

Refiguring the Subaltern Identity: A Reading of Mahasweta Devi's 'The Hunt'

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Abstract: *Identity, be it religious, cultural or social renders a sense of belonging. It binds a person to a particular caste, creed, gender or religion. Members of a social, religious, ethnic or political group identify with each other and conform to the policies or beliefs of the group. Literature, it might not be incorrect to state, is a collection of narratives that portray social and cultural practices. Mahasweta Devi's 'The Hunt' is not only a story of the subjugation of tribal women but it also entails the protagonist's quest for belonging and identity. Published in the anthology Imaginary Maps, this story has been translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The story, though fictional, is based on events that occur often in the lives of the tribal people. It is the story of a girl who despite being immensely liked by the tribal people, finds herself excluded from the tribes. She craves to belong. Choosing to fend for herself always, she transgresses gender roles and is not the stereotypical 'damsel in distress.' This paper intends to trace and analyse the protagonist's search for belonging and identity.*

Key Words: *Subaltern, identity, belonging, gender roles, conformity, tribal*

Mahasweta Devi, an Indian Bengali writer is famous for her stories which are more often than not women centric. In her stories we come across situations in which women are subjugated and exploited either by their family members or by authoritative and influential figures or by the enforcers of law. Mahasweta Devi highlights the fact that women's lives are full of struggles as they are more vulnerable because of their physicality. Honoured with the Padma Vibhushan and several literary awards like the Sahitya Akademi Award, Jnanpith Award and Ramon Magsaysay Award, Mahasweta Devi was a stalwart of the tribal communities. She dedicated her life for the rights and empowerment of the tribal communities. Her works have been translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

'The Hunt' by Mahasweta Devi was published in an anthology called *Imaginary Maps*. It is the story of a young girl, Mary Oraon who is the offspring of Bhikni, a tribal woman and Dixon, a white man. Mary is an attractive eighteen year old girl who works hard to earn her livelihood. She is confident, strong and knows how to keep unwanted male attention at bay.

"Mary has countless admirers at Tohri Market. She gets down at the station like a queen. She sits in her own rightful place at the market. She gets smokes from the other marketeers, drink tea and chews betel leaf at their expense, but encourages no one... Many men had wanted to be her lover. Mary had lifted her machete." (Devi 2-3)
Mary's mother Bhikni looked after the Dixons' household and bungalow even after the family had migrated to Australia. Dixon's son came back in 1959 to sell the estate. He impregnated Bhikni and then went back to Australia. Thus, Mary is distrustful of men especially outsiders. Both Bhikni and Mary work for Prasadji. Bhikni is employed on a wage basis while Mary is provided for in kind. She is given "board and lodging, clothes and sundries." (Devi 2) Mary is a dedicated worker.

"Mary cleans house, and pastures cattle, with her inviolate constitution, her infinite energy, and her razor-sharp mind. On the field she lunches on fried corn. She stands and picks fruit and oversees picking. She weighs the stuff herself for the buyers. She puts the fruit bitten by bats and birds into a sack, and feeds it to her mother's chickens. When the rains come she replants the seedlings carefully. She watches out for everything. She buys rice, oil, butter, and spices for the Prasads at Tohri market." (Devi 4)

Mary plans to marry Jalim, a Muslim boy. He is "the leader of the marketeers and a sharp lad." (Devi 2) Everyone knows that Mary is betrothed to Jalim and they intend to get married as soon as they save a hundred rupees. Jalim respects Mary and her decision of consummating their love only after marriage. The villagers do not interfere in Mary's life. Although she takes gifts of food for them and spends time with them, they do not regard her as one of their own. This is because she was an illegitimate child of a 'white man' and has Australian blood cruising through her veins.

It is with the advent of Tehsildar Singh that trouble begins. He was a broker introduced to Prasadji, Lalchand and Mulniji by Prasadji's son Banwari. He comes with the intention of buying the wood of all the Sal trees in that area. He drives a hard bargain. He is able to convince the landlords as well as the villagers to agree to his terms and conditions. The contractor, being shrewd, made the villagers believe that he was helping them and that they would not get a better offer elsewhere. The simple village folk believed everything he said.

“The broker started planning the deployment of manpower...twelve annas daily for men, eight annas for women ... And a tiffin of cornmeal in the afternoon... Salt and cayenne with the meal... A sack of salt weekly for each village... After the final agreement the contractor gave six bottles of first quality country liquor to the six elders. The elders of Kuruda told the others, ‘Go to the village, tell the chief, and offer prayers at the shrine. Good times are coming.’ (Devi 7)

Tehsildar Singh first lays his eyes on Mary when he visits Prasadji. Prasadji followed his gaze and understood that he was drawn towards Mary. Subtly, he warns Tehsildar Singh that Mary stays with them and they think of her as a daughter. However, that is not enough to deter Tehsildar Singh. He stalks Mary and gifts her a sari. She throws the sari at him while he is sitting in his tent surrounded by the tribal people and warns him of the consequences if he does not stop stalking her.

“Tehsildar loses face in everyone's eyes. He wants to say, I gave something in good faith...
The elders say, Don't give again.
--- What?
--- Don't give again.
---Is she a good character? Would a good one marry a Muslim?
--- Don't say that again.” (Devi 11)

The Tehsildar understands that the tribal people are more in number and he and his men are in a minority. He realises that he should not continue the conversation and he then maintains his silence. Mahasweta Devi was aware that, “Among the tribals, insulting or raping women is the greatest crime. Rape is uncommon to them. Women have a place of honour in tribal society.” (Devi, *Imaginary Maps* xi) However, he continues to stalk Mary. Mary is aware that he is married. She knows that he is pursuing her because she keeps him at bay. She knows that if she relents he would exploit her sexually, eventually lose interest in her and then abandon her. The felling of the trees continues. The contractor's work is coming to a close. He grows impatient and one day, he holds Mary's hand forcefully.

