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### **Mahasweta Devi and her Contribution in Modern Bengali Literature**

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#### **Abstract:**

*Mahasweta Devi was an eminent Bengali writer and a well-known social activist. She was born in a Brahmin family on January 14, 1926 in the Bengal province of British India. She was one of the best writers of Bengali literature. She worked for the rights of the tribal people both through her writings and activities. She did her graduation in English from Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan and started her career as a teacher and journalist. She was also a lecturer in English subject at the University of Calcutta. Her first work 'Jhansi Ki Rani' was published in 1956. After this her novel 'Naati' was also published in 1957. Her novel 'Aranyer Adhikar', a Sahitya Akademi awardee, is a saga of tribal leader Birsa Munda. Mahasweta Devi also wrote short stories for various literary magazines. Her major works are: 'Aranyer Adhikar', 'Agnigarbha', 'The Claimant of the Jungle', 'Maheswar', 'Mother of 1084', 'Village Bangla', 'Matrichavi', 'Master Sahib' etc. She has also been honored with the following awards: Sahitya Akademi Award (1979), Padma Shri Award (1986), Jnanpith Award (1997), Padma Vibhushan (2006) and Bang Bibhushan Award (2011). She was the first writer to receive the Jnanpith Award at the hands of the great leader of the South African black movement, Nelson Mandela. She passed away on July 28, 2016. Mahasweta Devi was a Bengali literary icon who championed on the rights of the marginalized. She used her privilege to Centre issues of social justice. One of her sayings is "The right to dream should be the first fundamental right of the people."*

**Keywords:** Mahasweta Devi, Bengali literature, Social Activities, Dalits and Tribals, Nelson Mandela, Aranyer Adhikar (The right of the forest), Hajar Churashir Maa (Mother of 1084).

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**Introduction:** "Life is not mathematics and the human being is not made for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics"

**Mahasweta Devi:** Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was a prominent contemporary writer from Bengal, India. She was not only a novelist but also a playwright and author of numerous short stories, over a hundred books goes to her credit. Her books' translations into

other Indian languages and English have gained national and international repute. She was one of the leftist perspectives, worked profoundly for the wellbeing of the tribal people for which she had earned wide name and fame. Among modern Bengali writers she was well recognized for her social and political activities. Her writings have delved into the lives of farmers, marginalized communities, women, and indigenous people. She has been engaged in various struggles for the survival of the settlers in India's hinterlands and other peripheral groups and has been resisting the exploitations by powerful upper class people. Mahasweta Devi was a prolific writer as well as a social activist who has contributed significantly to the Bengali literature and cultural discourse of the country. She is among the few Bengali writers who explored the diverse worlds of literature, history, journalism and socio-political activism equally. She traveled extensively in India's tribal regions, gaining firsthand experience of the harsh realities of indigenous peoples' lives, fighting against oppression, organizing grassroots movements, and providing leadership, writing journalistic reports on oppression, exploitation, and resistance. Mahasweta Devi has made significant contributions to the literature and cultural discourse of the nation. Her powerful stories of oppression and struggle have been seen by local scholars as rich narratives of feminist discourse. Her innovative use of language has expanded the boundaries of expression in Bengali literature.

**Birth and Education:** Mahasweta Devi was a writer, social worker, and unconventional journalist. She was born on January 14, 1926, in Dhaka, now in Bangladesh to the eminent literary parents. Her father, Manish Ghatak, was a renowned poet and novelist, known for using the pseudonym 'Jubanashwa' during the Swadeshi Movement. Ghatak's younger brother was the famous filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak. Mahasweta's mother, Dharitri Devi, was a writer and a social worker, whose brothers were prominent figures in various fields, such as the renowned poet Sanka Chowdhury and the founder-editor of Economic and Political Weekly, Sachin Chowdhury. Mahasweta received her early education in Dhaka, but after the partition of India, she moved to West Bengal, India. What sets Devi apart from her predecessors and contemporary writers is her sincere commitment and strong determination to support the downtrodden masses, especially supporting indigenous and women's rights. She joined Visva-Bharati University established by Rabindranath Tagore, and completed her studies there. She pursued B.A. (Hons) in English and later completed her M.A. in English from the University of Calcutta. She married the renowned playwright Bijon Bhattacharya, who was one of the founders of the IPTA movement (Indian People's Theatre Association). In 1948, she gave birth to Nabarun Bhattacharya, a prominent novelist of Bengali and Indian literature, whose works are noted for his intellectual depth and philosophical insight. Mahasweta Devi separated from Bijon Bhattacharya in 1959.

