

Urvashi O Johnny by Mahasweta Devi Is an Epitome of Urban Suffering

KHAJA SHAHINI BEGUM¹, DR. BATHINA RAJESH KUMAR²

¹Research scholar, Department of English, Koneru Lakshmaiah Education, Foundation, Vaddeswaram.

AP

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Koneru Lakshmaiah Education, Foundation, Vaddeswaram.

AP

Abstract— Mahasweta Devi in her plays constructs a complex network of marginality, to get at the root of the exploitation and suffering in the society. She dramatises the situations of the exploitation and suffering in the society through the character of Johnny in Urvashi O Johnny. The age-old existence of oppression, despair, and suffering is common in the lives of the marginalized classes across countries and continents. Literature of the marginalised or subalternity is a major area of the contemporary postcolonial modern studies which is very relevant to the study of Comparative Literature. It is quite interesting to notice that there is a considerable number of writers in Postcolonial literature who have made a commendable contribution to the expansion and blossoming of Postcolonial literature. These writers have taken-up and handled the issues related to the present and how they are connected to the past. The appreciable feature common to these writers is that the issues dealt with by these writers are very much connected to the heart of the common man. The subject matter of the Postcolonial writers is regarded as a hot commodity of the present literary scenario. The elements of marginalisation, exploitation and other elements related to social inequality are placed in the structure of Postcolonial writings. Social disparity and discrimination prevail in the form of hierarchy where one occupies the dominant position and other is condemned to the lowest subaltern level.

Indexed Terms- Oppression, Despair, Suffering, Marginalized Classes, Subalternity etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was a revolutionary Indian writer, social activist, and journalist, whose works have left an indelible mark on Indian literature, particularly in the realm of postcolonial and subaltern studies. Born into a politically active and intellectually effervescent family in Dhaka, now in Bangladesh, she was deeply influenced by her environment that has

instilled in her a strong sense of social justice from an early age. Her extensive body of work, spanning over several decades, encompasses novels, short stories, plays, and essays, all of which are focused on the marginalized and oppressed sections of society.

Devi's writings are powerful critiques of the structured exploitation and oppression of tribal communities, the landless poor, and women that are especially in the context of rural and urban India. Her works are often based on her first-hand experiences and extensive fieldwork among the tribal communities to offer a voice to those who are voiceless in mainstream literature. Her literary contributions have garnered numerous accolades, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, Jnanpith Award, and the Ramon Magsaysay Award, among others.

Voice for Voiceless

Mahasweta Devi lends voice to the voiceless by revealing several hidden types of subjugation which are very much deep rooted in the Indian social hierarchy and firmly battles for their legitimate rights. Mahasweta Devi shows a different kind of move to highlight the oppression standing different from other women writers. The women writers before her adopted traditional method of dealing with gender subjugation and other binary elements related to middle and upper class women. But with regard to Devi's works, their thrust is on the living conditions of working class people and their exploitation through the clutches of zamindars, landlords and money-lenders. Therefore, such works are recognized for their authentic portrayals of characters like that of the prostitute Moti in the play *Urvashi O Johnny* (Devi, Mahasweta, *Urvashi O Johnny* 2002). The class repression is deepened in the play *Urvashi O Johnny* that traces the

travails of Johnny the poor orphan whose journey from the orphanage in quest of fortune as a ventriloquist, his manic obsession with Urvashi, his marionette, his failure to secure success owing to throat cancer and his daunting struggle to survive amidst all these obstacles. This is very much reflected in the topics that Mahasweta Devi chooses to give literary space to themes of suffering. The intolerant attitude of the upper class, exploitation of the disadvantaged sections, the Machiavellian strategy of the landed gentry to deny the lower sections of their rights, and the caste system-- all find expression in her works. Devi uses the literary devices of irony, sarcasm, criticism as well as colloquialisms to articulate her outrage against society in her works as she highlights the evils and hypocrisy prevalent in the society. What is inherent in Mahasweta Devi's literary and activist works is how she connects the idea of oppression to history, mainly the people's movements against suppression and corruption. The chronological situations and events recorded in the history like the Partition and political movements like the Quit India Movement, Dalit and Naxalite Movement, Women's Movement and the Tebhaga Peasant Movement are deeply entrenched in her writings. Mahasweta Devi's principal concern is with the downtrodden social segments and tribes of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa. The Kheria Sabars, Santhals, Ganjus and Mundas, the low caste people living in the above regions are the most marginalized. In particular, the Sabars were the worst affected by social stigma and exclusion during the colonial rule. Devi's close activist association with the repressed made her realize that even after independence; people are still denied their basic necessities like food, water and land. This denial forced them to become bonded slaves and labourers. For Mahasweta Devi, literary activism is not a task of pedagogy or enlightenment but only a cathartic and catalytic process.

