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Mahasweta Devi and Postmodern Cultural Hegemony

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Abstract

The paper outlines a brief overview of Postmodernism and its offshoot Cultural Hegemony. The paper examines closely how Antonio Gramsci developed and propagated Cultural Hegemony. Furthermore, the paper takes into account the factors that influence a state to impose a hegemonic stance on the common people. The scope of the paper also covers Mahasweta Devi, one of the seminal writers of India who has tirelessly championed for the cause of the tribal communities and the downtrodden. Mahasweta Devi has always fought against the hegemonic tools that have been used by the state machinery at the behest of the capitalist class. The paper gives an overview of some of her prominent works that seek to expose the social hypocrisies and prejudices that impede the progress of the subaltern communities.

Keywords: culture, postmodernism, hegemony

Introduction

Postmodernism gained prominence mainly in the second half of the 20th century. Postmodernism could be found in philosophy, arts, literary criticism, architecture, etc. Postmodern writers tend to draw inspiration from their Modernist counterparts. Postmodern literature also breaks down boundaries. Hence, we find experimentation in the literature of the Postmodern period. The use of metafiction, pastiche, magic realism and inter-textuality are some of the instances of experimentation that Postmodern writers use in their works.

With the advent of Postmodernism, there was a deluge of new formations related to the economic and socio-cultural domains. The period covering Modernism and Postmodernism can



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also be said to imbibe a scientific mentality of reasoning and rationale. After the Second World War, there were great advancements in the field of science and technology. These advancements were soon felt by the social scientists as well who tried to apply the scientific temperament in their respective fields as well.

Postmodern literature tests and often transcends boundaries. There is a spirit of questioning that does not accept anything as the ultimate truth. Postmodernists believe that truth is a matter of perception and should not be considered as anything universal. Furthermore, Postmodern literature does not believe in clear distinctions or binaries to be precise. Postmodern critics believe in the concept of third space. Another thing that can be mentioned in this regard, is the huge advancement of technology, especially in the field of transport. Air travel, in the past seventy years, has become increasingly accessible to everyone. Compared to sea voyages in the past, air travel is time efficient and so, has played a direct role in the change of economy and workplaces. People now move more freely across the world and this has resulted in an intermingling of cultures. The effect of this can be directly seen in the fields of art, architecture, fashion, cuisines and most importantly, on literature. Multiculturalism is slowly gaining pace and social problems are acquiring completely new dimensions and forms. Hence, Postmodern literature is varied in terms of forms and is not restricted within set parameters. The Postmodern influence was also felt in the domain of language. Ferdinand de Saussure exerted an indelible influence on Postmodernists. Postmodernists are of the opinion that the meaning of a word is not always static. Rather, the meaning of a word encompasses contrasts and differences when compared to other words. Therefore, it can also be inferred that a meaning of a word is actually the product of another word which is the product of some other words. In this way, the process goes on. Postmodernists believe that the predominant discourses in the contemporary society actually reflect the interests and perceptions of the dominant group, thereby, ignoring the 'other'. This 'othering' of the humankind gives rise to the subalterns or the marginalized sections of the society. Thus, one of the sub genres of Postmodern literature is subaltern literature that seeks to give a voice to the marginalized sections of the society. Postmodern literature is heavily indebted to Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Roland Barthes, Homi Bhabha and others.

Postmodern writers include Margaret Atwood, John Barth, Anthony Burgess, Italo Calvino, Bob Dylan, Umberto Eco, T.S. Eliot, Doris Lessing, Alice Munro, Toni Morrison, Haruki Murakami, Orhan Pamuk, Kurt Vonnegut and others. All these writers explore subjectivism and their writings are often a break from realism. One more characteristic that can be identified in



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Postmodern writings is the gradual evolution of a character. The narrative might be fragmented. Furthermore, a postmodern text is often studied with relation to another text. Therefore, Postmodern literature is at times, criticized as a corpus of literature lacking originality. Postmodern literature is often found to represent the pluralistic society of contemporary times.

