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Colonial Images, Neo-colonial Realities: Unpacking the Construct of the Tribal Woman in Mahasweta Devi's *Outcast*

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Abstract

The critical perception that colonial structures of thought and its various intellectual disciplines were, far from being transparent, strongly entrenched in questions of power, ideology and utilitarian governance is, by no means, new. However, recent postcolonial discourse has argued that colonial scholarship as an apparatus of surveillance was no independent body of knowledge enforced on the natives but an epistemology intimately related to and built upon hierarchical local knowledges of the colony. In its consciousness of the complex processes by which dominant local knowledges such as religious, particularly Brahmanical scholarship combined with so-called scientific colonial disciplines to produce official versions of the colony's native population and its cultures, this paper seeks to undertake a reading of the colonial construction of the tribal woman in India, the perpetuity of that image in post-colonial times, and Mahasweta Devi's literary attempt at unpacking it in her four short stories in Outcast. Doubly marginalized by virtue of her race and gender, the tribal woman, this paper argues, is a figure whose cultural representation has remained static till of late. A historical construct that strongly contests her lived identity as an individual, the image of the tribal woman transmitted through pre-colonial and colonial times must be deconstructed in order to arrive at a socio-political understanding of her victimization and subalternation – a project which Outcast determinedly takes up.

Keywords: Colonial, Postcolonial, Construction, Epistemology, Tribal, Women, Subalternation

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"Radical writing, by definition," states Margery Fee, "is writing that is struggling, of necessity only partly successfully, to rewrite the dominant ideology from within, to produce a different version of reality." (Fee, 1995, p. 244) The purpose of radical, activist writing is to question the status-quo by drawing attention to lived experience that is steeped in discrimination, injustice and strategic disempowerment. Marginal writing, whether it channels activism through the lenses of gender, race, class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, environment or any other category of discrimination, has globally established itself as a potent weapon to disseminate and generate minority discourse within the epistemological arena of the mainstream. Literature as a mirror to society helps cull awareness and support for causes of the dispossessed, laying down gradually but effectively, the roadmap to redressal, transformation and change. Within the burgeoning field of marginality studies, tribal studies have had a long history of neglect. Linguistic barriers and the paucity of translations from tribal languages into English has been one significant reason for such marginalization. In the last several decades, however, the flip side of globalization coupled with a rising eco-consciousness fueled by threatening environmental problems and the urgent necessity of rerouting to indigenous possibilities of managing climate change, have led to renewed attention to tribal literature and culture.

When it comes to India, tribal ethics and politics have always played a prominent role in nation-building. Tribal industry and culture have made lasting contributions to the variegated fabric of the nation and tribal languages remain a valuable part of our linguistic heritage. However, this has not prevented the country's tribal population from being a constant victim of othering and dispossession. To many quarters of the so-called mainstream, tribals are still *jungles* or wild people lacking rationality, education or sophistication. In the well-known 2007 Bollywood film *Chak De! India*, the two characters from Jharkhand, Soi Moi Kispotta and Rani Kerketta, are asked if their state was filled with bushes. Even their language/intonation is marked out for difference. Though in the movie's particular plot, the establishment of regional diversity moves towards making a positive point, such marking out of tribals remains our national idiosyncrasy. In his book *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India's Northeast,* Sanjoy Hazarika points out how practices of ethnic stereotyping are so deeply entrenched in the country's consciousness that to a large section of Indians, the term 'Northeastern' has largely come to mean a person of oriental appearance. There is a large-scale tendency to homogenize tribal lives, thoughts,

experiences and cultures with the result that their rich distinctiveness is not only disregarded but also dismissed. For tribal women, the politics of stereotyping and representation has brought in greater damage. Projected as natural and as defenseless as Eve in Paradise, the tribal woman has been a constant victim of the sexual lust and abuse of the outsider/non-tribal male. This paper shall attempt to look into the condition of tribal people in general and the particular condition of tribal women through four translated short stories by the well-known Bengali writer, Mahasweta Devi. (Hazarika, 2018)