Themes of Suffering in Urvashi O Johnny

Urvashi O Johnny projects the graceless life of a downtrodden person, held captive under the smooth and levelled grounds, prepared by the privileged sections of society. It also explains how mistreatment and disregard have reduced people to a level of subhuman existence. The strength of Mahasweta Devi symbolizes her sympathetic crusade through art and activism to enable the weaker sections of people to

find a just and honourable place in India's mainstream, national life. The condition of the weaker sections during emergency was pathetic. They were the most vulnerable, marginalized and suppressed community in the country. These people have suffered centuries of discrimination and exploitation and even today, in spite of legislation to safeguard them in a fast growing urbanised society, they are still the victims of extensive prejudice, discrimination and violence. By presenting the character of Johnny, she explains how the urban conditions discarded the privileges of a young individual like Johnny. Mahasweta Devi considers drama a more serious instrument of expression and representation to deal with certain issues which the men playwrights have failed to do. She has adopted the genre as a more realistic means to highlight the present serious familial, social, cultural and political issues, the grievous, dastardly crimes and practices of the society in a satirical way. Her objective is to bring about a realisation of certain harsh realities, to preserve every individual's basic rights, to live freely, and to respect every individual irrespective of different gender caste or creed.

From the 1980s onwards, she has been proactively connected to many grassroots level social movements revolving around the question of bonded labour, continuing feudalism in rural polity, state negligence especially to the deprived and marginalized sections of the society which includes communities like untouchables and tribals. *Urvashi O Johnny* deals with the people who have rootless genesis and the roofless family identity. By creating this play Mahasweta Devi seems to challenge the urbanities, who, possessed with the mission for the materialistic delight have ended up, cruel and failing to perceive the reality of life. It is a satire on the academic urban setup which, particularly mindful of the explanations behind the sufferings of the underprivileged, runs as one with the foundation, instead of attempting to lead the general population to another level of expectation. The play depicts the dehumanized presence of the slum inhabitants in Calcutta. According to SamikBandyopadhyay, *Urvashi O Johnny* is a play for the Emergency, finds in the cancer of the throat a metaphor for the suppression of democratic rights (Devi 2011: xvii). However, it attains a universality of claim as it practically depicts the unending torments to which the poor are subjected. The clear record of the sufferings

and happiness in the lives of what could be known as the discards of society is portrayed by the dramatist's determined duty and enthusiasm for the underdog which is a component seldom found in progress of the contemporary authors. With *Urvashi O Johnny*, Mahasweta Devi intensely endeavours to defy a crowd of people with its cruelty towards a class of individuals whose tenuous association with the standard life has as of now grown dim. Johnny, a young fellow, is the legend of the play. He wishes to satisfy every person with his tricks. He is absorbed in a vitality to take the anguished humanity to a paradise of freedom. All things considered he flees, notwithstanding when he is in his teens to "catch the birds of happiness and bring them to you". (Devi 2011: xvii)

Though it has the emergency at the background, it acquires universal significance with its treatment of the common universal phenomenon of the suffering of the underdogs. This play comes as Mahasweta Devi's protest against the complacency of the urban middle class who are insensitive and reluctant to the reality around them. This is also an attack on the writers who are equally indifferent to the sufferings of the poor and content themselves in weaving 'fantastic' stories on the dehumanized existence of the slum dwellers to 'amuse' the easy-going urban middle class readers. The intellectuals who should have become the beacon light of hope to the oppressed; have become stooges of the exploiting agencies and thereby indirectly contributing to the furtherance of the sufferings of the oppressed. Thus, it is critical of the pseudo-intelligentsia too. Mahasweta Devi has taken up the task of a dramatist with a mission to investigate something unconventional and challenging. As it is already mentioned, Mahasweta Devi is a writer with a 'mission' of releasing human beings from all kinds of oppression and exploitation. Here she makes us face vis-a-vis the dehumanized existence of the slum-dwellers in the city of Calcutta. Inhumanity of the 'mainstream' people towards this lot is her main concern. Most of her works reveal the fact that the more man is oppressed; the man's spirit to survive becomes stronger. The subhuman existence and the miserable life of Johnny, the protagonist of the play does not dampen his faith in life and human dignity. He makes all out efforts to come out of the heart rending situation himself and dreams of taking the suffering humanity to the 'heaven of freedom'. His

aim is to attain happiness, but it eludes him. Yet he does not give up his hope. It is a known fact that Devi had written this play in this direction. It is not just the love affair of Johnny with Urvashi, a talking doll. It throws light on the life of individuals placed in a difficult situation touching the shades of subalternity.

