

Poetics and Politics of Water in Mahasweta Devi's *Water*

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Abstract: This paper draws from the reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Water* the dynamics of caste politics constructed on water distribution practices. The writer cuts through the politics of hegemony exposing the strategies of keeping intact the hierarchies of caste system. The characters' perception of water varies as per their social status in caste system. Water coalesces as a powerful repressive strategy in a greed-driven system that has the sanction of a structural hegemony to thwart the progression of marginal communities as it is only through exploitation that caste apartheid is sustained. At the centre of the story, we have Maghai whose response to water politics forms a critical basis in understanding the resilience of the exploited communities towards oppression.

INTRODUCTION

The representational value of this text resides in its univocality as it portrays the collective experiences of Dalits. The experience of Maghai in this text converges with the experience of Mulk Raj Anand's Bakha (*Untouchable*), Chandu ("Barber's Trade Union"), or Sharankumar Limbale's (*Outcaste*). As Sharan Kumar Limbale in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* remarks that even when texts on Dalit issues express the experience of an individual, there is no individual in Dalit literature as it articulates a collective experience (36).

Water is the primordial necessity of all living creatures and the hegemony of caste is structured around water at its crux. Myths, cultural practices, politics, histories, index for human progress and civilisation are built around the availability and harnessing of water. In India, caste practices are interwoven with water issue to keep the status quo hegemony of certain castes, preventing them from progressing and keeping them at the helm of oppression. Oppression in this regard has two important agendas in relation to the practice of caste system: subjugation and humiliation.

In the drama *Water*, water remains the mirage for untouchable communities of the village of Charsa as it is denied to all Doms, Chandals and Santhals. Maghai, the water diviner in the village, views his profession as a sacred bestowment from his ancestors and he derives immense pride and satisfaction to discharge his hereditary duties. Maghai, like Shakespeare's Ariel is the reason behind Santhosh's success of digging wells and also a factor in his status as an unquestionable despot in the village. Mahasweta Devi wants the readers to ruminate on the two opposite ends of life with different values and vision for life. The writer does it skilfully by projecting Santhosh, SDO, and other powerful section of the society on one hand and on the other, dispossessed lots with Maghai as their dramatic representative. Maghai's profession is an art, a supernatural power that he refuses to use as a trade for his living. This is to be contrasted with Santhosh's means of living. He acts as the mediator for the villagers of Charsa belonging to an upper caste, supposed to serve as a bridge between the government and villagers, ends up being a missing link between the two. The parasitic existence of Santhosh thrives living off of government welfare schemes meant for the less privileged. The offering of Maghai's services is beneficial to Santhosh and the whole village hitherto Maghai stays in eternal poverty. Maghai continues his hereditary profession for the sheer love of it even though water is denied to him and his community people. The indigenous knowledge that he possesses is indispensable for the village, the identification of this fact does not prompt Santosh or other people in upper caste rung to be in a mutually benefitting, co-operative relationship. The stark irony lies in the fact that all village wells are divined by Maghai yet there is no well from which he or the untouchables can draw water for their use.

It is impossible to ignore the gender element in the caste based oppression in the hegemonic set up. Caste

system poses different challenges to Dalit women as their “thrice removedness” (Narayan Das) from gender, caste, and class further jeopardizes their political positions. The severity of water woes hits women of untouchable castes the most as the responsibility of collecting water, waiting at the village well, digging at the sand beds of the river Charsa are the prerogative of women folk in the drama. The water crisis that pushes their lives to the fringes gets poignant rendering by Phulmani, Maghai’s wife, when she demonstrates the heavy price they pay for water crisis, “These two hands of mine are full of sores, Santhosh, all from scratching about the sands of the Charsa for water... we die without water, our little ones go thirsty, our women dig at the sands of the river for a cupful of water, who’d play such a cruel game with water that we need to quench our thirst? (Devi 2.137-138).” In another scene she narrates the daily hardship that women of the village undergo, “Evening’s the time when women gather at the river and dig holes in the sand with their bare hands. In the night, water trickles into the holes, and we have to fetch it before the sun rises, for then the hole will dry up.” (5.158-159) Phulmani tries to make the hideousness of the situation legible to Santhosh as his politically motivated apathy intends to bypass the problematic aspects and tries to make them look trivial. Water politics props up all the unjust practices of caste system preventing them from accessing the means to dignified life thereby perpetuating oppression on people at the bottom rung.