“At first Mary was scared. Struggling she lost her machete. With great effort, after a good deal of struggling, Mary was able to spring out of his grasp. Both of them stood up... Against the background of the spring songs Mary thought he was an animal. A-ni-mal... Suddenly Mary smiled... Mary's eyes and face softened. She said, On the day of the feast. Stay near that rock. The women will go far to play the hunt. I will come to you.” (Devi 12-13)

Mary had been caught unawares. She knew that the Tehsildar could sexually assault her. She knew that her protests would be futile. She decided to act smartly. She played along and made the Tehsildar believe that she was interested in him and would surrender herself to him on the day of the hunt. She knew that doing so was the only alternative she had at that point of time in order to ensure her safety. She patted his cheek, praised him and walked away, thus averting the impending doom.

The onset of the spring season is celebrated by performing annual rituals. One such ritual is ‘the hunt.’

“It is revealed that the ritual of the hunt that the tribes celebrate at the spring festival is for the women to perform this year. For twelve years men run the hunt. Then comes the women's turn... Like men they too go out with bow and arrow... Then they picnic together, drink liquor, sing and return home at evening. They do exactly what the men do.” (Devi 11)

Mary knows that ‘the hunt’ would give her an opportunity to teach Tehsildar Singh a lesson. She knew that in order to keep herself safe, she must put an end to the chasing and stalking once and for all. On the day of the hunt, Mary purchases chickens and liquor bottles for the women. She dresses well and participates in the hunt. While the other women chase hedgehogs and squirrels, Mary darts for the rock behind which Tehsildar Singh is hiding. She drinks with him and then strategically kills him. She takes his wallet and then dumps him in the ravine. She then takes a bath and goes to the place where the other women are cooking and celebrating. She sings and dances with them and finally

embarks on her journey to Tohri. She plans to visit Jalim and elope with him. She is not afraid of the dark as “she has killed the biggest beast.” (Devi 17)

Mary emerges as a brave woman who instead of succumbing to Tehsildar Singh’s advances, decides to avenge her predicament by killing him. She resorts to violence as a self defence mechanism. However, it is noteworthy that this brave girl yearns for the validation of her mother’s tribe. She is conscious of the fact that the people of the Oraon tribe do not consider her as one of their own because she is the illegitimate child of a ‘white man.’ Irrespective of the fact that she is generous towards the villagers, helps them whenever required, spends time with them and entertains them, they do not “think of her as their blood and do not place the harsh injunctions of their own society upon her.” (Devi 5) Everyone knows that she intends to marry Jalim, a Muslim but they do not interfere in her personal space. She knows that if her father had belonged to either of the Budhna, Mangla Oraon or Somra tribes, the tribal people would not have allowed this marriage to take place. They would have protested and taken all the steps necessary to prevent Mary’s marriage to Jalim. “She would have rebelled if they had. She is unhappy that they don’t. In her inmost heart there is somewhere a longing to be part of the Oraons. She would have been very glad if, when she was thirteen or fourteen, some brave Oraon lad had pulled her into marriage.” (Devi 5)

Mary longs to belong because belonging to a tribe would give her a definite identity. All the tribal people are subalterns and the tribal women, according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are thrice marginalised. They are marginalised because they belong to the tribes, because they are poor and most importantly because they are women. No doubt Mary would remain a subaltern but she would be one with the other subalterns. Belonging and conforming to an ethnic group, in a way, is a reassertion of identity. The tribes may have points of contention among them but they present a united front and always support each other. This brings to mind Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of ‘Strategic Essentialism.’

Mary is aware that although the tribal people like her, she is not a member of the tribal community and though they might protect her from the outsiders, they would never claim her as their own. She is aware that women command respect and occupy an honourable position in the tribal society. It is this importance and reverence that she longs for. She decides to marry Jalim irrespective of the fact that he is a Muslim because he proposed to her for marriage and safeguarded her honour when the drunken truck driver decided to carry her off. All her life she craved to belong. She wanted to be claimed. Thus, at the end of the story Mary decided to elope with Jalim and go away to some distant place so that she could start afresh and be identified only as Jalim’s wife and not as the illegitimate daughter of a ‘white man.’ She wants to leave her present identity behind and don a new one that binds her to her husband’s religious identity and instils in her a sense of belonging and conformity.

‘The Hunt’ is a remarkable story in its own right. It brings to light how mainstream authoritative figures like Tehsildar Singh seek to take advantage of the subalterns. However, it is different in its treatment of the theme of subjugation as it showcases the protagonist not as a victim who is wronged but as a survivor who fights all odds and takes control of her life. Mary transgresses gender roles and emerges as a strong, independent woman. Her quest for identity finally comes to a fruitful end when she decides to elope with Jalim. ‘The Hunt’ may be regarded as a microcosm for the macrocosm ... a mirror that reflects the transformation in gender roles in the contemporary society. “The story thus becomes a celebration of traditions that is compellingly relevant in contemporary times as well.” (Gupta 24) An avant-garde writer, Mahasweta Devi through this story, inspires women to take charge of their own lives and no longer cater to the stereotypical image of a ‘damsel in distress.’

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