The concept of the 'tribal', lately reworked in UN discourse as the 'indigene', is increasingly being recognized by social theorists and culture critics alike, as a problematic area of epistemological representation. Derived from the Latin *tribua,* the English word 'tribe' in sociological and anthropological discourse had initially referred to a political unit, coming gradually to be associated with the notion of territorial affiliation. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, tribes are defined as social groups "bound together by kin and duty and associated with a particular territory. Members of a tribe share the social cohesion associated with the family, together with the sense of political autonomy of a nation." (Scott and Marshall, 2005, p. 769) Tribals or Indigenous People, as they are referred to today, are communities found in various geographical pockets across the world and constitute a diversity of population groups which are looked upon as being the original inhabitants of the land which they occupy and whose distinct historical characteristics as a community – social, religious, cultural and linguistic - have survived into the present. However, what renders the idea of the 'indigene' conceptually problematic is that in the name of authenticity, it comes loaded with notions of primitivism, essentialism and cultural stagnation which strongly demarcate tribes from non-tribal social groups and confine them within strict boundaries of definition. Indigenous People, all over the globe, are inheritors of a shared history of economic victimization, political conflict and cultural subordination by members of other social groups. Looked upon as savage, often barbaric, backward and introvert people, their very identity as 'indigenous' has contributed in no mean way to their marginalization and dehumanization. The culture critic Terry Goldie, in her article 'The Representation of the Indigene', strongly asserts that the semiotic field in which the signification or representation of the indigene takes place, is framed by the majority culture's

constructions of the Other. According to her, "sex, violence, orality, mysticism, prehistoric" are five central ideas which shape the majority culture's concept of the tribal or indigene. Speaking with particular reference to the construction of Indigenous People in the literature of Australia, Canada and New Zealand, Goldie points out that sex and violence, in this body of literature, constitute "poles of attraction and repulsion, temptation by the dusky maiden and fear of the demonic violence of the fiendish warrior". (Goldie, 1995, p. 235) The tribal woman is projected in these works as a rich source of temptation, as a "restorative pastoral" (Goldie, 1995, p. 236) who beckons "the being chained by civilization towards the liberation represented by free and open sexuality, not the realm of untamed evil but of unrestrained joy." (Goldie, 1995, p. 235) Again, the predominant idea of a non-literate orality associated with the tribal, Goldie states, paves the way for an understanding of their episteme as "a different dimension of consciousness" (Goldie, 1995, p. 236), as a blank, un-inscribed state of innocence which, in turn, promotes the idea of a tribal mysticism so that "the indigene becomes a sign of oracular power, either malevolent…or beneficent…" (Goldie, 1995, p. 236) The final idea which, in Goldie's opinion, marks the construct of the tribal, is that of pre-historicity which transforms the indigene into "an historical artifact, a remnant of a golden age that seems to have little connection to anything akin to contemporary life" (Goldie, 1995, p. 236), thereby projecting indigenous culture as something essential and static. Although Goldie's opinions here are framed with respect to the mainstream construction of the indigene in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, her ideas may be held equally valid with reference to the stereotyping of tribals all over the world, not least in India where pre-colonial images of the native inhabitants combined with colonial economic interests in their land to render them abject victims of both economic exploitation and cultural marginalization.

In India, the discourse on Indigenous People can be traced back to Early and Later Vedic texts like the *Rig Vedas*, the *Dharmashastras*, the *Manusmriti*, the *Puranas* and the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* which contain references to the encounters between the Aryans who settled in Northern India around the third and fourth centuries B.C. and the native cultural groups who had been the subcontinent's original inhabitants. Referred to initially by their specific names such as Bhils, Oraons, Santhals, Gonds, etc. or in general as *aranyaka*, *dasyu* or *dasa*, the indigenous