WATER POLITICS AND RHETORIC OF DENIALISM

A striking feature of the system that is continued for the benefit of few in the hegemony is the free play of multiple strategies to keep the water politics thriving. Santhosh and the S.D.O at the helm of managing affairs of the village resort to many strategies to check dissent and to curb resistance to power. In the Charsa village, feudalistic landlords have for generations together kept a majority of untouchable communities at their behest, denying them all amenities that government provides. Santhosh is the one who pulls the string in all situations. Government relief for drought or flood is rationed by him. He hoards food grains, fodder, fuel, medicine and other

materials in his godown. He controls the village government school that functions in his control, and hoards textbooks, notebooks, writing board meant for school children. He using repetition, another rhetorical device, assures people that he is serving them though the ambiguities need no retelling. Exploitation of people by him knows no bounds. Still, people hardly have a choice of resisting it. Santhosh is not only exploitative through the position of power but also is a representative of the institutionalised system that augments his political power. His strategies amplify the mechanisms of an age old system stepping up to the trends of contemporary times to create updated systems of oppression renewed in its modus operandi to subjectify marginalized to its hegemony. With each passing age, the system fed by greed and vested interests becomes dogmatic to be repellent of any ingrowth of resistance to its power. The power structure of caste and its allies work in tandem resulting in terrorising repercussions for the oppressed. The societal approval for the systemic violence through caste hierarchy eases the ways in which underprivileged could be kept in repression. Powerful strategies like non-recognition of injustice, denialism and violent methods of state repression effectively demoralise people whose daily battle includes struggling for the basic necessity - water. Santhosh’s devious narrative is strategically employed to hoodwink villagers that there is no water crisis in the village Charsa just as there is no practice of untouchability. His open defence about the persistence of the caste based practices by situating it on religious grounds is another tactic to dethrow the beliefs of the people about his betrayal. The rhetoric of Santhosh is to decimate the validity of water crisis which is foregrounded on the practice of untouchability. Denying the untouchability grounds on which the water problem rests, he tries to make their complaints about water baseless and mitigates the charges of grave mismanagement of the situation. The SDO as a government representative is unwilling to act on political will or to look into the serious repercussions of the issue:

Don’t tell me of new problems, please don’t. As it is, the district has a load of problems already. Drought followed by drought, flood followed by flood, flood followed by drought, drought followed by flood... chronic! Problems stick to their district like incurable

dysentery. Charsa's only a block in the district, has a regular supply of relief. A lot of cash too! (7.172)

When Jiten, the school master presses charges against Santhosht to the SDO about mismanagement of relief materials and caste discrimination, the strategic rhetoric of the government official is denial. He blames the whole system as shaky to make provision for the errors of people like Santhosh and to make the charges seem flimsy. He also downplays his role and portrays himself as a victim of the system claiming it to be overpowering to him too. The SDO tries to cover up his failure says, "Me? Who the hell am I? I'm powerless. If I threaten a moneylender, the minister will jump on me. Do you think I don't know? There are millions of rupees lent out on interest in this district, multiplying continuously, but there are no papers." (7.173)

Santhosh's hypocrisy is a powerful rhetorical tool to tackle corruption charges. When Maghai asks him to build a well for his community he evades all possibilities. The conversation highlights the strategies of denialism:

Maghai. Will there be water for us from the well?

Santhosh. Don't you get water?"

Dhura. He can't answer that Santhosh-babu. You don't give us water, yet you ask, Don't you get water? That's enough to shut him up. We never get water, you never give us water. Why talk rubbish, Thakur?

Santhosh(raging). Whom have I refused water?

Dhura (in a rage). The doms. The chamars, the chandals go without water.

Santhosh. The smallest insect needs water to survive. But it seems you can do without water, Dhura! (4.152)

In the same vein, he dismisses caste questions involved in the treatment meted out to the people, "it's not a question of untouchability. You know already that the government has decreed that there'll be no untouchability. I've nothing to say about that... We worship our gods in our houses and you eat pigs and fowl. Now tell me, isn't the water polluted if you touch it?" (3.138). The rhetoric of denial here well masks the language of oppression by directing the arguments to the other end of the spectrum. The deductive reasoning used to rationalise the problems uncovers the manipulative language of oppression and its logical fallacies. AshisNandy remarks in *The Intimate Enemy*, "a colonial system perpetuates itself

by inducing the colonized, through socio-economic and psychological rewards and punishments, to accept social norms and cognitive categories" (3). Here, the grounds for discrimination are established on the psychological notions that they are inferior due to their food habits and lifestyles. Maghai is made to accept his inadequacy due to his caste lineage as the foundational practices of caste system rest on 'othering' people on the basis of their birth. Caste criteria at the centre structures notions of superiority and inferiority manipulating its subjects to exist in apartheid, thereby creating disjunctions at multiple levels: cultural, physical and psychological.