Unlike her other plays, this play moves back to the urban society exploring the hidden realities of the life lived on the streets. It projects the dehumanised survival of the slum-dwellers in Calcutta and shows man's brutality and heartlessness to man. It presents both sorrows and joys of the lives on the streets. Class oppression deepens in the play and traces the woes of the poor orphan Johnny. He escapes from the orphanage to seek fortunes as a ventriloquist. He develops a fascination for his talking doll Urvashi. His failure to find success is due to his affliction of cancer and he has struggled to survive amidst all these obstacles. Hence, it becomes a symbolic play that deals with the emergency period in India. It deals with the love affair of Johnny with Urvashi, a marionette. He is brought up in the slums and longs for happiness and runs away from the slums, to seek happiness for himself and for others like him. Later he decides to entertain the people with his talking-doll tricks. Strangely, he becomes infatuated with his marionette and considers it to be the source of happiness for the audience and a means of livelihood for him. As time passes, he develops a cancer in the throat. His marionette, Urvashi becomes mute as it is the voice of Johnny which she shares to amuse the audience. Johnny's cancer of throat is symbolic of the suppression of democratic rights during the Emergency. For Samik Bandyopadhyay, "*Urvashi O Johnny* is a play for the Emergency" (xiv). The love affair comes to an end as he collapses on the stage at the end of the play. However, it acquires a universality of appeal as it realistically portrays the unending torments to which the poor are subjected. Keeping in mind the horrors of the Emergency which 'plunged the Indian sensibility' into 'shock and pain and utter helplessness', Devi focuses on man's inhumanity to man.

Analysis of Storyline filled with Sufferings

The vivid account of the sorrows and joys in the lives of what could be called the dregs of society is characterized by the playwright's single-minded

commitment and passion for the underdog which is an element rarely found in the works of the contemporary writers.

For the setting of the play, she fittingly selected the city of Calcutta one of the progressive cities in the eyes of the Nation. She perhaps thought that the city of Calcutta, a highly developed city of India not only mirrors the urban world but also explores the depth of reality of the lives in the gutters of Calcutta. In this play, Mahasweta Devi explores and exhibits social dissent against the urbanites focussing chiefly on the people, who are engaged in the pursuit of the materialistic pleasure. As a result they have become insensitive and refuse to acknowledge the reality of life. At one level, it is a satire on the educated cosmopolitan society which is well aware of the root causes of the travails of the deprived, go hand in glove with the Establishment, instead of attempting to lead the people to a better tomorrow. These people with their innate cruelty do not allow the innocent people to live of their own accord. They, with their hard-heartedness, immorality, pitilessness, and ruthlessness use all inhuman mechanisms to put an end to the joy of the deprived sections. The voice of these sections is neither recognised nor finds a place in the society. Mahasweta Devi with all her pragmatic knowledge explores the conditions of these sections of people through the character of Johnny a young boy. He is projected as the protagonist of the play, who wishes to keep every person happy with the art of the puppet show. His puppet is Urvashi with whom he develops a kind of affinity and their artistic bond is almost unbreakable. He developed a kind of mind where he wants to give solace to the needy and the suffering through his puppet shows. All the time he is preoccupied with a passion to take the suffering humanity to a haven of freedom even at the cost of his own life. This fanatic desire made him run away from the orphanage and rededicate himself to give happiness to the underprivileged through his skill of a puppet show. Away from his home, Johnny trains himself to be a ventriloquist and ventriloquism becomes his life-long passion. Thereafter, he becomes fascinated by the marionette and takes up ventriloquism as a source of livelihood. As time rolls on, regrettably he develops cancer of the throat-a sudden twist in his life journey. It is interesting to see that Urvashi, the 'talking doll' becomes mute because

it is voice of Johnny that she represents all along for the amusement of the audience. The reasons behind his muteness reflect different adverse ramifications of the emergency. His cherished desire to provide amusement to the people till the last minute of his life is suddenly brought to nought. The unexpected twist that took place in the life of Johnny is not applicable to Johnny alone. The fate of Johnny is the fate of every common man who wishes to die for others like a martyr. Perhaps, this is the reason why Mulkras Anand in his work *Coolie* opined that there are two kinds of people in the world the rich and the poor and the twain never come together in their life time.

