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MARGINALISATION AND RESILIENCE IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S "THE WHY-WHY GIRL"

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi, a proficient Bengali writer and activist who puts a question mark on the democratic and civilized nation, India. It is imperative to have a clear understanding of "marginalised" in order to understand and appreciate the writings of Mahasweta. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the concept "marginalize" means "to make somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence decisions or events; or to put somebody in a powerless position". Mahasweta empathetically restates her commitment to the rural and urban poor, particularly children, in Bihar, West Bengal, Gujarat and Jharkhand in her first picture book titled "The Why-Why Girl". It is a heart warming tale of the ten-year old Moyna who belongs to the Shabar tribe, an exploited and marginalized hill people. Moyna is burdened with the triple handicap of being a child, a female and a tribal.

Not only does Mahasweta expose the extreme oppression of children in rural India but she shows the way out. Moyna is not crushed by the circumstances of her life. Instead, she constantly demands answers to her questions. However, in "The Why Why Girl", the socio-economic hierarchies pragmatic measures are needed to refrain one from discouraging a questioning attitude. How does one ensure that the Moynas of the world do not get silenced? In fact, it is these questions that push the imaginary boundaries and bring about change, inspire inventions and make people discover new things. The first task is to glorify the act of questioning itself, right from childhood. It is only the habit of questioning that will make confident and righteous adults.

Key words: Marginalisation, Resilience, Children, Tribal

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Today various communities continue to be marginalized from society due to the development of practices, policies and programmes that meet only the needs of the upper castes. It is imperative to have a clear understanding of "marginalised" in order to understand and appreciate the writings of Mahasweta. The term "marginalized" incorporates the entire people who are subordinates in terms of class, caste, gender and

office. According to the Oxford Dictionary the concept “marginalize” means “to make somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence decisions or events; or to put somebody in a powerless position”

There are a quite a few women writers who have marked their presence steadily in this men subjugated ambience. They have refused to follow street and state censors and succeeded in bringing unheard voices to the fore. Mahasweta Devi, a proficient Bengali writer is among those irresistible voices who puts a question mark on the democratic and civilized nation, India. Mahasweta Devi is very concerned about the fate of her characters, about the dignity of their lives, about the survival in the community, the exploitation they are subjected to, the hardships they face, the official indifferences and apathy. Arundhati Roy opined that, there’s really no such thing as the “voiceless”. There are “only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard” (The 2004 Sydney Peace Prize lecture at the Seymour Theatre Centre, University of Sydney). Through Mahasweta’s writing one gets to hear the voice of a community that is otherwise voiceless. Mahasweta has been able to creatively integrate her approach with her service to people.

Mahasweta empathetically restates her commitment to the poor, exploited and marginalized classes of India primarily consisting of the “lower” castes and tribals, and the peasants and labourers who constitute the rural and urban poor. She tried to bring their unheard stories before the world to sensitize the world about these people before the world to sensitize the world about these people particularly children in Bihar, West Bengal, Gujarat and Jharkhand. “The Why-Why Girl” is the first picture book for children, through which Mahasweta combines her strengths to create magic. “The Why-Why Girl” is flanked by urban life and life close to nature, the rich and the poor, the divide between the literate and the illiterate, between adult and child, and above all, the divide between those who ask “why” and those who don’t. “The Why Why Girl” is a heart warming tale of the ten-year old Moyna who belongs to the Shabar tribe, an exploited and marginalized hill people. Growing up in a feudal village in West Bengal, her parents own no land and are practically slaves to the local landlords. Moyna is burdened with the triple handicap of being a child, a female and a tribal.

Discrimination between the education of a girl and a boy is more common in rural areas and in urban slums, where most of the families live below poverty line. In these poor families men are supposed to be bread-earners and women bread-makers. No wonder education of the former is being given greater importance. Children and the elderly population face different kind of vulnerability. “The Why Why Girl” is a heartwarming tale of the ten-year old Moyna who belongs to the Shabar tribe, an exploited and marginalized hill people. Growing up in a feudal village in West Bengal, she owns no land and is practically a slave to the local landlords. Moyna is burdened with the triple handicap of being a child, a female and a tribal.