Postmodern Indian English writers, in the recent past, have occupied the spotlight in the international arena of world literature. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Neel Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, V.S. Naipaul, Mahasweta Devi and others have captured the cultural diversity of the present age, anxiety born out of diaspora, cultural isolation and hybridity, cosmopolitanism, the continuous rift between the traditional and modernity, the use of myth, etc. The aforementioned writers also discuss gender issues, LGBT rights, use of history in their writings, etc. The aforementioned Postmodern writers use different kinds of narrative techniques in their writings such as magic realism, bildungsroman, mythical realism, historical romance, etc. One more characteristic of Indian English writers of the Postmodern period is that most of the writers have now settled in the West. As a result, their writings have encompassed streaks of both cultures: the Orient and the Occident. This straddling between two cultural spaces has also given rise to alienation, anxiety among the characters, perceptual differences, inter-generational differences, etc. Their writings often encompass a new form of culture which is a by-product of cosmopolitanism. Indian English writers also focus on the problems that are plaguing India. One such instance is Left wing extremism that has affected India for the past fifty years or so. Writers have tried to capture different perceptions to the problems. They have analyzed various prisms and discussed the movement in details. Other issues that have captured the imagination of Indian English writers are untouchability, the great Indian partition, social reforms, education, etc.

One of the characteristic features of Postmodernism is skepticism, irony and at times, rejection of the grand narratives and ideologies that are propagated within the social space. Postmodernists also emphasise that ideology can play a pivotal role in maintaining a political or an economic power. Postmodernists also believe that knowledge can be socially constructed and conditioned. Therefore, knowledge can be manipulated to suit the vested interests of the ruling class.

An off-shoot of Postmodernism is the theory of Cultural Hegemony that was propagated by Antonio Gramsci. Antonio Gramsci was an Italian Marxist scholar. He was also a renowned linguist and a sociologist. Gramsci's theories are believed to be an extension of the already



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existing Marxism and so, he is often called a neo-Marxist. Gramsci, when imprisoned because of his views, engaged himself in some serious study. His *Prison Notebooks* are considered to be deliberations in the field of Cultural Studies.

Cultural Hegemony, propagated by Gramsci, refers to ruling a state with the help of cultural and ideological factors. Those in power often manipulate and twist the values, norms, beliefs of the society. This is part of the Cultural Hegemony that Gramsci advocates. Cultural Hegemony is invisible because culture resides within us. Culture is found in stories, images, rhetoric and therefore, is not always tangible. Naturally, it is harder to resist this hegemony. When a culture becomes hegemonic, the ruling class defines it as common sense or the norm for the majority of the population. Cultural Hegemony is usually formed by the ruling class and their agendas. The ruling class tries to dominate and control the subjects with means that can be traced to the culture propagated by the rulers. Gramsci also asserted that Cultural Hegemony is often placed before the common people in the garb of welfare measures. People are made to feel that the culture propagated by the ruling class is actually meant to benefit them. Therefore, getting the consent of the common people is hardly a problem. It can also be said that ruling people with the help of their consent is easier than a rule that is dependent on force.

Cultural Hegemony is an extension of Marx's belief that the society is always ruled by people who have the capital in their hands. Antonio Gramsci included the factors of folklore, society, beliefs, religion, spirituality and the media and inferred that the aforementioned factors can be orchestrated to an extent where the common people are made to believe that the existing reality is the ultimate state of existence. Furthermore, Gramsci said that education is a powerful tool that is often manipulated by those in power. This control of the education system can be defined as a part of Cultural Hegemony as well.

Marx has always felt that ideology played a very important role within the social structure of a country. Gramsci elaborated Marx's belief further in his essay *The Intellectuals* where the former said that ideology usually plays its role within the spaces of religion and education. Gramsci was also of the opinion that the so-called intellectuals end up helping the ruling class. The intelligentsia maintains and sustains the cause of the Cultural Hegemony. Cultural Hegemony influences the belief system of the mass. Cultural Hegemony also takes into account people's exposure to cultural narratives that essentially reflect the values and thought process of the ruling class.

As evident from the title, this paper studies the concept of Postmodern Cultural Hegemony and



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how Mahasweta Devi, in her works, deals with the cultural hegemony that is prevalent in the contemporary society. Mahasweta Devi, often referred to as 'Ma' by the tribal communities of India was one such writer who challenged the notions of cultural hegemony. Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was also a social activist who took keen interest in the lives of the marginalized and the tribal sections of the community. Throughout the span of her career, she wrote more than 100 novels and short stories. Many of her works focused on the Naxalites and the villagers affected by the Naxal revolution in India. She also wrote on prostitutes, beggars and the subaltern people. Mahasweta Devi was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay award in 1997. She was also awarded the Sahitya Akademi, Jnanpith and Padma Vibhushan.

