

Plight of Women in the Selected Short Stories of Mahasweta Devi and Mulk Raj Anand

Megha Soni^{1*}, Prof. Dr. Charu Chitra²

ABSTRACT

In our society, women are found to be enslaved in a variety of ways even if they are born free. In society, they are continuously disregarded and viewed as inferior members of the human race. Women are not granted the same kind of freedom or security that men have. Throughout her life, woman has experienced a range of physical and mental disorders. She is seen by many as being delicate and frail. Males have consistently been able to rise and sustain a position of dominance in society since the beginning of time, pushing females into a submissive role. Thus, the stories written by Mahasweta Devi and Mulk Raj Anand highlight the unsaid realities of women's suffering as well as their ability to endure and fight against oppression. The audience is also made aware of the "unspeakable" truth about the women through these stories. The aim of the present paper is, to understand the plight of women in society, their sufferings, their psyche, brutality or violence towards women etc.

Keywords: Gender, oppression, women, brutality, exploitation

All human beings are not born with tags of man or woman but it is society that makes them either man or woman (Beauvoir 118), this line has been taken from the Simon de Beauvoir's famous book *The second Sex* in which she clearly mentioned that no one is man or woman, it's society who give the tag of gender and also give the duties and authority according to that, to survive in this world. The social expectations of the two sexes are used to create gender roles, which act as personal norms of conduct. Hazel Reeves and Sally Baden in their literary work, *Gender and Development. Concepts and definition* remarked that:

Gender relationships among the people are determined, in a culture, by a number of different operating authorities like family relations, legal system etc. These operating authorities are the reasons that are responsible for creating certain rules or regulations to control and manipulate social institutions. Even the history reveals the fact that women were marginalized and were not given equal rights to use their power to bring about change in the social sphere (18).

Women are stereotyped as being irrational, lustful, unreliable, greedy, and dishonest. Women are created to serve men and carry their offspring. The categorization of women into

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Jiwaji University, Gwalior (Madhya Pradesh) India

²Professor, English Department, Govt. K.R.G. PG Autonomous College, Gwalior, (Madhya Pradesh) India

*Corresponding Author

Received: March 6, 2024; Revision Received: April 27, 2024; Accepted: May 01, 2024

Plight of Women in the Selected Short Stories of Mahasweta Devi and Mulk Raj Anand

the upper caste and lower caste was a bizarre tradition that was practiced in former times. Based on their caste, women were treated differently. Thus, despite the fact that women are given gender roles, they are not free to use their rights. Males hold the true levers of influence and power. Abuse, humiliation, and violence are directed at women who attempt to rebel against their obligations and speak out for their rights.

The worst form of oppression experienced by women who are illiterate, uneducated, and ignorant, among other characteristics, is gender stereotyping that results in gender oppression. This gender stereotype, brutality, exploitation and many other sufferings can be seen in the works of many authors but in this paper I am taking the literary works of Mahasweta Devi and Mulk Raj Anand.

Mahasweta devi is most likely the Indian author who wrote in an indigenous language and whose works have received the most translations. She had taken up the cause of the tribal people of India through political activity and writing, and always acknowledged as the greatest Bengali author. As a political anthropologist, investigative journalist, and editor of a "People's Magazine," she had spent more than thirty years working with and for the tribal people of West Bengal and the southeast of Bihar. She is the author of more than 100 publications, including novels, plays, and collections of short stories etc. She has also received several literary awards, including the Jnanpith and Magasasay, for her work on the predicament of outlying tribal peoples. According to Gayatri Spivak, "Mahasweta Devi is as unusual within the Bengali literary tradition as Foucault or Derrida is unusual in the philosophical or political mainstream in France." (Spivak 46)

Mahasweta Devi stands out from the other authors because of the activist fervor she displays in her writings, which shows that she is concerned about issues affecting the impoverished. Her experiences as a social and political activist are reflected in her works about the disadvantaged. She fights for their rights and provides voice to the oppressed by exposing the various forms of injustice that are pervasive in Indian society. Devi's method of addressing oppression differs from other female writers' in that she addresses the problem of gender oppression as it is intertwined with class and caste divisions, as opposed to most female writers, who focus on the oppression of lower-class or middle-class women.

Mahasweta Devi expresses a forceful objection to gender oppression, such as, gang-rape in police custody, in her literary works through characters. She portrayed the story of Dopdi (also known as "Draupadi") in *Breast Stories*, a tribal lady who was an underground activist. When Dopdi is detained by the police and gang-raped, she refuses to put on her clothing and raises a fuss about gender inequality and male body sex. This acts as a demonstration of the female subaltern's resistance to the triadic form of oppression on the female body.