In fact, the whole thrust here is the release of the human spirit from all sorts of oppression and exploitation. Mahasweta Devi wants even the lowliest who have virtually been denied a decent life and are considered as a burden on the society, to realize his or her freedom. It is through this freedom, that even the subaltern would achieve self-realization. The doctor and Johnny's friends warn Johnny that he would become dumb if he continued to gab. But he does not give up his profession for he finds in it a form of freedom--a freedom for his joy and joy for others. At the end of the play, he fails to speak when he tries to perform his last show. Samik Bandyopadhyay says that "the cancer of throat is a metaphor for the suppression of democratic rights which the emergency of 1975 brought" (xiii). The play brings a live picture of life on the streets of Calcutta. It is a satire on the writers who show fantasy in their writings to amuse people rather than enlightening them. She brings forth an animate and inanimate affair between Johnny and his marionette, Urvashi. Samik Bandyopadhyay comments, "In the animate-inanimate affair, Mahasweta Devi sees desperation, a life and death involvement that demands from the man, commitment more than human and a commitment that eventually proves to be fatal" (xiii). It is the commitment of Johnny which brings him death. As Johnny accepts ventriloquism as a practice to give pleasure and happiness to the communities of the suppressed and the oppressed, he gets attached to his talking doll, Urvashi. He could not imagine himself being away from her.

When the doctor warned him not to gab and to be away from Urvashi, he shows his protest:

“You are all conspiring to draw me away from Urvashi. I’ll drive my knife straight into your heart” (57).

Despite the fact that he would face adverse consequences, he is prepared to face all of them happily rather than give up his profession as it provides an outlet for his thoughts and feelings.

It is very heartening to see how Johnny, the champion of the suffering brethren, is left with none to support him and how he becomes a non-entity as he loses his voice which he had used to offer to people, at least, a moment of release from the struggles of work-a-day world. Unlike other orphans, he strives to live the life of a respectable human being. He struggles hard to live and learn ventriloquism as he aims to sacrifice his joys for the common good. Till his death he continues to make people happy through his profession.

E.Satyanarayana says:

“Like Brati Chatterjee of *Mother of 1084*, Johnny is a crusader for human rights. Preoccupied with a motive of altruism, he could not bear to see the weak and hapless being subjected to innumerable indignities. He risks his personal enjoyments for the sake of the common good” (Satyanarayana, E. *The Plays of Mahasweta Devi*: 59).

At the end, he collapses while performing his last show. The play presents a realistic picture of the lives of beggars on the streets of Calcutta. The playwright too through Johnny speaks about the hard facts of life in the urban society. Johnny says to the One-Eyed-One: “Every one seeks happiness. Even when they don’t afford to go to movies they watch the queue at the counter and draw happiness from the sight. Before a sweet meats shop, beggars “ maimed in their arms and legs roll along the hot pitch begging for their masters and moneylenders, and find happiness in watching smart things. I showed the play of Johnny and Urvashi” (67).

This is the condition of the slum dwellers of Calcutta who become the victims of debauched ethics of social codes and moral orders. Johnny also feels the same in a state of disappointment and misery. He becomes the slave of Urvashi because the people, whom he tries to save, give him pain. He is in dilemma between the

demand of the society and self. He wants to fulfill his duty for the sake of humanity and concurrently he yearns for assertion of himself. But he fails and tries to firm up his identity by saying:

“Who’s there to defeat me? Tell me! Yes, this is Johnny. Degenerates! Didn’t catch the birds of happiness and bring them to you? Who am I? Urvashi’s my mistress, I’m her slave. Don’t you know us?...No, there was nobody here. I was having visions. There’s nothing. It’s all lies. I’ve got drunk, that’s all, that’s what wrong” (90-91).

Till the end of the play Johnny not only tries to uplift the suffering humanity but also engages himself with Urvashi. She serves for him an artistic escape from pain, suffering, misery and poverty. His throat cancer is not only his personal ailment but also the disease of every independent nation at the time of Emergency. This cancer snatches away the freedom to speak and rights of happiness of the people. Johnny has a wish to make people articulate their rights to protest, protect, reform and express, and for this with his sore throat he wants to do a final show which is for him a final confrontation with the cruel, greedy, materialistic, manipulated autocrats and hypocrites. Johnny finds in cancer of the throat a metaphor. In fact, it is not a metaphor that will bear a literal, crude parallelization, but it has a destiny that grows from the ventriloquist’s artist image and his dream of catching the birds of happiness. In the last show, Devi shows the audiences’ meddling as they become intrusive when Johnny cries. Johnny somehow makes people able to speak but his disclosure through Urvashi proves to be touching, poignant and heart rending. Devi shows that it’s our duty to make those happy who give their best for others’ happiness and the doll cries out. The very notion of death is clearly visible here, and Devi here gives a humorous touch in this notion by some other way only to provoke thought. Johnny in his conversation with Ramanna and Moti reveals his thought of death and presents it humorous way.

