

Food as a Social Force in the Select Works of Mahasweta Devi

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Since time memorial, eating has been a basic human activity, an activity which is not only necessary for human existence but also associated with their economical status. Eating is both a necessity and a pleasure. Eating habits and rituals help the better understanding of their standard of their living. Poverty is not a personal choice, but a reflection of society. Our culture does this to the point that it ignores the effect of root causes shaped by society and beyond the control of the individual. Food carries multiple meanings that serve to derive the action of the plots and the characters. Through food writers reflect on the aspects of Indian culture. The present day writers use food and eating to symbolize cultural issues of acceptance, resistance, and preservation of culture, as well as symbols of memory, emotions, narrative history, relationships, power and consumption.

Mahasweta Devi has critically reflected on the social class position in her literary works exploring the dilemma of the bourgeois intellectual's social loyalties. Devi's writings have a pronounced class consciousness in her writings. Devi used the image of food in her writings to highlight the acts of local resistance to aggression and oppression of the people. In her introduction to *Agnigarbha* (1978), Devi explained her mission for writings as thus: 'I find my people still groaning under hunger, landless, indebtedness and bonded labor. Anger, luminous, burning and passionate, directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints is the only source of inspiration in all my writing.' The present paper is going to explore strive of people for their food and hunger for using all their means of power. By using four short stories, *Rudali*, *Breast Giver*, *Salt and Statue* of Devi, the paper portrays the idea of poverty and how the characters in the story tackle their hunger in different ways.

Rudali, one of her most impressive short stories represented the miserable condition of a low-caste starving family in Indian society. Sanichari, the central character of the story, is an untouchable by caste. The very opening of the story introduces Sanichari along with her socio-economic environment: "In Thahad village, ganjus and dusheds were in majority. Sanichari was ganju by caste. Like the other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty (54)." This story centers on the two women who develop a partnership for survival. Sanichari was in need to go for the profession of a pain mourner (*Rudali*) because there was nobody to provide her with

basic necessities of life like food and shelter. She had to sell her tears which she never shed at the death of her own people but the death of the landowners so that she could earn her daily bread.

Even the rituals in this society became a financial burden for the poor people who are struggling for their daily bread. Every death in the village is mediated by certain rituals created by the rich people, which are bringing a burden to the poor people. In one occasion Sanicahri exclaims, “Was one to weep or worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbors cheaply at the shradh? (55).” The author in an ironic vein pictures here the pathetic predicament of the under privileged people, who do not even have time to mourn the death of their family members owing to their busy efforts to meet the religious demands. Sanichari was unable weep even at her husband’s death. Because she has to shoulder the responsibilities of pooling up the expense of the funeral of her husband. So she do not time for mourning.

But at the other hand when someone died in a malik mahajan household, the amount of money spent on the death ceremonies immediately raised the prestige of the family. The status of the Rudali also rose, “We can offer worship after all sever rupees! (73).” Funeral wailing has turned up to be a means of survival for Sanichari. Devi sarcastically points out how the domestic under privileged people are forced to put off not only their pleasures but also their personal sorrows due to their socio-economic constraints. There is a sense of freedom from their sad life in this alternative profession of funeral weeping that earns them cash and food grains which satisfy both their mind and body.

In the next story *Breast Giver* from the collection *Breast Stories* the problem of poverty and survival has been handled by Devi in a new venture. In this story Jashoda, the protagonist is indulging herself in professional motherhood only to satisfy her family’s hunger and poverty. She is a foster mother and breast giver to her master’s house and her breasts are the only means to manage food for her own family. Here Jashoda’s reproduction turns to be labor which leads to her survival. In order to have milk all the time, she needs be giving birth to child, which in turn secures her job at the master’s house. Jashoda in this story play many roles of sufferings as a wife, mother, wet nurse and an alienated breast cancer patient.