In the story, the Bengali army officer Senanayak's strategies help the Indian Army capture the long-desired Dopdi. She is cross-examined for an hour, but she doesn't say anything and keeps her composure. Senanayak then gives the soldiers the order to "Make her. Do the necessary" (Devi, *Breast Stories* 195). After being finally captured by the army, Draupadi is tortured, raped, and dismembered by many lustful men over that long night. Draupadi does not scream or acts like a helpless victim after the dreadful event. She refuses to put on her clothes in the morning, rips a piece of them with her teeth, and washes herself. Her actions make no sense and are quite odd. She appears larger than life to the all-too-calculating Senanayak, the army commander, by refusing to follow the order. In the harsh sunlight, she approaches Senanayak while still being completely naked. She claims:

Plight of Women in the Selected Short Stories of Mahasweta Devi and Mulk Raj Anand

...what's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush-shirt to spit the bloody gob at and says, there isn't man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me come on, counter me...Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid (Devi, *Breast Stories* 196).

Her other female character, Gangor suffers the same fate in *Behind the Bodice*. Her magnificent breasts are captured on camera by a seasoned photographer named Upin. But she suffers misfortune as a result of this innocent exercise in foreign sensationalism. The police and the contractor are both pursuing her out of passion. She is being raped in prison. Her breasts have been damaged with her fingernails, leaving only gaping holes in place of the breasts that previously fascinated Upin.

The mutilated bodies of Draupadi and Gangor represent the savage exploitation and persecution of gendered underprivileged. Breasts, long associated with sensual imagery, take on a melancholy motif in each of these stories. Female breasts are portrayed by Mahasweta Devi in a way that violates all accepted conventions of representation and instead serves as a symbol of women's vulnerability to exploitation, torture, and other extreme forms of violence.

While Draupadi and Gangor are raped to settle scores, Mahsweta devi's two other stories' characters, Shanichari and Douloti fall prey to male predators, because they are bound laborers. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "It is a well-known fact that the worst victims of the recent exacerbation of the international division of labour are women....In their case, patriarchal relations contribute to their production as the new focus of super-exploitation" (Spivak 98)

The appeal of work in brick kilns attracts girls like Shanichari. Once there, they are made to labour for a meager rate that is much below the established minimum wage. Pay discrimination against female workers is the worst result of gender bias. While women are compelled to work like robots and satisfy their lords' libido, males as bonded labourers are made to toil sixteen to eighteen hours a day. In addition to abusing their ladies sexually, upper caste and class males have the power to subjugate the poor and abuse them economically. Mahasweta Devi provides binary oppositions to society. On the one hand, there is a world of total destitution and poverty where women have a place of honour, and on the other, there is a world of affluent avarice and debauchery where women's beauty and reputation are tarnished. As stated by Uma Chakravarti:

.....upper caste men have had sexual access to lower caste women- an aspect of the material power they have over the lower caste.....Fairly early on a 'black' woman was regarded as the natural object of desire and pleasure. Apart from using their labour, masters of *dasis* in early literature used the sexual services of women in servitude. This is a practice that has continued through the centuries (Chakravarti 205).

In her tales Shanichari, and Douloti the Bountiful, Mahasweta Devi conveys the tragedy of these girls. She brings to light the pathetic situation of women who, as a result of their forced entry into the public domain due to extreme poverty, are subjected to the worst kind of exploitation. They face sexual harassment in addition to being forced to do unpaid services there.

Plight of Women in the Selected Short Stories of Mahasweta Devi and Mulk Raj Anand

Mulk Raj Anand has also expressed the plight of women in his literary work. He is the India's most well-known Anglo-Anglian author and his short tales and novels are widely read both in India and beyond. He was born in Peshawar (now in Pakistan) in 1905, and he has extensive knowledge of and experience with both India and the United Kingdom. Deep research is drawn to his body of creative writing. K. R. S. Iyengar, a distinguished scholar, says of Anand that he wrote "of the people, for the people, and as a man of the people" (Iyengar 333). Regarding Anand's sensitive nature, M. K. Naik says, "The strength of Anand's fiction lies in its vast range, its wealth of living characters, its ruthless realism, its deeply felt indignation at social wrongs, and its strong humanitarian compassion" (Naik 160).

In his novels and short tales, Anand paints a truthful portrait of society. His tales reflect the pitiful images of people who are treated no better than animals and inanimate objects. Anand's compassion for the underprivileged and *dalits* makes him the champion of the weak and a crusader against social ills and artificial obstacles that divide people and unfairly degrade them. He carefully considers the customs, traditions, and social standards that make women and outcasts weaker people. Through his characters, he puts social and moral issues before the readers.

Unquestionably, Anand is a sincere, devoted, and selfless voice for the voiceless. He is an effective critic of modern society. He promotes the relief of those who have been victimized by fellow humans for no fault other than being born into the underclass as an artist and humanitarian. According to M. Berry, literature for Anand was, "a weapon for attacking social, political and economic institutions injurious to human freedom and equal opportunity" (Berry 27).