inhabitants of India, as Romila Thapar observes, came to be regarded in the wake of Aryan settlement, as hostile and barbarian aliens or *mlecchas*. This discourse of Aryan racial, cultural and linguistic superiority over indigenous inferiority which was constructed in religious and secular texts of Aryan scholarship came to be compounded by social structures such as the caste system and the ritual status of purity and impurity which lead to the segregation of people and the demarcation of geographical territories with the result that modern tribal regions can be well-identified with the *mleccha desas* of Ancient India. In the wake of colonialism, the introduction of the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology in India led to the construction of new cultural discourses of the indigene which described them as backward, primitive people, adhering to a traditional mode of living and wary of civilization. Even today, the constitutional parameters in our country for identifying a community for inclusion as a Scheduled Tribe according to the *Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India 2013*, constitute indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness of contact with the community at large, geographical isolation, and backwardness – all of which criteria contain distinct echoes of colonial epistemology. (Thapar, 2002)

The era of British colonialism witnessed the acceleration of the economic and cultural downfall of the tribals with British economic interests in their forests robbing them of their land and home and forcing them to work as agricultural labour to earn their livelihood. Further, the introduction of the system of bonded labour by the colonial rulers set up a native exploitative machinery of money-lenders, contractors, middlemen and zamindars who came to dictate and govern the fate of the hapless tribals. Post-Independence, a number of efforts were made by the government of India to restore to indigenous people their rightful place in the national community through benefits of reservation and other constitutional safeguards but discriminatory behavior of the mainstream towards them has persisted till date in one form or the other. Where the indigene has not been abjectly dehumanized, s/he has been exotically romanticized as claiming kinship with a pure, unadulterated, past of unchanging rituals and customs and in either way, the stereotypes assigned to these communities have contested their lived identities as agentive beings in a changing world.

In the fiction of Mahasweta Devi, one comes across a committed activist attempt to unpack all such cultural stereotypes and to reveal the lived, experiential world of the indigenous people in all its contradictions and its moving humanity. While her long career as an activist, as a journalist and as a fiction writer has been dedicated to the cause of the tribals of Chotanagpur, Bengal and Orissa as a whole and though she has consistently refused to be labeled as a feminist in her political stance, what particularly strikes the reader in Mahasweta Devi's oeuvre is her sensitive, multi-layered portrayal of the tribal woman. Caught between tradition and modernity, doubly marginalized by her race and gender, and subject to victimization both within her community and without, the tribal woman in Mahasweta Devi's fiction dismantles all received notions of the indigenous woman's autonomy, brute strength and licentious freedom. Daughter, wife and mother who must consent to be the custodian of her culture while at the same time being betrayed by it, Mahasweta Devi's female characters refuse to be spiritually commodified, though to be physically violated and abused is their consistent destiny. Mired within circumstances that they are incapable of changing, her female characters, in various degrees, establish themselves as agentive figures who call forth respect and admiration for the tenacity and heroism that mark their struggle. This paper intends to cast a glance at the four short stories contained in the volume *Outcast* and to read them as offering, in combination, a composite view of the trauma of the indigenous woman who must suffer not as a consequence of wrong action but on the sole account of being a tribal and a woman.

"Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina and Chinta – grouping these four women in a single volume was a difficult decision," writes the translator of *Outcast*, Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, adding

> "…before I finally selected these stories, I went through a mental tussle. Should I include a more cheerful story, perhaps one where the woman was not just a victim, one that ended on a note of hope? After much thought, I decided that Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina and Chinta could be comfortable only in each other's' company. That it was facile to search for something far removed from reality. And also, that Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina and Chinta are not just victims, each subtly forcing her community to rethink societal norms. Hence the grouping of these stories in a single collection." (Devi, 2015, p. vii)

The title of the collection reflects the existential agony of each of these four heroines, for the turn of events in their life renders each of them an outcast from their communities, lives, bodies and selves and yet, despite the humiliation and disintegration that they undergo as part of their received and inalterable destines, it does not break their integrity as individuals and to the last, the reader remains a witness to their intrinsic heroism in responding to and negotiating with life. Dhouli, Shanichari and Chinta constitute the titular figures of their separate stories of betrayal, exploitation and oppression and though Josmina who features in the story 'The Fairytale of Rajabasha', shares fictional space with her co-suffering husband Sarjom, it is ultimately to her lot that the greater burden of suffering and sacrifice falls.