Devi in this story explained Jashoda’s means of survival which has transformed into a commodity. Though Jashoda goes to the Haldar’s house for feeding, Haldar’s mistress being a lady shows jealous on Jashoda by calling her as a legendary cow of fulfillment for her family. The difference between the luxury of rich class and the poverty of poor class is exposed by the writer very explicitly. The Haldar family women become traitors of Jashoda by escaping even their basic duty of feeding their own children. Instead they praise the lord for sending Jashoda as the cow of fulfillment. One can notice the economic oppression that can be seen in the lives of

poor people, “Haldar’s mistress sees Jashoda’s mammal projections in a charmed envy and says, and the good lord sent you down as the legendary cow of fulfillment (48).” The wives of Haldar’s family felt happy to wear European cut and they no need for feeding a child of their own. They never felt the pain of Jashoda in doing such activity. It is clearly stated in the following lines: “The wives have no excuse to say ‘no’. The wives are happy. They can wear blouses and bras of European cut...they are no longer obliged to breast feed their babies (52).”

Devi places her mother-goddess Jashoda as a metaphor for India as ‘mother for hire’. The breasts not only historically represented as a meaning for temptation of rape and exploitation. But it is also having a personal meaning of resistance. At the end of the story, Jashoda’s breasts which fed twenty of her own children and fifty others can no longer deliver to the demands of her hungry consumers. Jashoda’s breast milk has dried up and she has lost her only means of production, her “left tit” “flaming red” “like a stone pushing inside (62).” Towards the end of Jashoda’s life, no prophetic dream comes to guide her. Though she fed many sons and daughters, nobody was there to take care of her during her last days. Her body is revealed as a mere vessel that man through his religious symbols spurs on. All those sons and daughters used her for her will and now left empty and lacking. At last Jashoda suffers a painful and sickened death. Her plentiful breasts now become a gaping wound.

Devi’s short story *Salt* is printed in her collection *Bitter Soil*, which holds a special symbolic place for salt in Indian literary and cultural traditions. According to the ancient saying, ‘Love like salt’, is said to have originated in India. Love is like salt the flavoring that makes all food valued from ancient times, makes life palatable and beautiful while it adds incalculable value to living. This symbolism is applied to Devi’s stories about the outcast and the oppressed of the indigenous tribes of India. This story of her speaks of the love that these rejected ones deserve that should be demonstrated through equitable political, social and economic advantages. Here Devi portrayed the story of a poor tribal community that steals the salt and licks from a reserve forest for their survival.

Exploitation is the predominant theme in this story, highlighting the problems of the innocent tribal people who are taken advantage of, not only by Uttamchand, but also by everyone in the position of power. Yet, after the deaths of “three men and an elephant”, the headman feels that “someone else was responsible (113).” Where life is reduced to a bare struggle for survival, conventional morality ceases to apply. Purti the protagonist’s role in the tragedy highlights the impossibility of making black and white moral judgments in certain situations. The headman accuses Purti of endangering the lives of his entire community through his carelessness in allowing the elephant to see him stealing salt.

Statue a story collection from *Old Women* is a tragic tale of forbidden love, which returns to haunt Dulali, now an old woman pre-occupied only with her day-to-day substance. The children in this story spend their life by doing some menial works for their survival. The primary motto of their life was to pacify the hunger of their bodies and not the needs of their brains. Hunger is presented as the greatest reality in the life of Dulali. “She has accepted hunger pangs as chronic and inalterable reality (13).” Dulali is found sitting by her hearth even in the hottest months of Bengal. The major reason behind that was “with her belly always empty or three-quarters empty, there is nothing left in her body. She likes the fire warmth and for lack of blood feels chilled all the times (14).” All her thoughts and dreams are only belly-centered.

Dulali in this story is suffering from injustice all her life. She is kept on ration by her family members, “Some rice-salt-oil-lentil at month’s end, two sarees yearly (13).” She tries to solve her life’s problems in different ways. She starts to collect the pots that are left at Monasha’s shrine and sometimes steals lentils from the other compound. She wanders in the dense jungle of the Thakur and eats whatever she gets due to her poverty. In this socially secluded state, her mind oscillates with complicated thoughts. Dulali finally realizes that as time passes, for a woman, the ideology of love remains a memory, but she acknowledges defeat in the hands of hunger.

As the revolutionary Tamil poet Mahakavi Bharathiyar stated “Thani oru manithanukku unavu illai yenil intha jagathinai azhitiduvom!”, food is common and basic necessity for each and every human being in this world without any inequality. The greatest reason for poverty is the structure of the society. Without structural changes in this society it may be very difficult to nullify the disparities and poverty.

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