She began her career as a teacher at Bijoygarh College (affiliated with the University of Calcutta) in 1964. At that time, Bijoygarh College was an institution for working women students. During those days, she also worked as a journalist and creative writer. She has become more famous for her research-related work on 'Lodhas' and 'Shabar', the indigenous communities of West Bengal. She was a worker who dedicated herself to the struggle for the tribal people in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. In her extensive

Bengali literature, she has depicted the brutal oppression of the subjugated and the marginalized people by the powerful ones.

**Literary Works:** Mahasweta's fiction is not fantasy, nor is it a romantic romance. It is firmly rooted in the reality of the place, embedded in the solidity of reality. Detailed documentation of her might be created in large pages. What frees her from the trappings of ideological biases is life's reality and experiential and material truths. She does not embrace a more tactile view of reality because, as a hardcore realist, she believes that fiction must necessarily emerge from historical events. The authenticity of fiction is the primary condition for its effective application. Mahasweta challenges conventional literary tropes by using the trope of caricature to subvert the traditional narrative of mythological storytelling, which works as an argumentative presentation of knowledge provided at a time when the dominant structure is threatened by the advent of new knowledge. Mahasweta has invited the mythological narrative to express an intrinsic critique of patriarchal domination. The mythological narrative serves as a vehicle for expressing authoritative dominance, which Mahasweta has called upon to challenge. The expansion and revision of the mythological story is a continuous problem in narrative interventions. Her call to the mythological narrative for a subaltern narrative marks her as a counter-writer. The expansion and revision of the mythological narrative are marked by her critical writing.

**According to her:**

“I always believe that ordinary people create real history. I gradually realized that the eternal source of inspiration for my writing lies among these extraordinary, oppressed, and exploited people who never accept defeat. For me, the inexhaustible source of writing lies in these wonderful, tormenting people. Why should I search for my subjects elsewhere when I have started to know them? Sometimes I feel that my writing actually belongs to them.”

She had started writing at a young age and began to write short stories in various literary magazines. She became more famous for her works related to the study of Lodha and Shabar, the indigenous communities, women, and Dalits of West Bengal. She had a supportive dedicated soul to the struggle of the tribal people in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. In her extensive Bengali literature, she has depicted the brutal oppression upon the subjugated people and the marginalized by powerful, feudal, capitalist, and colonial government officials. She has received several awards for her work in both literature and journalism. According to her, it is true that ordinary people create real history. She manifests in various forms such as renaissance, folklore, music, myth, and legendary deeds, which are carried forward by ordinary people from generation to generation. The reason and inspiration for my writing are all those people who have been oppressed and exploited but never accepted defeat.

Devi, according to an interview, claims to have written books starting from children's books to novels, having written around 100 to 150 books in various places. Mahasweta Devi's works, such as "Jhansi Rani," (The Queen of Jhansi) this book is a reconstruction of the life of Rani Lakshmi Bai, who fought against the British forces during the mid-

nineteenth century. It was published in Bengali in 1956. Her other early works, like "Amrita Sanchy" (1964) and "Andhanmalik" (1967), were also amalgamations of British colonial practices. Towards the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, her work was significantly influenced by the Naxalite movement. In a 1983 interview, Devi referred to this movement as the first significant event. This leftist militant movement attracted participation from student groups. Mahasweta Devi's "Hajar Churashir Maa" (Mother of 1084, (1975) translated by Samik Bandopadhyay, Seagull Books, 1997) is a high-middle-class woman's tale whose world changes forever when her son is killed for his Naxalite beliefs. Recently, a Hindi film titled "Hazar Chaurasiki Maa" has been made based on the book "Hajar Churashir Maa." So far, more than 94 pieces of Mahasweta Devi's literature have been published, including novels, short stories, and plays. Among them, the most important are mentioned below:

