

Subaltern Consciousness in Mahasweta Devi's Titu Mir

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Abstract

The principal concern of this paper is to examine the subaltern consciousness in Mahasweta Devi's Titu Mir (2002). It also explores the issues of representation, subalternity, and subaltern consciousness as a means of protest as well as means of preservation of subaltern existence. Devi's radical stance as a writer and an activist in fighting for the cause of the subaltern has been examined to underscore the need of subaltern history, which has been fabricated and tampered with to marginalise the subaltern in letter and spirit. Her radical standpoint of empowering the subaltern is evident in her oeuvre where she gives a poignant depiction of the deplorable condition of the subaltern right from pre-colonial to post-colonial contemporary times. Her primary concern has been the universal fact that the subaltern has been dispossessed of his voice due to which he is at a loss to express the recurrence of discrimination, subjugation and oppression endured by the subaltern masses.

KEYWORDS: Subalternity, History, Oppression, Discrimination, Consciousness, Subaltern Masses

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Mahasweta Devi is an aggressive activist, writer and a historian who has diligently endeavoured to subvert the unbalanced equation of caste and hence has highlighted the need for a democratic and unbiased society. Devi as an unflinching advocate of the subaltern has provided the subaltern with an agency to speak, and has through her works apprehended the totalitarian systems which have expelled the subaltern to the fringes of the society.

In the printed texts of national and colonial historical records, the image of Titu Mir occupies kaleidoscopic versions, saying which is not to be deemed as praise. When it comes to their representation, the aim of the paper is to highlight the myriad depictions of these historic figures from scandalous to hyperbolic or mythicised, to folkloric as well as heroic depiction. It is attested that such innumerable and rather contaminated representations which are far from the truth are damaging to the true essence of an individual, and with time establish themselves as the only legitimatised records to know the subaltern. To add more, when such an immutable legitimacy is provided to these records, it disallows any rectification of the same even if such representations are found to be one-sided, false or inadequate. This study examines Devi's novel Titu Mir to highlight how these novels work as an intervention in creating a subaltern history. What measure of intervention does Devi's work serve as an investigation and rectification of the official records on Titu Mir.

In investigating the modes of representation as outlined in Subaltern Studies, one discerns an association between subalternity and representation and can also observe the effect of each on the writing of an authentic history. It is certainly necessary to examine the ways representation - misrepresentation or underrepresentation in historical texts produce subalternity and how such a violent subversion of truth can be challenged.

In her emblematic history-writing, Devi has also traced the individual in history in regards to Titu Mir. In the novel, Titu Mir, she has defied the misrepresentation of

peasant rebels as derivatives of Nationalistic struggles and colonial regime. Her novel is claimed to be a historical tale which aims to address Titu Mir as a hero of his own story rooted in the larger socio-economic situation of his era. The novel is not only a highlight of the peasant as a rebel but his consciousness as well which is generally purported to be created by elitist power structures and hence relegating the peasant to the margins of his own tale. In recovering the truth, Devi indicts the historians who have produced unfaithful and scandalous records of the revolt and stamped Titu Mir, a folk-hero and a peasant rebel, as a violent extremist. In her novel, which she has rendered as a historical fiction to revisit history, the author has commented how the authentic account of history has been smothered as historical records have been rewritten from the stage of misrepresentation.

Devi attests to the systematic institution of misrepresentation which has obliterated the actual records in favour of partisan, politicised, and elitist historiography.

Devi in the beginning of the novel sets the tone - Titu's personality as akin to a leader; his interest in daring activities; his curious conversations with the sanyasis and fakirs reminiscent of the war between these groups and the British; the famine; the Santhals coerced to plant Indigo; zamindars and their exploitative practices, and in the course of the novel, the author now and then intersperses these details with ample significance to Titu Mir as a hero of his story. Devi, as we turn the pages of the novel, has developed a historical narrative of why the peasants are forced to revolt.

Devi has depicted the culpable reasons to highlight the cause behind the making of a subaltern consciousness which eventually drove the peasant to revolt against such inhuman injustices. As traced in Titu Mir, and in the historical retelling by subaltern critics, the peasants are provoked to rebel due to many culpable reasons as: first, land settlement process namely Permanent Settlement which made the British head of revenue collection etc and due to which the peasants are forced to pay high taxes; and second, the indigo plantation is made peremptory over food crops, and it is observed that indigo gravely effected the fertility of the lands. The peasants are hence not only bearing the brunt of colonial oppression, but as Devi notes the zamindars, the police and other structures of authority are also connected in the debasement and exploitation of the subaltern. Devi hence also attacks the native elite for conniving with the British and allowing such a state to solidify itself in India in those times.

All these episodes serve as tell-tale reasons of how the peasants are recurrently made victims of elitist tantrums of power and greed. These are the incendiary reasons which naturally instigated the peasants to protest against the exploitative measures taken by the British in the whole of India. And it is due to these inhuman degrees of exploitation, as Partha Chatterjee observes in *Empire and Nation*, "...subaltern consciousness... evolved out of the experience of subordination - out of the struggle...the daily routine of servitude, exploitation, and deprivation" (292). Consequently, Devi highlights how Titu Mir's conscious awakening of being exploited is not only on a personal level but that he had grown cognizant of the silent sufferings of his fellow peasants as well. Further, for representing the affliction and wretchedness of the peasants, he is misrepresented as an extremist. It is only in rewriting history from the vantage point of the peasants, can this monstrous subversion of truth be arrested and corrected. The novel in this regard hence as a reconstructed history serves as a significant evidence of peasants and peasant revolt and how they have received marginal representation.

