

Two States, Two Stories: “Salt” By Mahasweta Devi and Mannu Bhandari

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Abstract

This paper aims to compare two stories originally written in two different regional languages of India but translated into English with the same title. The stories - set in two different geographical regions - one in the eastern and the other in the western part of India - traverse the regional as well as psychological terrains where the protagonists struggle to survive in a sick, dysfunctional society in the post-independence era. Natural and human resource exploitation is one of the major concerns of the ecopsychologists all over the world, especially in a country that has been transformed from being a colonial/slave country to a third world country.

Social inequality, injustice and imbalance result into rebellions that would change the world- this Marxist or Leftist belief has really become outdated and needs the process of rethinking them in terms of the modern times when the country is undergoing a technological revolution. This paper aims to study in depth the ecopsychological issues raised by Mahasweta Devi and Mannu Bhandari in their respective stories.

Keywords: salt, labour, loyalty, exploitation, eco-terror and eco-psychology.

Indiscriminate and mindless exploitation of land, water, forests, hills, rocks, sand and other terrestrial resources have been a serious ecological concern since the beginning of the 20th century but more serious and brutal exploitation of human resources has been the centuries old tradition of the world irrespective of class, race, society or nation or regime. Indentured or bonded labour systems, slavery, debt bondage and human trafficking have been some of the most

atrocious practices existing more in civilized societies in comparison to the aborigine ones. The focus of the environmentalists and ecologists has gone beyond the primary fundamentals of preservation of environment and sustainability and now takes into consideration the impact of deforestation, urbanization and concretization on the human psyche at individual as well as group levels. These upcoming considerations have resulted into the development of a large number

of modern ecological theories such as eco-Humanities, eco-psychology, eco-consumerism and others. Obviously, the answer to all the problems of ecology essentially lies in the human retreat to nature, eco- heritage and eco-therapy.

Human exploitation and its long lasting ripple effects on the generations to come is the only common platform on which both the writers- Mahasweta Devi and Mannu Bhandari – can be put together for the critics/readers interested in comparing both the writers. Although they were contemporaries and voiced their protest against the social anomalies using their distinct style and techniques, they have worked for different causes. Both of them started their careers in writing around the same times- in 1950s and by 60s they had gained enough recognition and receptivity in their literary circles and among their readers. Mannu Bhandari captured the conflict of the urbanizing Indian populace trying to retain and conform to the dogmatic, traditional values in the lives of individuals who lives the life of what her critic Anil Singh describes as full of “tension, alienation, mental agony, corruption and frustrations of social life” (*Indian Fiction in English Translation*, 2005, 92). Mahasweta Devi began her literary career with writing a bio-historical work on Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi but during her frequent visits to the region to collect the songs and folk stories about Laxmibai, she noticed the plight of the adivasi tribes and that became a major turning point in her life. She turned to literary as well social and cultural activism and dedicated the rest of her life for championing the cause of the adivasi tribes of Bihar, West Bengal and almost all the states of India.

Both the writers belonged to the families with great literary background and both were involved with the new literary movements in the post independent India. Bhandari along

with other Hindi writers such as Nirmal Verma, Rajendra Yadav (her husband), Bhishma Sahani, Kamleshwar and others was the founder of the Naya Kahani Movement. Their stories centred around the newer social issues evolving out of the transformation and urbanization that India was undergoing during those times. They opened new debates and discussions in their works that focussed on gender inequality, injustice and conflicts among the working classes, neo-rich and the privileged classes of societies. Devi’s father Manish Ghatak was the founder of “Kallol,” a literary movement in West Bengal and both her parents as well as her whole family from both the sides were writers. Mahasweta had also been associated with “Gananatya” a group which worked to take social and political theatre to the rural parts of the state in the 1930s and the 1940s. In the later part of her life, she joined hands with Prof. Ganesh Devi to establish the Budhan Theatre for the Chhara community in Gujarat who have been branded since the times of the British rule as criminals. The purpose of establishing this theatre was “to provide a voice to a people who want to tell the world, ‘We are not born criminals, we are born actors.’” (Desai, 2011, webpage).