'Dhouli' is the story of Dhouli, a young, widowed, *dusad* woman who is forced through emotional manipulations, to fall in love with the Brahmin *deota* Misrilal and though his love is, initially, well-intentioned, what family and community would countenance this relationship? Had he been capable of making Dhouli his forced mistress, it would have been perfectly acceptable to both communities and the child born out of the union would have been allowed to be born and to lead a decent life. However, the sin that Dhouli had committed in falling in love outside her caste and in willingly bearing the child of her lover angers both the communities and both Misrilal's family and her own people turn against her, branding her as an immoral prostitute. While in the beginning Dhouli holds on to the hope that her true love would return soon to claim her, in a few months it becomes amply clear to her that for all his high promises, Misrilal too had proven a coward and there is no way that Dhouli can maintain herself and her child except through prostitution. But even this angers the Brahmin community which regards Dhouli's prostitution as an act of bold defiance against their powerful authority and as way of revenge, they convene a Panchayat that orders Dhouli to leave the village and practice her fallen profession elsewhere. As Dhouli's mother remembers how her daughter had returned from her in-law's house after her widowhood in an attempt to escape dishonor at the hands of her brother-in-law only to be fated to this public shame, she breaks down but Dhouli is wise enough to realize that had she not escaped, her fate would have been far worse. At her in-law's house every day, she would have had to play the role of a prostitute privately - suffering unpaid and unempowered. In Ranchi at least, she would be part of "a community", whose "collective strength" was "far more powerful than an individual's strength." (Devi, 2015, p. 33) Thus, Dhouli exercises her agency by

voluntarily choosing to work as part of the organized prostitution workforce rather than to make pretense of upholding honour by submitting to private exploitation. However, as she embarks on her life-changing journey to Ranchi leaving behind her child with her aged mother, she cannot help wondering that perhaps nature too, which seemed indifferent to her fate, had leased itself out to the Brahmins as the other promises of life had.

The story, 'Shanichari', locates itself in the backdrop of the Rata massacre, and movingly describes the way in which political irresponsibility led hundreds of tribal girls, unable to maintain themselves in their poverty-stricken villages, to work every year in the distant brick kilns of Bengal lured by the promise of food and security only to experience there the worst forms of physical exploitation. While during the day, they were subjected to cruel, back-breaking labour at a meagre pay, the nights witnessed their further dehumanization as their bodies became the *Malik's* possession, sent off to different employees for their entertainment and his interests. And yet, though such terrible fates awaited these girls, staying at home was not an option, for how would they then protect their honour? How would they clothe themselves in their abject poverty? Mahasweta Devi beautifully inserts into the narrative a song to express this moving pain of the tribal women:

"My girl could live on tubers,
Wear leaves and buds in her ears,
Alas, trees can't grow clothes
And so, my girl, said Ma-*go*,
To the brick kilns I must go
To the brick kilns I must go." (Devi, 2015, p. 49)

The brick kiln, here, becomes a powerful metaphor of both torture and resilience through fire. Symbolic of the industrial world in opposition to the agricultural, the modern in opposition to the bucolic, the brick kiln also stands for the fire of hunger and lust that the tribal girls must suffer as they go out into the world. The story describes the dense network of businessmen, contractors, middlemen, policemen, and railway authorities who are a part of this exploitative machinery that take away from girls like Shanichari all the promises of love, life and youth. The last image of the story in which Shanichari tells Hiralal that the misery of girls like her was not brought about

by the likes of Gohuman Bibi who enticed them to distant lands but extends her arms to blame the world as a whole for the sufferings of her people, points to the utter impossibility of apportioning blame on any single party.