Mahasweta Devi gives her best effort to show the pitiable condition of the oppressed and exploited slum dwellers of Kolkata and at the same time she brings Johnny on to the stage to give those people a ray of hope to attain happiness and freedom. In the last scene when Johnny becomes mute the audience begin to open their mouth, raise their voice, utter a protest in a

positive way, and start to make questions and these are the aspects what Johnny wants. The audience becomes inquisitive for the first time, and their voices and Johnny's desperate mime symbolise a new beginning, an era where Johnny has somehow managed to create his prototypes and where Urvashi is not needed. Till the last moment Johnny tries to make people happy. He also has a fear also that after his death perhaps he will be forgotten by his people. It will be all free service when Johnny's dead and Urvashi's dead. But knowing all these he never surrenders before the cancer, rather the establishment. His sacrifice paves the way for others and people start to realise their roles. The show will never come to an end for another Johnny will come on to the stage and that's what the dramatist tries to show. No fatal disease can take the freedom and happiness away from anyone if he has the power to confront it and Johnny does exactly this. The show will continue, is what the last scene symbolises: What's the matter? Why did you fall silent?...Why is Johnny crying? Urvashi, how are you? How are we? Speak aloud, the way you always do...What's wrong?...What's the matter? What's happened? ... I'm not well, not well, not well...till he uses his fingers to make the gesture of cutting his throat. The desperate mime continues as the curtain comes down (93-94).

What really holds *Urvashi O Johnny* as a drama is Johnny's emotional attachment to Urvashi, the marionette, which gains a metaphysical facet as the latter begins to occupy his thoughts resulting in his total estrangement from his beloved, the One-Eyed Moti and his patrons who, having been conscious of the impending danger, persuade him to give it up. However much he might get infatuated with it, the marionette cannot be an alternative for his dearly loved. It is only a make-believe means for his happiness. It serves to highlight the fact that he is too poor to have a beloved and a family. It is also an escape route via art heightening the sense of unreality mixed with irony. Furthermore, the playwright endows Urvashi with human qualities. It is around this inanimate character that the playwright revolves the entire drama of human relations by making its sense felt in almost all the senses. In fact, all the characters including the protagonist address Urvashi in a language which we generally use when we speak to a fellow being. And we are not informed that it is a marionette that Johnny is in love with till the end of

the last scene which adds a kind of edginess to the play.

CONCLUSION

Johnny, thus, gives up his life in pursuit of happiness. A ventriloquist with a purpose, Johnny appears to be the mouthpiece of the author bringing to light the facts of our existence. Through the character of Johnny, Mahasweta Devi unveils her dismay at the criminal neglect and cold indifference of the mainstream nation towards the selected weaker section of the natives like Johnny. Besides exposing the structures of economic marginalisation she criticises the nation for its inhuman and exploitative attitude. She recognises herself to be an educated, upper class Indian citizen and therefore a member of the oppressor class. Without being self-conscious she raises her voice for the declassed, deprived, dehumanised, underprivileged and oppressed communities with whom she categorizes at the experimental level. For her, activism involves engagement through literary creation with issues which impact the lives of her subjects to empower the subject and enlighten the target reader as she had done in the present play *Urvashi O Johnny*. Mahasweta Devi through her continual representation of the voices of marginalised, instead of being depressed, takes a positive flight and constructive attitude for the transformation of power and caste structure of society.

REFERENCES

- [1] Chakravarty, R. (2023). *Mahasweta Devi*. Taylor & Francis.
- [2] Devi, Mahasweta. *Five Plays*. Trans. and Intro. Samik Bandyopadhyay. Calcutta: Seagull, 1997. Print.
- [3] Devi, Mahasweta. *After Kurukshetra*. Trans. Anjum Katyal. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005. Print.
- [4] ---. *Aranyathinte Adhikaram*. (The Rights of the Forest) Trans. Leela Sarkar. Kottayam: DC Books, 1992. Print.
- [5] ---. "Arjun". Trans. Mridula Nath Chakravarty. *The Wordsmiths*. Ed. Meenakshi Sharma. New Delhi: Katha, 1994. 178-187. Print.
- [6] E. Satyanarayana. (2000). *The Plays of*

Mahasweta Devi.

- [7] Shukla, Dr. S. (2018). Plea to the bonded laborers in Mahasweta Devi's play "Aajir." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 3(5), 754–760.
<https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.3.5.10>