It is interesting to note that some of the most popular works of Mahasweta and Bhandari have been adapted into films as well as plays for the stage performances. Bhandari’s involvement with the Hindi film industry had been much controversial in terms of her claims for her scripts being distorted. In her complaint to the court for her novel *Aap Ka Bunty* being distorted in the film version, she had said, "My novel's message is that such children are extremely vulnerable and need special care as they can grow up into extremes of sensitivity or ruthlessness. But they have made it into just another commercial" (quoted in *In News*

: *A Live TV Magazine*, January 12, 2014). She was extremely concerned about her works that carried a strong social message for the readers with a view to leaving a deep impression on the mind of the reader/viewer and drive him or her to find out solutions for the social problems that she takes up in her works. Although she had never been a social or cultural activist in terms of working directly for the victims of society, her works spoke for the silent sufferers and questioned the legitimacy of the actions of the victimizers.

Mahasweta Devi, on the other hand had eventually emerged as a powerful, fiery social activist who played an important role on many occasions to lodge open protests in favour of the adivasis against the government authorities. She raised her voice against the so called developmental and revolutionary steps taken by the government for the progress of the decolonized India which actually led to “pauperizing” the tribal by stripping them off their lands, forests, culture and opportunities to leave decent, dignified lives. The “lop-sided development plans” of the Indian government have resulted into making the adivasis homeless because of their illiteracy and ignorance of laws. The tribes that never had any *ericture* deeds, agreements or documents. “Her writing addressed one single word: injustice,” G. N. Devy, a writer and activist who had worked closely with Mahasweta Devi said. He continues, “Wherever she saw what she thought was injustice, she plunged into the struggle and never looked back.” (*The New York Times*, 2 August, 2016, np) Daxin Bajrange, the Director of Budhan Theatre who had worked with Prof. Devy and Mahasweta Devi lovingly called her “Amma.” Bajrange opines, “ Amma is synonymous with Ulgulan, an unceasing fight. What I learned in my 18 years of association with her is that she is a fount of a rebellious energy dedicated to real democratisation of our country.

This rebellious energy is reflected in her body of her work. (*Matrubhumi*, July 28, 2016).*

Salt as a metaphor in the Indian ethos stands for multiple connotations. With the suffixes *haram* and *halal* in Hindi, it stands for the loyalty and disloyalty respectively. In various cultures and sub-cultures of the Indian populace, it could have connotations to being worthy and sharing goodwill. It has various common uses such as for seasoning and preserving food, adding nutrients, as disinfectant, purifier, remover and destroyer of evil and others. In Indian ethos these uses could metaphorically stand for initiating and entering into new bonds, bringing good luck, exchanging greetings and others. There is a custom observed by the young boys in the rural villages of Gujarat, that they collect salt from the evaporated ponds and distribute it to people, calling it ‘sabras’ which means that it will bring good luck in the New Year (<http://heritagetreasure.in/articles/garvi-gujarat-nodiwali/>). Mahatma Gandhi’s protest against the British tax on salt stood for the peaceful civil disobedience movement and *satyagraha*. In the *Bible*, salt stands as a metaphor to many concepts such as agreement between man and God (“covenant of salt,” Leviticus 2:13), purity, perfection, intelligence, hospitality and fidelity). P.T. Subrahmanyam, a seeker has rightly said for Gandhiji, “That Gandhiji’s *satyagraha* and *ahimsa* were inspired greatly by Christ’s ‘Sermon on the Mount’ that talks of doing good to evil (*The Speaking Tree*, Bennet & Coleman, Mumbai, 24 December, 2017, 1)

In the stories “Salt,” the material stands for the sense of being obliged - having “the salt in veins.” Salt is the agent of “power, prestige, and unlimited wealth” that “flows through the veins of” (Bhandari, “Salt,” *Imaging the Other*, 1999,18) the oppressed. Salt is a replacement

of “blood” and it gets “thicker, denser” with the passing of “two or more generations” that have survived because of the feigned “magnanimity” and “graciousness” of Thakur Sahib, the rich, exploitative landlord of the unnamed village. His counterpart in Mahasweta’s ‘Salt’ is Uttamchand—the *bania*, the trader and the *mahajan* the moneylender in Jhujhar, an adivasi village in the lap of the Palamau Reserve Forest. Wageless labour and bonded slavery are proportionate to the obligation taken from the Mahajan or Thakur Sahib and the only way to repay those obligations is continue as bonded labours for “generations” together.

