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POVERTY, LOVE, AND POLITICS IN MAHASWETA'S STATUE

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ABSTRACT

The story, *Statue*, by Mahasweta Devi, satirically focuses on the strong political will for revival of a long-forgotten memory about the death of some Dindayal Thakur of Chhatim village for looting of a train to serve the colonized mother land and it wittily shows how the political leaders neglect the long-standing demand of the poorest villagers for construction of a road that could lead to the economic development of the most deprived villagers. Establishments like school, market, health centre etc seem to be secondary, the making of a statue at the expense of public money seems to be of the utmost importance to play to the sentiment of the public and arouse in them patriotic zeal to gain political mileage. Nabin who symbolizes dream of the young generation for a better and healthier life is finally used and deceived by the political leaders. As he walks in darkness with his pishi, Dulali, the Chhatim village also moves to darkness and gets devoured by it gradually.

Keywords: Dindayal Thakur, Dulali, political will, patriotic zeal, road

Mahasweta Devi, one of the eminent Bengali writers, is a famous name in India and abroad for her relentless fight for the rights of the deprived and the oppressed people. She started her literary career from the mid-1900 and in order to expose to the world the plights of the dispossessed communities through her works, she journeyed very extensively on foot and spent days and nights with them to gather firsthand experiences about their daily struggles. In 'The Author in Conversation' of *Imaginary Maps* Mahasweta says to Spivak:

'I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty toward society. Yet I don't really know why I do these things. This sense of duty is an obsession, and I must remain accountable to myself. I ask myself this question a thousand times: have I done what I could have done? My house is full of them, they write to me, they come and stay with me, I go and stay with them. And this journalistic exposure is very necessary. The government officials admit that they are afraid of me. What will I write next?'(ix)

The opening lines are very significant –'THE DECISION TO RAISE A BRONZE STATUE of Dindayal Thakur, the Freedom Fighter, in Chhatim village, and to dedicate-unveil it with enough pomp and circumstance, and soon, was taken at Calcutta Secretariat, and the announcement appeared in every newspaper. Naturally, the people of Chhatim village didn't know this' (1). Like many other villages in our country, Chhatim was completely separated from the main stream of life. The village was lived by the poor people – Santhal, Munda, Bhunya, Harhi, Muchi, Shunri, Bauri etc and the population of Chhatim and seven other neighbouring villages was less than 3000 and out of that population less than 30 persons were literate who were occupied with filling their

bellies like the illiterate. The district town was situated seven miles away where the Government offices, schools, health centres, and a seasonal movie theatre were established.

In the village of Chhatim, the Thakur family was well known because of Dindayal. 'In 1924, Dindayal was caught, imprisoned, tortured and finally killed on the gallows for the attempted robbery and looting of a train. Consequently, the police subjected his parents, brothers and sisters to unspeakable harassment and confiscated their home and land' (4). But the innocent villagers of Chhatim had almost forgotten the Thakur family because of their daily hard struggle for existence – 'Their days pass in the difficult struggle of sharecropping rice in *laterite* soil, in the casual labour of *felling* Sal trees in forest areas, and as field hands now and then in the fields of Madan Khan's son Sadan Khan. In their gloomy and destitute village there are no services. No *health centre* nearby, no well with water in the village, not even a market, a roadway' (4). Although there were several versions regarding the arrival of the Thakur family at Chhatim, the problems in the life of the 'Chhatimians' (4) remained unchanged in the span of 54 years. Nabin Bhunya from the well known Bhunya family was in class eight when he started to dedicate his life to help the poor people of Chhatim village. He thought in a different way for the development of the village. He went to the District town seeking help for the villagers, wrote applications for the poor farmers for seed-loan, tried to earnestly request the concerned authority 'to pull the paved road from the village all the way to the bus route' (8). With his limitless zeal, he also tried to get a health centre in his village and to get all these primary requirements fulfilled, approximately Rs. 70000 was required. But the minister was interested to raise a statue of Dinu at the expense of 74,851 rupees.

The love affair between Dinu and the widow Dulali was revolutionary in 1924. Dulali used to go to Dinu's mother from the age of 10. As she belonged to the Bhunya family, she would wander everywhere at ease. It was Dulali who would put covers on Dinu's books. She also knew to make ink from ink tablets. But everything was not fine with Dulali. At 12 when she went to see the wedding ceremony of a special friend, Kusum, she was not allowed to see the wedding by Kusum's aunt. Widows were not socially allowed to participate in such functions. Kusum's mother told her, 'Duli! You're not to see a wedding, dear, you're not to join in the wife-rites. Come and see when Kusi goes to her groom's house in the palki' (14). Four years later when Malati, Kusum's younger sister was getting married, Dulali was standing behind the house holding a Champak tree branch. Sudden appearance of Dinu made her surprised. He straight told her that he loved to look at her all the time. But what he did after that was completely unexpected:

'Dinu put his finger on her face, drew it down and said, you look like Saraswati, the Goddess of learning.

What is this?

Look, I love you, so I want to touch you a bit.

Dulali is very afraid. Her face gets hot, her body trembles. Then she says, you go to school in Patke, is this what you're learning?

Do they teach this in school?

Go, go away now' (31).

But they met on several occasions which were not preplanned. One more example is when Dulali was returning from the shrine of the goddess Manosha after offering her milk and bananas, it was raining heavily and she got wet through. She took shelter under a tree and saw Dinu returning home holding an umbrella over his head. She asked:

'O Dinu! Stop a bit.

Dulali? You?

I was at the shrine.

Come, come under my umbrella.

Stop a bit, it's raining too hard.

Let's stop, then.