#### **NOTABLE BOOKS:**

- 1) "The Queen of Jhansi" (biography, translated into English by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta in 1956.).
- 2) "Mother of 1084" (1975; translated by Samik Bandopadhyay, Seagull Books, 1997).
- 3) "Bitter Soil," Epsita Chandra, Seagull, 1998. Four short stories.
- 4) "The Right of the Forest" (1977).
- 5) "Womb of Fire" (1978).
- 6) "Chotti Munda and His Arrow" (1980).
- 7) "The Imaginary Map" (translated by Gayatri Spivak, London).
- 8) "Dhowli" (short story).
- 9) "Dust on the Road" (translator: Maitrayee Ghatak, Seagull, Calcutta 1981).
- 10) "Our Non-Veg Cow" (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998, translated by Paramita Banerjee).

#### **FROM TRANSLATION WORKS:**

- 1) "After Kurukshetra: Three Stories (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005).
- 2) "Armenian Champa Tree." Translated by Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharya. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998.
- 3) "The Bedanabala" Translated by Sunandini Banerjee. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005.
- 4) "Bhikhari Dausad or the Fundamental right." Translation: Mahasweta Devi, Polygraph 4 (1990).

**A Glimpse of her Writings:** The breast is the source of food and sustenance. Jashoda provides financial support to feed many children in her extended family with breast milk. Her abundant milk supports her own husband and family as well. The names of the characters are not chosen randomly. Jashoda is Krishna's mother. Many of these stories have multiple layers, so each passage can offer many interpretations, and each reader can discover a different perspective. Devi's stories are notable for their lack of sentimentality. They depict the harsh life stories of oppressed tribal people, neglected by the elite and exploited by the government, helped by charity groups and righteous townsfolk, described

in a style that blends seamlessly with the history of this region. The stories are rich in detail and cultural nuances, allowing many readers to be acquainted with diverse classes and cultural descriptions, but the stories themselves will resonate.

Should "Breast-Giver" or "Mother of 1084" be considered as allegorical representations of oppression? Or should they be considered as individual narratives? Can historical, ideological, realistic, and allegorical elements coexist in a coherent narrative? Mahasweta's literature is a crucible where all these elements converge into a narrative that is simultaneously debatable, symbolic, realistic, and historically verifiable. It is true that she does not completely erase the story, but there is a possibility of subversion of the imperialist narrative in her stories. The colonial and patriarchal narratives based primarily on binary oppositions such as colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, patriarchy, and the public-private divide create a violent hierarchical classification. In this classification, indigenous people's socio-cultural practices are marked as a deviant group. Mahasweta's literary goal is to build a relationship between the dominant and the subordinate, and to attempt to bring down what was once high through reversal and subversion that make room for opposites and contradictions. The downtrodden people always remain under the dominance of others, once they become compelled to rebel and raise voice against them.

Indian history has always been dominated by aboriginality. Its origin is as an ideal product of the ruling group. Thus, it is responsible for all the major acquisitions of Indian nationhood, personality, organization, and ideology. Ranjit Guha has described Indian nationalism's history as "a kind of spiritual biography" of Indian aborigines. In his view, these types of historical writings fail to acknowledge and explain the contributions of the common people to Indian history. The upper class create problems in the proper application of rights of the exploited and try to lower the contribution of the lower classes and groups from the history pages.

