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## TREATMENT OF FEMALE TRIBES IN THE SELECT STORIES OF MAHASWETA DEVI

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### Abstract

Mahasweta Devi is the foremost woman writer of modern Indian writing in English. She selects the path of an activist and spends many years in fighting for the rights of tribes. As a social activist she has wholly involved herself to work for the struggles of the tribal people in states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. In her fictions themed on Bengal, Devi often narrates the brutal oppressions faced by the tribal people at the hands of the powerful upper caste persons comprising landlords, money lenders and government officials. Her trenchant and powerful fictions have won her the recognition in the form of Sahitya Academy (1979), Jnanpith (1996), and Ramon Magasaysay (1966) awards, amongst several other literary honours. She is also awarded the Padmasree in 1986, for her active work among the dispossessed tribal communities.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Identity, Predicament of women, Subjugation of women, Passive spectators.

### INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi is considered as one of the boldest of Bengali female writers. She has written novels and short stories based on historical subjects and also on topics of social and political relevance. She has brought out the rebellious spirit of the tortured people of the past and the present with a rare blend of fact and fiction.

Though Mahasweta Devi's sympathetic portrayal of the subjugation of women and their consequent revolt invariably adds a feminist dimension to her work, she quite often refuses to have connection with any school of thought, but, Mahasweta Devi, like a subaltern, is scrupulous in her consideration towards women and documents moments of the collective struggle in which men and women join together when

their condition of work or education suffer from gender or class discrimination.

In other words, she does not regard women as a separate entity but treats subordination as linked to the oppressions of class and caste. She employs her creative energy more often not only to explore the causes for their eternal sufferings in the patriarchal society but also to suggest a solution which lies in the hands of the oppressed and can be changed only when they rise and fight back.

The women characters in her works are stronger when compared to men. The men appear to be lacking insight into what is happening to their being, and remain for a moment, passive spectators as their counterparts pass through the trying situations created by an equally indifferent establishment.

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Mahasweta Devi has brought her experiences of working among tribal, particularly children in Bihar, West Bengal, Gujarat and Jharkhand in her book titled '**The Why-Why Girl**'. It tells the tale of Moyna, a Shabar tribal girl, who is unable to go to school as she has to attend the household chores. But between tending goats and collecting firewood, this little girl, with her unbridled curiosity, keeps throwing up questions about the world around her. She is always brimming with so many 'why-whys' that she earns the sobriquet The Why-Why Girl. Her quest for knowledge leads her to books, which she herself learns to read and wherein she finds the answers that she seeks. Moyna thus embodies the spirit of inquiry and the close bond with nature that characterizes most tribal children and even non-tribal ones.

**Draupati** is one of the most famous stories of Mahasweta Devi. It is set among the tribal in Bengal. Draupati, or Dopdi as her name appears in dialect, is a rebel, hunted down by the government in their attempt to subjugate these groups. The government uses all forces available to them, including kidnapping, murder and rape and any tribal deaths in custody are 'accidents'. But Dopdi is not easily scared. After continuous days of rape and abuse, deprived of food and water, the story ends with a magnificent final scene in which she faces her abusers, naked and bloody, but fiercely strong.

**Breast Giver** (Stanadayini) is the narrator of social self indulgence and apathy. Jashoda, the protagonist after her husband is crippled, becomes a wet nurse breast-feeding an endless stream of new-born of the rich. A surrogate mother of sorts, forced by her husband and circumstances to give birth over again just to keep the milk flowing. The money she earns by continuously suckling babies at her milk-rich breasts keeps her own family well fed till the breasts give way to cancer and ironically, succumbs to breast cancer, alone, breast-less, with not a single surrogate "son" to light her pyre.

**The Hunt** is a straightforward narrative of a woman who is a victim of male sexual aggression and avenges her oppressive plight by killing her oppressor.

**Douloti the Beautiful** is one of Mahasweta Devi's most probing exposures of bond slavery in India. Douloti has to pay throughout her life for her master for a loan of three hundred rupees, taken by her father, which rose over to forty thousand rupees by the time she dies.

Mahasweta Devi's **Rudaali** centers on two women who develop a partnership for survival. Rudaali is one of the haunting stories that come from remote villages in Rajasthan. Sanichari is a beautiful girl born in lower caste, and her life is full of sufferings because of her lower caste, poor finances, lost parents, drunken husband, and mischievous son. In her old age, she has become like a stone which doesn't weep. Even a sharp eavesdrop that brings artificial tears in the eyes of a Rudaali cannot bring tears in her eyes. Her mother, an old professional Rudaali, lives with her for a couple of days but doesn't tell her that she is her mother. She suggests her to become a fellow Rudaali with her. But the problem is that Sanichari can't weep. When Sanichari's mother dies, she comes to know that she is her mother, Sanichari's tears come back to her eyes after long years and she becomes a famous Rudaali taking over her mother's profession.

**Bedanabala. Her Life. Her Times** is a touching tale told in first person of a woman Bedanabala, whose mother used to live in a brothel. These reminiscences are sometimes personal, sometimes historical. Bedanabala, written in 1996, seeks to empathize with a segment of society condemned even by other women as beyond the bounds of decency and social acceptance. The story begins in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the "theft" of a beautiful girl child from a wealthy family. She is Bedanabala's mother. She grows up in the house of ill repute, to be groomed to enter the profession once she has come of age. But then, Did'ma, the owner of the brothel, grow to love this beautiful child as her own daughter and does not want her to enter this profession. She seeks for her a life of a householder. It is a story that is seldom told. Was ma's contribution to the war effort, her donations to the fighters of Indian's freedom and her gifts to the mission a way of atoning for her sins?. The story is set in changing India, our India poised on the threshold of progress and transformation. New thoughts and ideas are forming in the minds of idealistic youth and nationalistic passion runs high.

**Giribala** is very carefully researched and unique work of Mahasweta Devi. With the example of Giribala, she is asking all women to break free of the patriarchal chains in their lives and to move towards physical, intellectual and spiritual liberation. For this very reason, the story of Giribala provides a strong contribution to the field of rhetoric. It is an example of what human

beings can do when pushed to the limit, when pushed beyond endurance. Certainly a simple story such as Giribala can help hundreds or thousands of women of any country to claim decency, to gain control over themselves and their lives. It is about education and consciousness-raising, the process of breaking free of the imposition of men's ideology on women and about engaging in acts of glorious self-determination.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, Mahasweta Devi has mainly focused on the process of roles assigned to women in the male dominated society. She has tried to discuss the question of individual space and socio-economic independence of women. She has beautifully narrated how they are

deprived of their rights and are treated as secondary citizens. She has connotatively satirized the failure of marriage and education. Through this she has even pointed out the issue of sexual exploitation and their use as commodity in the Indian society.

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