In writing the narrative of Titu Mir, Devi has at the outset explored the identity of the man to break the stereotypical depiction of tribal to yield the truth. Her motive has been to rectify the history but not at the expense of romanticizing the character. She

has portrayed the man in his true light by gathering facts associated with his legend. This technique of historicizing is a break from the traditional notion of historiography that harps on a stereotypical impression of the peasant rebels. Devi has opposed this depiction to represent the reality of the anti-colonial and anti-native bourgeois struggle of Titu Mir. The subaltern critics have also attacked this stereotypical and rather pastoral method to romanticize the tribal identity.

Devi in this regard has done away with the gallant depiction of the hero and his peasant community. She has rendered a realistic portrayal to expose the truth than digress over the truth in flamboyant flourishes of romanticised content; as the latter deals with only the eddy over the ocean than the truth which is lying in its abyss. In her writing, Devi has actively pursued the human element which is often negated as paltry or mulled over as insignificant. In view of this, her works are indeed a radical rewriting of history and reconstruction of historiography as a model. In light of the treatment of her characters as humans and how she accords them primary pedestal, her novels have been considered epitome of historical fiction.

The very germ of insurgency arose in Titu Mir's consciousness that is triggered by a mere spoken word. That word shook him to the exploitation he had been facing but is numb to it. It should but be noted, that the spoken word only provoked his consciousness that is already inside of him. He knew about the abuse of the zamindars and the colonial sahibs, but what the episode triggered is his slumbering consciousness – it awakened it rather than create it. Devi also highlights this point by writing episodes wherein Titu Mir would help his peers when faced with social injustice. Devi intends to show that Titu Mir is cognizant of the oppression faced by him and his people. As Devi observes in Titu Mir, "...Ever since he is a boy, he has been unable to tolerate injustice. He'd give his shirt to the needy... he'd pour out grain for visiting fakirs" (45). In his intolerance towards injustice, Devi intends to prove Titu Mir like many peasants were the author of their consciousness than an outsider.

Devi in Titu Mir highlights the significance of this religiosity which stirred the consciousness of Titu Mir to not only rid the country of the suppressors but also purge the religion from the distortive practises and rituals. Religious ideology hence as observed acts as a unifying as well as powerful persuader of masses, as its precepts are taken to be gospel truths of divine justification and hence claim irrefutable veracity. Therefore, in articulating one's attack on injustice, the peasants mobilised their stand by means of such an ideology or an ideology which can be considered as equally potent. In order to rid the country of a foreign evil, hence the peasant moved by his consciousness looked closer home by exposing and reforming the distortive renderings of his religion first; and then with a firm footing based on a corrected religious ideology, he is empowered to depose the oppressor.

In the last line, the need of a religious ideology to articulate one's consciousness comes forth. Why religion needs reformation is firstly to empower the poor subaltern with a concrete foundation. Once it has been achieved the subaltern can without any doubt believe in the rectified faith and fight for what is right based on an ideology which has been made right. This point can be further analysed in the novel as Devi narrates the history of factors which eventually lead to a revolt, factors being - consciousness, consciousness based on religious ideology and eventually a consciousness that helps manifest a revolt. In regard to Titu Mir and his meeting with Syed Ahmad, which acts as a final push to his awakened consciousness, Devi writes that Titu hence had found "the charm, the incantation that banished fear" and hence had "found the path he is looking for" (Titu Mir 64). It can then be said that religious ideology, therefore, served as a charm, and an incantation to empower the peasant in

his finding of a path and the means to tread it to eventually finish it and seek what had been the calling of his consciousness - justice.

In further highlighting the indispensable role of subaltern consciousness, it can be stated that without it a revolt cannot come to pass. A peasant had it, and it is only because of it that there are inestimable peasant revolts. In the novel, Devi has strikingly commented on it when she writes that only those who had suffered at the hands of the oppressors and realised their suffering could be in a position to revolt.

It should not be a radical thought to conceive history of peasant struggle as a part of Indian history. It should be perceived as a common, accepted and established mode of history, if one is to consider the magnitude of peasant struggles, and the rational cum highly pragmatic modes of subaltern consciousness witnessed; it hence should be generally understood to consider such histories as integral part of Indian history. But such is grievously not the case, which is shocking to voice the least. It instigates one to ask, why such a misdemeanour, to what end, and how could possibly a nation call itself enlightened if it bars the most momentous struggles of India namely peasant revolts from its official history. To this endeavour which is to ask these questions, find resolutions and expose the perpetrators, the activists as Devi have weaved their historic fiction. To this end, the academic discourse of Subaltern studies debates representation, consciousness and subalternity etc. To this end hence the aim of the paper has been to realize how peasant rebel history that exists is either inadvertently uninformed, or strategically fabricated; and the peasant as an individual is often superseded by a peasant as a metaphor for the savage hence his life is represented as a precipitous occurrence than a conscious, organic and human experience.

As evident in these observations, which reveal the shocking obliteration of ethnic identity, the paper hence has examined how Devi intends to empower these people with an identity and a history. She does not leave any stone unturned to rewrite subaltern history. Her novel, *Titu Mir*, is a proof of the significance of history and its relevance in contemporary society. The criminal falsification of elite history has continued to prevail even today. The past which is not documented from an impartial eye has infected the present of the subalterns, and shall slander the future if not rectified. The objective of the novels is to set the record straight in exposing the blighted lies of elite history are it colonial or native elitist history.

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