One of the biggest ways people are handicapping themselves today is by being too afraid to ask questions. While it is very easy to talk about, it is often very hard for one to take the leap and ask. An ancient Chinese proverb says, “He who asks question remains a fool for five minutes. He who does not ask, remains a fool forever.” As a society one often treats question as a threat to authority, challenge to hierarchy and a mark of impolite behaviour. It is not easy to be curious when hardly anyone wants to be at the receiving end. In a study made at Harvard Business School, they cited multiple reasons for people’s reluctance to ask questions and the most prominent response was: fear of negative evaluation. Being fearless, dutiful, logical, sentimental, rational, Moyna, a delightful 10-year-old protagonist of “The Why-Why Girl” with sparkling eyes, endless energy and avid curiosity who is forever wanting to know “Why”? .She wants to know the answers to her numerous/continual questions. “Why do I have to walk so far to the river to fetch water? Why do we live in a leaf hut? Why can’t we eat rice twice a day?” (8).

Moyna is so full of questions that the postmaster calls her the “why-why girl”! She is not crushed by the circumstances of her life. Instead, she constantly demands answers to her questions. “But why?” she asks, “Why shouldn’t I catch a cobra?” or “Why can’t fish speak?” (13). She is lucky to have Mahasweta who answered many of her questions. As a reader, one would get re-acquainted with a child’s inquisitive nature and at the same time, one is reminded of one’s own adult impatience with curious inquirers.

Development is always broadly pictured in terms of mass participation. Marginality is a practice that affects millions of people throughout the world which makes them hampered in contributing to the society. Even after so many years of independence, the marginal are deprived of their basic rights. People who are

marginalized have rather little control over their lives, and the resources available to them which acts as a barrier to their local life, which in turn, leads to isolation. A major proportion of the lower castes, tribes and Dalits are still dependent on others for their livelihood. They are mainly landless with little control over resources such as land, forest and water. As a result, they compromise on their nutrition intake, access to healthcare, environment and education. This could be clearly witnessed among tribal children. Little Moyna being a Shabar tribe, is in the plight to support her mother with heavy housework and tends the goats of the village landlords. Many children in poor families are made to work and when it comes to the tribal children the condition is all the more adverse.

Moyna expresses a desire to learn to read because she had never considered books as something that contained answers to her questions. This new idea startles and excites her. She falls silent at the thought about the means by which she could get the knowledge in books. Since Moyna has an enquiring mind, she is determined to learn to read and write. Plying the author with questions, she finally comes up with: "why do you read books before you go to sleep?" "Because books have the answers to your whys," replies Mahasweta. "Why shouldn't I study too?"(18) asks Moyna. Why couldn't school open in the afternoon so that the goat herds and cowherds could attend. Mahasweta Devi ensures that Moyna goes to school so that her quest could continue.

Moyna comes with her bag of clothes and her pet mongoose to the author's house, promising the author snake curry made of any good snakes caught by the mongoose. Moyna ignores her mother's protests steadily: "Why not? It's a big hut. How much space does one old woman need?" (10). One can't help but smile and admire this feisty girl. She later becomes an active member of Samiti. She is not like the other people in her tribe. The others accepted the circumstances without any complaints but Moyna is curious about everything, through which she learns many things. At the age of 18, Moyna becomes a demanding teacher in the same school she studied and as a teacher now, Moyna goads the children to ask that one question which opens up a vast and unknown world to them –"Why"?