The chauvinistic attitudes of some males are exposed in Mulk Raj Anand's stories, which also show the hardships of women in our culture. The title story, "Lajwanti" in the collection of short stories *Lajwanti and Other Stories* he uses the image of a caged bird to symbolize the helplessness of a woman. Lajwanti is a young country girl, and here is her harrowing tale. Her brother-in-law Jaswant was harassing her, and she had to put up with it. Due to the fact that her husband was pursuing his BA at a college, he was not residing in the home. Despite her fierce resistance, she is helpless against Jaswant's passionate gaze. By doing the following, Anand demonstrates her helplessness:

And in the panic of this premonition, she felt the chords of guilt choke her dry throat. She might have borne the humiliation. She might have given in to Jaswant. She could have closed her eyes. Her husband Balwant was away at college. Her benevolent father-in-law would not have known. And the mother-in-law who wanted her son's more than anything else, would not have worried, even if she had come to know, because she favored Jaswant, who worked on the land and not Balwant who wanted to be a clerk (Anand, *Lajwanti and other stories* 11).

She wanted to run away to her parents' house but she was not allowed and her brother-in-law used all filthy language to rebuke her. She was addressed as a 'prostitute! Bad woman!'. She was even slapped on the head and physically tortured too. Even after she made it to her parents' house, she was still treated like an intruder. Her father didn't think it was appropriate since 'a daughter returning home without due ceremony, was inauspicious.'

Plight of Women in the Selected Short Stories of Mahasweta Devi and Mulk Raj Anand

In the other story “The Silver Bangle”, the lady of the house accuses the untouchable sweeper girl Sajani of stealing the silver bangles, even these bangles are given by Sajani’s mother on the occasion of her engagement. The lady says to Sajani:

Get up and go out don’t you come into this house again. You have raised your head to the sky – low people, wearing silver bangles!! Don’t you know that untouchables in the south are not supposed to wear silver at all...And you posing like a cheap film star...Go die (Anand, *Lajwanti and other stories* 118)

The story’s climax reveals that the sexually frigid high caste lady of the home is actually envious of her husband’s attraction to the young sweeper girl and is just using her caste superiority as cover for her inferiority to young Sajani.

In the next story, “The Hiccup”, young Arati, the protagonist is allergic to fried parathas, but her callous mother-in-law forces her to consume them, which causes her to suffocate to death. The loss of the family’s reputation, not the young bride’s passing, is what the mother-in-law considers to be the true tragedy, “Hai! The cursed one, she had to bring disgrace to our household. What will people say – that she died of a hiccup” (Anand, *Lajwanti and other stories* 60). In “The Tamarind Tree”, a young wife who is expecting a child discovers that she cannot connect with her husband in a way that satisfies her need to consume tamarind fruit. This knowledge, however, makes her feel much more disappointed than she already did.

Thus, all the characters, Lajwanti, Arati, Sajani, Gangor, Dopadi and Shanichari in the stories of Mulk Raj anand and Mahasweta Devi clearly depict the plight of women in society. They (women) always get torture, exploit, and harass etc. in the society mostly by male. In these stories all the sufferer characters are women (female), which shows the gender oppression too. In these stories mostly all the women are suffered and tortured by male. Like Dropdi by Senanayak, Gangor by Upin, police and other male of society, Sanichari by brick-kilns owner Rahmat, Lajwanti by Jaswant etc. Mulk Raj Anand and Mahasweta Devi both generally stand for the miserable state of women as well as the harsh inequalities that caste, class, and patriarchy have against them in our society. Both give a fairly accurate depiction of the impoverished, forced, and low-caste status of women in India.

The stories of Mahasweta Devi and Mulk Raj Anand introduce us to a range of women, from rich to impoverished, high caste ladies to tribal women, who are enduring the hypocritical actions of their families and society. These women were not only devastated by society’s dualism or multi-behavior, but it also functioned as a model of dictatorship, with women and their physical attributes being viewed as nothing more than “mutilation” and “a commodity to be consumed.” Furthermore, their physical form is neglected and used as a subject of procreation without their express consent.

REFERENCES

- Anand, Mulk Raj. *Lajwanti and other stories*. Orient Paperbacks, 2015.
Selected Short Stories. Penguin Books, 2006.
Beauvoir, Simon de. *The second Sex*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1949.
Berry, M. *Mulk Raj Anand: The Man and the Novelist*. Oriental Press, 1971.
Chakravarti, Uma. “Through Another Lens: Men, Women and Caste”, *Translating Caste*, ed. Japan Basu. Katha, 2002.
Devi, Mahasweta. *Breast Stories*. Seagull Books, 2018.

Plight of Women in the Selected Short Stories of Mahasweta Devi and Mulk Raj Anand

Imaginary Map. Thema Publication, 2015.

Hazel, Reeves and Sally, Baden. *Gender and Development. Concepts and definition*. Great Institute of Development Studies, 2000.

Iyengar, K. R. S. *Indian Writing in English*. Sterling Publishers, 2007.

Naik, M. K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. Sahitya Akademi, 2006.

Spivak, C. Gayatri. "Draupadi" *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 1988.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty quoted by Stephen Morton, "Materialism and Value," *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Routledge, 2003.

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Soni, M. & Chitra, C. (2024). Plight of Women in the Selected Short Stories of Mahasweta Devi and Mulk Raj Anand. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 9(2), 36-41. DIP: 18.02.004/20240902, DOI: 10.25215/2455/0902004