Mahasweta Devi continuously raised robust voice in favor of the Politically, socially and economically depressed people in her writings and she stood at the intersection of important contemporary issues. She was a significant figure in socially committed literature which are vividly found in her novels, short stories, children's stories, plays, and journalistic writings. This article is an attempt to introduce her engaging work to readers, acknowledging her contribution to our country's literary and cultural history as an important recognition. She defines literature as a "responsibility" job derived from the author's historical commitments. Writing for political purposes from a specific political position is necessary for these historical commitments to work towards transforming social structures for the better society. In short, her literature is a powerful means to bring changes to the anomalies prevailing in the society, politically. In essence, her creative writing transcends the limits of literary convention and presents itself as a powerful, socio-political, and historical tract.

To her, literature is a redemptive task. it delves into the depths of silence and the abyss of sorrow for redemption. The ultimate goal of this redemption is the subaltern voices, their inclusion experiences, and emotions. Her writing is a creative work as well as a brave work that helps her transcend shame and guilt overcoming societies. She has undoubtedly added

innovative and mind blowing thoughts to the modern Bengali literature which are appreciated by one and all having literary pursuit.

**Awards Received by Mahasweta Devi:** Due to her outstanding contribution in literature and social activities she was awarded with a number of prizes throughout her life. the novel “the right of the forest” has brought her to Sahitya Academy Award (Bengali) in 1979. She was the first writer to receive the Jnanpith Award at the hands of the great leader of the South African black movement, Nelson Mandela. The other awards got by her put down below.

- 1) Padma Shri (1986) for Social Works.
- 2) Jnanpith Award (1996) the highest literary award from the Indian Academy of Letters.
- 3) Ramon Magsaysay Award (1997) Journalism. Literature and the creative Communication Arts.
- 4) Padma Vibhushan (2006) the second highest civilian award from the Government of India.
- 5) SAARC Literary Award (2007).
- 6) Yashwantrao Chavan National Award (2010).
- 7) Banga Bibhushan (2011) West Bengal Government's highest civilian award.
- 8) Hall of Fame Lifetime Achievement Literary Brahmin (2012) First Lifetime Achievement Award in Bengali literature.
- 9) Nominated for Nobel Prize in Literature (2012).

**Death:** Mahasweta Devi suffered a heart attack and went through treatment in Belle Vue Clinic, Kolkata. She was suffering from diabetes, sepsis and urinary infection. However, after passing a life full of tremendous literary contribution and social activities she passed away on 28 July 2016 at the age of 90 years.

On her death, the honorable Chief Minister of West Bengal Shrimati Mamata Banerjee tweeted as “India has lost a great writer. Bengal has lost a glorious mother and I have lost a personal guide. Mahsweta Di rest in peace.” The honorable Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Damodardas Modi tweeted as “Mahasweta Devi wonderfully illustrated the might of the pen. A voice of compassion, equality and justice, she leaves us deeply saddened.” These were a few words dedicated to her for her fascinating writings and varied social activities.

**Conclusion:** In her writing, there emerges the resistance of women and their different approaches specially her encouragement of women towards struggles for their upliftment in societies. Her writings will sensitize the masses towards political and social equality and consciousness. I have attempted to explore various frameworks and strives of women's struggle emerged in Mahasweta Devi's writings. Mahasweta Devi's impact on Indian literature and social activism is profound and enduring. Through her poignant storytelling, she gave voice to the voiceless, shining a light on the struggles of marginalized communities, particularly indigenous tribes and women. Her works, characterized by raw

honesty and deep empathy, served as a powerful voice for social change, challenging prevailing norms and advocating for the rights and dignity of the oppressed. Devi's commitment to addressing issues of caste, class, gender, and land rights made her an icon of resistance and solidarity. Beyond her literary contributions, she actively engaged in grassroots movements, amplifying the voices of those at the margins of society. Devi's outcomes serve as a reminder of the transformative power of literature and the enduring importance of empathy and activism in creating a more just and equitable world. Even after her passing, her words continue to resound, inspiring generations to confront injustice and strive for a more inclusive society.

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