The two of them under an umbrella. The sky dark with clouds. Who'll say it's afternoon, looks like night. Dulali was most uncomfortable.

Dinu said suddenly, Dulali!

What?

What have you done to me, Dulali! I can't think of anything but you'(33).

After all these developments, Dulali was in a dilemma. She wanted to avoid the Thakur-aunt house, but she could not because people would suspect something wrong. She caught cold and fell seriously ill. She was suffering from pneumonia fever. It was Dinu who brought a doctor from Patke to treat Dulali. Dulali was recovering slowly but she had to wait for a long time to get her strength back. One day when Dulali was going to Dinu's house, Dinu once again expressed his love for Dulali very passionately. Dulali warned him saying that she was of low caste and a widow. She requested her to calm down and concentrate on his education. But Dinu was in love with Dulali blindly. When Dulali told him that she would be at peace if he would control his passions, Dinu told: 'You'll be at peace, Dulali? At peace? Good. Then I'll calm w-ay down. I won't bother you any more. Dulali, stand here, let me look at you. Duli, Dulali, Dulali, I love you so much, I never got the chance to say it' (35).

Dinu left the village and returned to it after a long absence. When the results of his school-leaving examinations were out people saw him as a different Dinu. 'Spare of speech, stern and serious' (37). He moved around the fisherfolks' neighbourhoods, the Bauri quarter in the cholera season. He was also working in rural relief. When everyone was busy in the worship of the harvest Kali, Dinu met her in the garden and told :... 'Dulali, I now know everything.

What?

I'll marry you.

Marry? Me?

I'll marry you.

Aren't you afraid of sinning?

What sin? Widows can remarry, by law. What fear? We'll go to Calcutta. A hundred thousand people and more, a huge city, who will find us? I'm telling you, Dulali, marry me, hold me, otherwise I'll float away' (38).

What he had meant by 'I'll float away' then, Dulali could not unearth. At last Dinu's marriage with some other girl was fixed in the November of 1924 and there was music. Dinu was in groom's dresses, but when he gazed at Dulali standing at a distance 'winding her dry unwashed hair in her hand, pulling the end of her white borderless cloth around her body'(43), Dinu 'tears off the wreath from around his neck, throws his shawl down, wipes the mark off his forehead'(44). Dinu's abrupt behaviour wondered all. 'Dinu shouts in a terrible voice towards those from the bride's party who'd come to get the groom, Go back home, please. I won't marry. These terrible and terrific words burst and rent the village sky, inaugurated an apocalypse' (44). He also asked Dulali, 'Come Dulali. If we remain in the village after this they will cut you up alive' (44). Under such terrible developments Dulali lost her consciousness and Dinu left the village for good. Everyone was maintaining silence as the two families blamed each other. One fine morning the horrible news came that Dinu would be hanged to death because he had looted a train for the cause of motherland. In December 1924, at 7 pm Dindayal Thakur, Ramani Santra, and Sardeb Panda suddenly entered the guard's room of a running train and said -' Bande Mataram. Dindayal said, we're taking money for Mother India's work. Money that a foreign government has taken from us by exploitation, don't stop us'(19). Policemen came to the village and brought elephants to demolish the house and torture over the members of Dinu's family. The Thakur-aunt was also humiliated openly. Out of the sense of despondency and suffering, the Thakur-uncle refused to worship the image of Manosha and before leaving the village he cursed Mahananda, Dulali's father:

'Your daughter is alive, Mahananda. You have not felt filial bereavement. And still you're thinking of what disaster may come to you. Why should I take your household god? The image? I wish you misfortune, yes. If this brings you tremendous misfortune, perhaps I'll get a bit of peace. You brought me such immense misfortune through your daughter?'(46)

The poor and needy villagers of Chhatim village almost forgot about the Thakur family and Dinu. Dulali reached the age of 78 and was spending her days in a corner. The news of the installation of a Statue in the village stirred the quiet life of the villagers and the love affair between Dinu and Dulali came to the light again because of a book written by a researcher. People from the fisherfolk quarters and the Bauri quarters cleaned the Thakur house wilderness to make the place for the dias on which the statue would be installed. The trees which did not bear fruits were cut and sold. Nabin went to the town and met the MLA and requested him for the need of a road for the poor villagers. MLA assured Nabin: 'There has to be a road. By that road the laboring masses of the village will travel to the outside world with the goods produced by their sweat, and come back smiling to the village with the wealth gained from their labour' (52-53). Nabin, a simple villager, easily trusted the MLA and returned to the village with dreams. Gradually the dias was erected and it was engraved below:

'Dindayal Thakur, martyred freedom fighter

(1900 – 1924)

He who gives life to the last drop, cannot,

will not, perish'(66).

The Statue was raised to the dias and it was inaugurated pompously in the presence of the ministers, MLA, and other guests. The Minister, MLA, and Sadan Khan delivered long speeches to the villagers of Chhatim and seven other neighbouring villages. Before the end when Nabin got the chance to say something to the people, he thanked the minister and MLA for granting a road to the villagers of Chhatim. The MLA pulled his shirt and told him that the government would consider the construction of the road under some future plan. Nabin forgot protocol and shouted: '...You've promised a road, a *school*, a weekly market, a *health centre*.' The powerful MLA threatened Nabin: 'Don't put the cart before the horse, Nabin. Let the government be stable, everything will follow' (70). Innocent Nabin gathered experience and started to walk in darkness with his beloved pishi.

While in some other works by Mahasweta, we see that the widows belonging to the lower caste were sexually exploited by the moneylenders, jotedars, and contractors; in this novella the writer deals with a theme that is completely different- a school boy passionately wants to marry a widow ignoring all social stigmas. It was really unthinkable in the 1920s.

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