Articulation of Resistance by Subaltern Women: Reading Mahasweta Devi’s ‘The Hunt’ and ‘Bayen’

Amandeep Kaur
Assistant Professor
Mata Gujri College, Fatehgarh Sahib

The study of subaltern forms a very critical part of literature. Many scholars have analysed their condition and have come up with different conclusions. One class of such thinkers believe that the subalterns are perpetually doomed and it is impossible to recover their voice. But why do we think that subaltern cannot speak? Subaltern people have been blessed with voice as the elite class has been; so there is no question of silence of Subaltern. But the fact that is bothering us across the histories and cultures is that they have not been allowed to speak or their voice is mutilated.

Why can’t the Subaltern class go one or two rungs higher on the ladder of social hierarchy? Because the elite class never let them go. The reason is ‘Power and Knowledge’. Gramsci’s analysis of the capitalist society illicit very vividly the role of intellectuals in creating the social hegemony of the bourgeoisie. But according to Bhabha, subaltern social groups are also in a position to subvert the authority of those who have hegemonic power (191-207). Foucault says, “Where there is power, there is always resistance” (qtd. in Miller 299). In history, there are traces of rebellion, but these are not openly posited; rather, one has to discover these traces as embodied and inscribed in the form of records produced in the context of the exercise of bureaucratic and legal domination. So we may suggest that these superior forms of authority have already appropriated the speech of the subaltern, when that speech becomes available for study.
The failure of elite discourses to identify many of the most significant aspects of the past is a significant motive of the Subaltern Studies. The project of Subaltern Studies besides being a source of our understanding of tribes, lower castes etc, acts to restore to them their historical being. It talks about the rights of the subaltern groups.

In fact, in a sense, women also constitute the subaltern, because of their subordinate position in patriarchal society. An important thing to be noted here is that women belonging to the lower caste or class become a kind of double subaltern; one, because of sex; two, because of low caste or/and class. The position of women of the lower class or/and caste in Third World is even worse. For instance, in India women are subject to triple torture. Besides gender and caste bias, the curse of Third world is upon them. The case of Indian rural women is miserably hopeless.

An eminent Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi through her works tries to recover the voice of socially denigrated group which according to Spivak’s problematisation of the term ‘Subaltern’ are real subalterns. In an interview she says:

Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word ‘subaltern’. . . . They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. (“Interview with Gayatri Chakarvorty Spivak” 29-47)

The present paper is an attempt to answer these questions: What kind of possible language can be used by female subaltern to resist the atrocities inflicted on them? Do they all respond similarly and with equal intensity? If they respond differently, then to what extent do their experiences of oppression vary, and why?
Mahashweta Devi’s story ‘Bayen’ explores feminine sensibility and the trauma that a woman undergoes because of the harsh treatment meted out to her in the name of oppressive and outdated social values and obsolete traditions. Chandidasi Gangadasi has been depicted as a helpless woman before the superstitions prevailing in her society and who is therefore psychologically oppressed. But as the story unfolds, she emerges as a powerful and moving persona, arousing great admiration. Chandidasi belongs to the race of cremation attendants. Being the only daughter of the family, she inherits the paternal job. Obviously, she is not afraid of dead bodies or darkness at all.

Once she is teased by some fellow people and is accused of evil. She becomes weaker in no time and declares, “I have not the heart to do it anymore.” A series of such incidents force her to quit her job. Actually one night she hears the cries of the jackals in the graveyard and goes to the cremation ground to ensure a peaceful sleep to the dead children in their graves. Unfortunately, this human action proves to be a threat to her existence. The gullible people are deceived into the belief that Chandi is responsible for the death of children. She is pathetically defenseless when her insensitive husband also becomes a party to her victimization. She is eventually declared “buyen” and deprived of her status of a human being. From Chandidasi she is made Chandibayen, illustrating painfully the idea that society can make of a woman whatever it likes.

As a bayen, Chandi has to live alone in a hut on the periphery of the village. A red flag is put up on the roof of her hut as a sign of danger. Her suffering is intensified when she is not even allowed to see her son. She is forced to believe that she is a witch.

She averts a train accident giving her own life. It is this act of sacrifice that proves her human worth. When a medal is announced for her, someone whispers, “Yes sir, she was one of us” (13). Chandi, a victim of ailing society, dies a heroic death, showing she was as human as others. She restores her dignity among those who had expelled her. Her sacrifice is, no doubt, a mark of
the ultimate victory of human values that the oppressed keep alive and it is an unmistakable pointer to the defeat of the inhumanity of the oppressor.

Another strong symbol of subaltern resistance is Mary Oraon of the story *The Hunt*. Mary Oraon is a racially hybrid woman, who overcomes the sexual threat of a vulgar out-of-town member of the dominant class. *The Hunt* shows the ugly traces of the mistreatment of the tribal women by the colonizers. Oraon is the product of Bikhni’s, a tribal woman, raped by a white man who came to India after decolonization to sell off his property. She is fierce, proud, strong, and charming woman. But she has to work like a slave for a family. But there is a clear message of resistance and rejection in her eyes. Perhaps it is because white blood is running in her veins; as the narrator writes. “Yes, there is something true in Mary, the power of Australian blood” (3).

She finds some measure of independence because of her outcaste status. The fact that she is not fully an Oraon daughter troubles her, as the narrator tells us of her psychology: “She would have been very glad if, when she was thirteen or fourteen, some brave Oraon lad had pulled her into marriage” (6). When Tehsildar Singh starts bothering her she kills him to put an end to this trouble. It concludes the tale of a strong and an independent woman. This way she becomes the agent of action and makes impossible things possible. She proves that even tribal women can overcome their oppressors.

Mary Oraon is seemingly a role model for all the Marys who are sexually threatened. But Mahasweta Devi makes it clear that Mary is not a readymade role model for the third world women because of the circumstances of her birth. Mary’s mixed blood is repeatedly identified as the source of her power. Wenzel appropriately remarks, “The trajectory of Mary’s wonderful tale in no way changes the lives of the Oraons in Kuruda (Mary’s village) . . . .” It can be concluded that if every woman is given Mary’s freedom and singularity, she can fight for her security and defend herself. Every woman needs to be free from social and cultural constraints because these constraints make
her vulnerable and weak. All Marys should be free to move from and through their Kurudas, spatially and culturally. It is only then that they can be an equal match to their exploiters. Spivak also asserts that “[s]ubaltern women need to recognize that ‘internalized [gender] constraints’ inhibit their becoming organic intellectuals, and that ethical singularity with first and third world peoples can help them overcome this obstacle” (qtd in Sagar 143). Mary Oran exemplifies such an organic intellectual when she takes her life in her own hands, gathers her forces with supreme will power and turns the tables on her oppressor.

Their violence can be called progressive kind of violence. The death of Chandidasi is not an equalizer; in fact, she rises much above than those who deem themselves superior. We cannot make out whose resistance is fairer. If we swap their courses of action, Chandidasi cannot kill the whole society. Mary Oraon has no such discontent against the society as it has already abandoned her. Her exploiter is a single person and not a community. She settles her score in her own way. The intersection of gender with other axes of power such as race, caste, class, ethnicity, religion etc. suggests that the experience of oppression and resistance for women living in diverse culture tends to be different and specific.

Thus the stories of Mahasweta bring to light the subliminal traces of exploitation that have always stoked the fires of subaltern rebellion and are perhaps the best examples of fiction as an agent for transformation. The transformation may, however, come slowly.

Works Cited