Childhood is an important stage in everyone's life. It is an age of one's physical and mental growth, when one is eager to become an adult and be part of the wider society. But in reality, all the children do not enjoy their childhood; many face violence in the form of punishment, abuse and neglect. Children have the right to survival and protection and the right to develop to their full potential. They also have the right and responsibility to build a better world in partnership with adults. The turning point in Moyna's life comes when she learns from the author that books have the answers to all her "whys"! She goes and fights with the Samiti school teacher that she is unable to study because the school timings clash with the time when she has to tend the goats. "If you don't teach me, how will I learn? I will tell the old lady (Mahasweta Devi) that none of us, goatherds and cowherds can study if the hours are not changed"(18). When the village primary school opens, no guesses on who is the first person to be admitted there.

Moyna and her world with a touch of fantasy are rooted in realism and she is struggling to preserve her 'identity'. She is the one who respects tradition, spreads happiness to people around her, but never forgets to question the customs that don't make sense anymore. Identity has largely been portrayed as relational in nature and characterized by a socially defined sense in girls and women. It also comes across as a joyless phase for lower caste girls who are bogged down by the compulsions of child labour, poverty, struggle for survival and vulnerability to exploitation. Childhood and adolescence for most girls are also mirrored through the imposition of restrictions, suppression of freedom and denial of education to them. Yet, unlike her passive companions, Moyna raises new and troubling questions. These questions reveal the plight of the forest-dwellers, and the casual way in which their hardships are accepted.

Not only does Mahasweta expose the extreme oppression of children in rural India but she shows the way out. Resistance is a spontaneous response to oppression and it is a counter dominating move. Resistance gives voice to the voiceless, space to the excluded and attention to the exploited. Resistance to the oppression is the core in Mahasweta Devi who asks the question repeatedly through her literary work, "why do the big swindlers and power wielders go unpunished and why do the oppressed communities pay the price all the time?" (qtd. in Rangarajan 88). Moyna shows her resistance by asking "Why do I have to grace the Babus

goats? Their boys can do it", "Why should I eat their leftovers?"(8). Khiri, Moyna's mother, finds her daughter's habit of questioning a nuisance. She is worried that her child is obstinate

and not meek like other girls. When Khiri asks her daughter to thank Babu for the rice he sent them, she denies and says "Why should I?", "Don't I sweep the cowshed and do a thousand jobs for him? Does he ever thank me? Why should I?"(6).The story presents the stark reality of the poor in India. It also goes to show that everyone has a sense of self-respect and sadly it is never given a thought by the rich and the urban classes. Just because someone is poor, it does not mean they are any less human. Moyna asks, looking up at the sky, "Why do stars look so small if many of them are bigger than the sun?" This question is an indication of the tribal people's existence. "Their lives are rich and their contribution to the economy of the nation is huge, but they are ignored and belittled, not only because they live far away from the political and economic centres of the country, but also because they are tribals who are not highly advanced, nor do they belong to the upper castes." (Ramaswamy).

India of today is a nation of young people. To realise its true potential one must invest in the health and education in every child. One must create new employment opportunities for all, especially for the less privileged sectors of society, and for those living in rural areas. One must eliminate the rural – urban divide in development indicators. As the great philosopher Socrates once said, "The only true wisdom is knowing you know nothing." Coming from such a brilliant man who has provided the world with so much wisdom, this quote should speak volumes about the importance of understanding how little one really knows. It should also create a sense of humility, allowing one to feel comfortable about asking questions. At the end of the account Mahasweta Devi writes, "Had Moyna known that she was being written about, she would have asked, 'Writing about me?'Why?" (21).

However, in the socio-economic hierarchies pragmatic measures are needed to refrain one from discouraging a questioning attitude. How does one ensure that the Moynas of the world do not get silenced? How does one stop compartmentalising the unequal real world that strangely co-exists with the idealised world? In fact, it is these questions that push the imaginary boundaries and bring about change, inspire inventions and make people discover new things. The first task is to glorify the act of questioning itself, right from childhood. It is only the habit of questioning that will make confident and righteous adults.

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