Land is the major force that leads to human exploitation in both the stories. Amidst the power of democratic elections of 1977, the victory of the Communist party and its initiative of establishing ‘youth teams’ play a significant role in changing the social order but not in full effect. Share-cropping, abolition of *betbegari* (wageless labour), health, liquor addiction, tyrannical practices of the *mahajan*, education and control on price-hikes are the major reforms the *samitis* formed by the youth teams in the new political order making the Adivasis of Jhujhar gain a few privileges over the centuries old exploitative practices of the *mahajan*. But eventually, the youth-team offices turn out to be as corrupt and indifferent to their issues as the ones that had been before the elections. Mahajan Uttamchand’s defeat by the youth-teams and his helplessness at the crops being shared by the Adivasis tillers of his land result into his unchallenged and double-edged decision of not selling salt in the village. “I will kill them by salt” (Mahasweta, ‘Salt,’ 128) and “I’m not selling salt to anyone. There is no profit in salt.”(134). The intervention by one of the youths from the *samitis* only worsens the matter leaving the people of Jhujhar in the state of “saltless darkness.” Salt is the cheapest commodity available and the most

“organic and mineral constituent” of the human body but Uttamchand’s monopolistic practice of not selling it is invincible and it results into respiratory, orthopaedic, physiological and other medical problems among the people of Jhujhar.

In both the stories, natural disasters, imbalance and exploitation decide the human fate and psyche albeit, the human response to these situations vary. Bhandari’s personae helplessly surrender but Mahasweta Devi’s protagonists combat the tyrannical forces only to surrender to them towards the end. Both the writers have portrayed their victims as responsible for designing their own vicissitudes. Mahasweta’s Purti Munda exploits nature by encroaching the quiet terrains of the elephants; Bhandari’s Bhima finds solace in self-infliction and obeisance. In the process, both find themselves in a state of compulsive obsession of being responsible for the suffering around. Ekoa, the isolated, ousted leader elephant in Mahasweta’s story is a case example of the internal sufferings of these victims. All the three share an unpredictable kind of a situation. While the reader is prepared to reach to the end on the note of a strong positive action, all the three behave unpredictably strange and meet a fatal end – Ekoa is killed by forest officials, Purti and his companions are crushed by Ekoa and Bhima is unable to speak his mind in spite of getting a golden opportunity to do so. The sentiment is well captured in Mahasweta Devi’s words in her story - “Exiled from leadership and from the herd, it’s behaviour turns irresponsible” (Mahasweta Devi, 136).

Bhima dares to do something that his grand or great grand parents could never have imagined—ask Kunwar Sahib to educate his (Bhima’s) son. Purti Munda either knew or did not know that Mahajan was tired of the long battle and had started selling salt once again in the market of

Jhujhar. Yet Purti undertook the expedition of stealing salt-earth and act irrationally and Ekoa was much inebriated after he killed Purti and his companions. Their deaths could not have been justified by the Forest department and so Ekoa had to be declared a “rogue” and killed. The reason Mahaweta Devi gives is “ All this because of mere salt! They couldn’t get salt. If they could buy salt, three men and one elephant would still be alive”(144)

In his article ‘Is There an Ecological Unconscious?’ (January 27, 2010) published in *The New York Times Magazine* , Daniel B.Smith quotes Glenn Albrecht’s term “solastalgia” which is :

a combination of the Latin word *solacium* (comfort) and the Greek root *-algia* (pain), which he defined as “the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault . . . a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at ‘home.’”(Smith, 1)

Albrecht’s term was coined in 2004 and later on was much used by ecopsychologists world over. The major concern of his study in 2004 focused on displacement and “loss of heart’s ease” of the Aborigines of Upper Hunter in Australia. Albrecht points out that solastalgia “ is a global condition, felt to a greater or lesser degree by different people in different locations but felt increasingly, given the ongoing degradation of the environment. “(Smith, 3). The immediate question Smith raises in his article is does this change in environment really affect the minds of the inhabitants.

Both, Bhandari and Mahasweta Devi, have addressed this issue in their stories. Purti Munda’s return to the Jhujhar from the urbanized cities

-Dhanbad, Ranchi and Doltaganj- where he had worked as a coolie was an example of a man who could not settle down in an urban set up nor could he attain any upward mobility in terms of his financial gains. Eventually his involvement in raising his voice against the anti-advansi forces is just a manifestation of his frustration and “know-all.” The village elder reprimands him for his unnecessary venture of disturbing the elephants in the forest for encroaching their salt-licks: “The advansi who goes off to work in the coal mines or as a coolie in the town, stays away . You didn’t. You were kicked out. You came back thinking yourself a know-all” (Mahasweta Devi, 141). Irrationality and lack of thoughtfulness lead Purti to take his friends to the Forest once again in search of salt and their end is miserable.

