for whom Devi has been fighting. Nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes constitute about 10 percent of the country's population; they are still deprived of education, health care and economic empowerment, among other things. The recommendations of the Balkrishna Renke Commission in 2008 and the National Advisory Commission in 2011 are yet to be approved by the government (Ramachandran 2). A large number of Gypsies are deprived of their voting rights for not having any fixed home or homeland because of their nomadic lifestyle. But home and homeland as the essential marker of social and national identity can be questioned in view of the fact that so much migration is constantly taking place across the world; populations are dislocated and relocated all the time, swelling the population of diaspora across the borders. This text is Devi's intervention for the recognition

⁸ *Dusshera* is a festival for the worship of goddess Durga represented as a goddess with ten hands wielding weapons of various types and riding a lion while killing a demon. *Dusshera* is specifically observed to commemorate Lord Ram Chandra's worship of Durga on this day to seek her blessings on the eve of his war against the demon king Ravan.

of the nomads, their restoration into the nation space and for the reclamation of their disappearing traditions.

Maatang manipulates action against the gypsies for their illegal act of brewing liquor by using his power and influence. It is more because their brewing liquor poses an economic threat to his own business of brewing liquor, which is equally illegal but escapes the law. From this point of view, the very credentials of Maatang as a member of the civic society, into which gypsies are not allowed, can be questioned. Gypsies set up tents outside the village, earn their living by performing acrobatics, and sell herbal medicines, traditional drugs, talismans and stones believed to have magical effects. They are the repository of folk wisdom, in opposition to elitist knowledge. Acrobatics is a part of the Indian martial tradition that needs to be significantly related to the contemporary socio-cultural situation. And also, these nomads stand for open, free, outward life, which is a challenge to the restrictive ideology of Maatang and the constrictive system of which he is the product and patron. The erotic mystery and vitality of the gypsy symbolised by the magic potion they possess is a challenge to the atrophied sexuality of Maatang's class, and the officially/communally controlled sexuality of Punnasashi and also the restricted domestic sexuality of the Mistress. Paatan, who belongs to the marginalised class and seeks emancipation, finds an ally in these nomads, and falls in love with a gypsy girl and plans to escape with her. The play seems to propose an alliance among the subaltern groups.

Absence in Presence

When Paatan opens the wrapper handed over to him by the Mistress, he does not find any bond inside it and feels cheated, and in despair and bewilderment he strangles the Mistress to death. But later on, he finds that the bond has been reduced to dust; in reality the bond has ceased to exist and he realises his mistake. This confusion of reality and falsity is caused due to the psychologically disorienting effect of the slavery of bonded labour. The ultimate irony is that many of his ancestors along with him have slaved away their lives, while there is no bond to bind them to slavery. He has lived a life of bondage, without knowing that he is really free and he kills the Mistress without knowing that she has really loved him.

The play ends with an awareness of the falsity and illusion, on which an aajir's life is based. Not only his life but also the lives of his ancestors have been a mockery. He is confounded by history, the history of bonded labour, the history represented here by the elusive non-existent bond. What is presence here is an illusion of absence. This is the predicament of all the subalterns represented by the Mistress, Punnasashi, gypsy men and women suffering perpetually, whose suffering is historically determined for the absent cause. The play is a representation of reality and an allegory of the contemporary situation.

The play *Aajir* is, thus, a political intervention by Mahasweta Devi in favour of the downtrodden, as she pursues a sociocultural agenda exposing the failure/inadequacy of the development and welfare programmes of the government and pleading for their reformulation and implementation based on the honest assessment of the ground realities and the involvement of the local population.

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