'The Fairytale of Rajbasha', as the emphatic title amply indicates, is the subversion of the idea of a fairy-tale. Here again, Mahasweta Devi sets up an opposition between the tribal and non-tribal worlds and the skewed value-systems of the latter that end up shattering the harmony of the former. The story begins with the happy, fairytale-like marriage of Sarjom and Josmina and employs the structure of the fairytale to describe the trials and tribulations that they undergo in their quest for financial and domestic security. Lured to Punjab by the prospect of ending their poverty through well-paid employments, Sarjom and Josmina move from one exploitative master to another - overworked, underpaid and sexually abused till the structure of work in the morning, physical submission at night and running away when things become intolerable, falls into a repetitive pattern. Bewildered about what went wrong with them, they try to find solace in their native, oral wisdom and recall the story of the two metal drums that stood in the forests of Kolhan to warn its children of the arrival of the enemy. Having been betrayed by their faith which failed to warn them of the enemy's arrival, what can Sarjom and Josmina do but accept their fate? Reminiscent of the philosophical pessimism of Hardy, this story deeply haunts the psyche of the reader with its omnipotence of loss.

'Chinta', like Dhouli, is the story of a widowed tribal woman who falls in love with a man from another community and being overwhelmed by his promises of love, agrees to leave behind her son for a while to live with him in Kolkata. Here, he repeatedly abuses and finally deserts her after fathering two daughters. Chinta works as a maid in houses, struggling to support herself and her family and just when, she seems to have managed to make both ends meet, relatives from her native community arrive in the city with her now grown-up son and insist that she must get rid of her daughters if by ritualistic custom, her son is to be properly married. Chinta initially rebels against the decision but her male relatives finally cower her into submission, arrange the sale of her daughters and with the proceedings, make sure that Chinta will be able to pay for the

repentance rites that will make her acceptable to the village after bearing a *diku's,* an outsider's child in her womb.

All four stories bring out the peculiar predicament of the tribal woman who must, on the one hand, unsuccessfully contest her representation as a sexually available, *junglee* female outside her community and on the other, must pay for her own community's inability to protect her from the outside world and its stereotyping with her own sweat, blood and tears. Being sexually commodified by the upper-class groups is, as the tribal community agrees, the fate of its women, and yet, if a child should chance to be produced from such couplings, the woman's social identity in the community is tarnished and she must undergo expensive purification rights to rid herself of the sin of lending out her womb to an outsider. And even after all this, the mother and child, are destined to be outcasts, living away from the rest of the village with the child in future being allowed to marry only a partner of the same mode of birth. Mahasweta Devi thus, very artistically and effectively manages to highlight the trauma of the tribal communities in a changing time when they can live as neither fully closed nor fully open communities and must negotiate their place in the wider framework of modernity if they are to protect themselves from the exploitation that has become their destiny.

In his chilling short story 'November is the Month of Migrations', Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's twenty-year old protagonist, Talamai Kisku yields sexually to a jawan of the Railway Protection Force for fifty rupees and two pieces of cold bread pakora. "Saali, you Santhal women are made for this only. You are good!" the policeman tells her. "Talamai takes care not to scream, or even wince. She knows the routine. She has to do nothing, only spread her legs and be quiet." (Hansda, 2015, p. 41) Both Shekhar and Devi use silence and passivity to assert female agency. However, the neo-colonial incisiveness in the tale cannot be missed. In 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance', Shekhar's protagonist, Mangal Murmu says, "We are like toys – someone presses our 'ON' button, or turns a key in our backsides, and we Santhals start beating rhythms on our tamak and tumdak, or start blowing tunes on our tiriyo while someone snatches away our very dancing grounds." (Hansda, 2015, p. 170) Both writers, thus, point out, how change in the tribal communities must begin from within. It is only through an understanding of the larger politics of

society that they can raise their voices to counter their stereotypical cultural representations and establish new models of their identity and empowered being in the world.

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