Not only human species but the animal kingdom suffers equally in terms of undergoing psycho-pathological imbalance in the forests of Jhujhar. Human ecology- the relationship between human beings and ecological forces are disturbed by Purti and his companions. Ekoa had “possibly sensed that the salt-earth was being stolen”(138). Quite worried and exasperated by his unreliable quiet behaviour, the Forest Department raised alarms:” Was he becoming suspicious of human beings? Was he trying to pick up human smells with the radar of his trunk?”(138). Neither the herd of elephants nor the Forest Department could understand where the salt disappeared – “ There were salt-licks, but no [salt] Everything seemed topsy-turvy”(138). But Ekoa watched the human movement carefully and quietly. The human irrationality was combatted by the animal’s calculated, rational move and the world could never know the real reason behind the tragic death of Purti and his lads.

Quoting James Hillman's study on archetypal psychotherapy and soulless society, Carl Golden an ecotherapist puts forth a very fundamental question raised by Hillman: "How can a person be sane in an insane environment?" (www.soulcraft.co). Hillman argued that psychology needs to include not only environmental issues, but issues of social, political, and economic justice, as well. Bonded slavery of five generations in Bhandari's story is the outcome of the act of "charity" carried out by the fifth ancestor of Kunwar Sahib towards Bhima's fifth ancestor. The barter of four urchins as against four bags of grain given to their parents becomes an act of obligation forever on Bhima's great great grandfather. Bhima had frequently heard these lines running in the family:

This goddamned hunger, it consumed everything-kith and kin, love attachment. I was one of those four fortunate children. So understand father exists, that you are here. And of course, your sons and grandsons in the future. So son, remember, it isn't blood but the salt of the haveli that flows through your veins (Bhandari, 17).

Passive resignation and sentimental loyalty to the extent of becoming knuckleheads make Bhima's lineage sycophants who never stop praising for generations together this act of "charity" of the Thakurs. Bhima's struggle to speak for his son's education and his sheer failure to communicate to Kunwar Sahib are the most tragic examples of mental aberration mind that has actually transformed into racial memory.

Unequal distribution of resources and power are at the root of poverty, deprivation and inequality. Three generations of the Thakur family worked to expand their estate into "fiefdom of some seventy odd villages and the [haveli]

grown into a regular fortress" (Bhandari,18) With this unquestionable power in hand, Thakur Sahib enjoys the status of being an uncrowned king who when rides past the roads of villages 'even plants and trees stop swaying.'" (18) Human dignity violated and surrendered to the tyrannical forces for even a small offence" causing people to tremble like leaves and small children to wet their mother's laps."(18) In Mahasweta Devi's story, Mahajan's monopolistic practices are responsible for human degradation, humiliation and violence. His forefathers "bought up the adivasis' fertile jungle land hand over fist." The indigenous tribes consider land as a deity and not a commodity that could be sold or bought. Mahasweta Devi regrets:

In those days, like today, it was very busy to buy land and drive out the adivasis. Adivasis then were as wary as they are today of accounts-documents- deeds-laws. Hence the adivasis of Jhujhar don't even know when they once owned their land. When they could bring the harvest of their own labour home. (Mahasweta Devi, 125)

The result is for the past few generations, the village is bound in the shackles of *betbegari* (wageless labour) to Mahajan. The returns of crop sharing is added on the debit side of Mahajan's ledger leaving the bonded labours poor and starving forever.

In their own distinct style and manner, both the stories powerfully emerge as documents of history of suffering and exploitation of the marginalized sections of the society- the adivasis and dalits - in the pre-colonial as well as post colonial India. Mahasweta Devi's reference to their conditions -"as wary as they are today" is a global concern for the rights of those who are the victims of social exclusion. Education, employment, social upward mobility, equal

rights and basic necessities are the constitutional rights of each individual in a democratic nation but more important than that is the preservation of ecological resources of the nation that have been endangered or exhausted by the agents of capitalistic forces.

*Read more at: <http://english.mathrubhumi.com/features/literature/mahasweta-devi-amma-a-rebellious-energy-english-news-1.1237152>

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