WATER DIVINING AND POETICS OF WATER

Water has amply been represented in literature. Literature exhibits the vast possibilities through which poets, writers, characters and lives have entwined the different facets of nature with water. Maghai's belief in the ancient legend about the nether Ganga, obedient discharge of duties assigned to him by caste, supernatural faculty handed down to him by his forefathers, his fascination for the river Charsa and his deep-seated respect for water divining profession forms the basis of water poetics in the drama. Maghai's character invokes the beauty, power of water; his response reflects on the symbiotic relationship water has with the ecosystem and human lives. His association with water in the drama is perhaps the most organic and coherent of all romanticised portrayals of water in literature. Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Water," S.T. Coleridge's "The Rhyme of Ancient Mariner" delineate water on romantic or platonic realm. The aspect of Maghai's personality interspersed with water is replete with multiple dimensions of water and close-knit repercussions they have on human life. He looks at it as his muse, the nether Ganga, as his mother, loves Charsa River calling it as a beautiful wench that inspires his poetic sensibilities, "I'm drunk, not with booze, but with water. At the sight of water I get flushed, with my blood beating the madal (Devi 7.166)." Water for Maghai holds sensual power that can provoke him out of his dreariness for water. The full flowing river is an intoxicating spectrum that pulls him out of the spell of droughts. He spends long hours watching the river when it overflows in the Monsoon season. His ruminations on the river

provoke amusement and jealousy in Phulmani. She teases him calling the river as his mistress. Maghai calls it as a beautiful wench and goes on flirting with it. He chides the river by calling it a whore. The river also provokes in him anger and bitterness for its inconsistency: flowing in excessive bouts in Monsoon and creating scarcity in summer:

Dhura's mother is right. You're a whore, a fallen woman. In the summer months when I scrape at your breasts, how you flirt with me! You sing to me: The water won't be easy to get,
I've kept the water hidden deep under,
You've to scratch at my breasts
Before I let it loose,
not to you,
but to your wife and daughters.

They don't give us water. For water I have to scrape at your breasts,

And then you flirt with me, you whore!" (7.167)

The idea of river that denies him and his people access to equality, civilisation and dignity is the same outlet for his fanciful ideas. The poetics of water in relation to the river Charsa is contrasted with the politics constructed around the accessibility of water by Dalits in the village. Maghai understands the hypocrisy of Santhosh nevertheless does not prevent himself from offering his service of divining water for his wells. Phulmani, his wife, and Dhura, his son, oppose him for they view his service as their exploitation and a betrayal to their community. Maghai's vision about divining wells seeps deeper through beliefs that have their roots in animism and synthesise a mystical sacred view of the world. His feelings for the Charsa River border between flirtation and adoration. As he proclaims, he sees it as a playful mistress who overflows in Monsoon and denies them during winter. He calls it different names, thereby finding a streak of subvert pleasure from the very same water politics that reduces people's existence null and void. This pattern of domination and exploitation is not exclusive to the hierarchy of people but expands to the natural order of the world. Binary opposition is seen in the treatment of water by polemic groups: oppressed, who stay close to nature and preserve it and on the other, oppressors, who employ destructive means to exploit nature. The forces of oppression see nature as either beneficial to their mercenary motives or obstructive to their designs. Earth is blasted to find sources of

water pockets, whereas Maghai's indigenous knowledge that he inherited from his forefathers helps him to divine water in a supernatural way. Maghai is approached every time by Santhosh to divine water for all his wells. Even indispensable services from people of lower castes are made to look as superfluous to create a scarcity of the takers of the service. This is achieved with being on the top of the hierarchy and employing devious means to keep the status quo to protect the vested interests.

Maghai's poetic vision of water even at the cost of being oppressed by the same things that he believes and loves is the source of his misery. He understands the vicious system he inhabits where landlord Santhosh, SDO and others are confirmed in their commitment to deny them water, government relief measures, education and dignity. Santhosh uses his power to build wells for his family, relatives, his caste members and others with whom he either has mercenary or caste associations except for the people who struggle for it for their very sustenance. Maghai requests him to build their community a well to overcome their daily struggle for drinking water. The community well that is built for them is used by upper caste people and the other well that is built for their use is uncongenial as it is also the place where upper caste people wash their cattle and made it unfit for use. The daily misery spouting from the tyrannical system keep the likes of Maghai struggling for their survival.

Maghai is shot in the skirmish that breaks out when the police try to thwart their efforts of building a dam. The ultimate spectacle of water poetics culminates in the last episode when the river Charsa breaks loose and Santhosh exclaims, "O Holy Father! Haven't ever seen a sight like this. As the dam crumbled, the river leapt through and seemed to snatch Maghai, raise him on the crest of its wave, and carry him away like one who is mad. Look at her, there she goes, there, there, carrying Maghai away." (198). This poetic scene comes after Maghai's wishes to be carried away by the water, "It's the Bhagirath of the nether Ganga here, Wife. I can't let them carry me as a corpse into their bloody morgue. My last journey will be with the water..." (14.198). The fight of Maghai culminates in his death with the river carrying him away as per his last wish. The poetic ending may dramatically justify Maghai's intricate, metaphysical connection with water. Yet,

the drama offers a bleak view about the hopes for the oppressed as it leaves a range of unsettling questions about caste tyranny and its perpetual legacy.

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