Mahasweta Devi came from a family of social thinkers and intellectuals. Guided by her family members, she immersed herself in social causes like educating girls, championing the cause of the tribals, etc. from a very early age. During the initial years of her writing career, Mahasweta Devi extensively toured the tribal belts of Northern India. She came in close contact with the villagers and this left an indelible mark on her. Later, she participated in the Tebhaga movement and became an active member of the Relief Committee that was formed to provide assistance to the refugees who had suffered and subsequently escaped the Partition in 1947.

Coming to her literary works, *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights of the Forest) is a text that focuses on the tribal leader Birsa Munda and his fight against the British. *Aranyer Adhikar* chronicles how the tribals fought against the British atrocities and asserted their rights. The novel is a scathing criticism of the injustices that were present in the contemporary society. Mahasweta Devi considered the British as the outsiders who wanted to usurp the traditional rights of the tribal communities over the forested areas of India. Critic Ilina Sen believes, "Mahasweta Devi's writings on tribal life are intimate and clearly identify the state and its agents as violent oppressors of the people." (Sen 1) Mahasweta Devi's promotion of the tribal culture is found in other works as well. In her novella, *Pterodactyl*, she examines the social factors that contribute towards the misunderstanding of the tribal communities by the mainstream society. She probes closely how this misunderstanding ultimately prompts social injustices and prejudices that affect social cohesion. Jogamaya Bayer comments "The outsiders misapprehension of the adivasis' desperation indicates their indifference to the adivasi culture." (Bayer 96) Mahasweta Devi felt that the tribal communities were wronged by the mainstream society that was characterised by hypocrisy and falsity.

Mahasweta Devi's short story *Talaq* or *The Divorce* is a social commentary on the ills of the contemporary society. She lays bare the hypocrisy of the custom that dictates the peculiar practice of having to consummate a marriage with another man if the husband had divorced the wife. In her short story, Mahasweta Devi highlights how a Muslim couple had to flee their



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village because of the regressive custom. Critic Urmil Talwar feels, “Mahasweta Devi depicts the fate of women who are twice colonized and victimized in the Indian social system but resists the term feminism as she proficiently displays the exploitation of the lower class and tribal men as her emphasis is on class and not on gender.” (Talwar 218) The last literary work that this paper will discuss is *Mother of 1084*.

Mother of 1084 is a novella that exposes the ruthlessness of the state machinery. The novella narrates the socio-political condition of Bengal during 1960s and 1970s when the state was rocked by the Naxalite insurgency. In the novella, the author describes the travails of Sujata, whose son was killed by the police. Brati was a Naxalite who dreamt of an egalitarian society, free from social injustices. Brati's dead body which is now identified as corpse number 1084 becomes a metaphor for the police atrocities that were committed upon the youths of the contemporary society. The novella also showcases the prevalent patriarchy that was present in the age. Sujata's process of self-realisation begins after her son's death. She finds herself slowly drifting towards the ideology that was supported by her son Brati. She comes in close contact with Brati's former comrades and gets to know about their dreams and the cause for which they are fighting. Carlotta Beretta believes that the character of Sujata undergoes a process of self-realizations. In fact, “Sujata, the mother of Brati Chatterjee represents the anguish of all mothers who bear the pain of seeing their children suffer in the hands of the state.” (Beretta 69) Sujata also gets to know her husband's infidelity. Thus, like other Postmodern characters, her contours of self-awakening moves from a micro level to a macro one because her own realizations within her personal space prompt her to understand the reality governing the greater social space of the contemporary times.

To sum up, Mahasweta Devi's writings are especially relevant in today's age that is affected by divisive forces and social impairments. She lends a voice to the subaltern communities of India that are otherwise repressed by the mainstream narratives, governed by those in power. Mahasweta Devi's works are, therefore, an answer to the schismatic trends that are often witnessed in the current socio-political scenario of India.

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