INTER-GENERATIONAL TRIBAL SLAVERY AS REPRESENTED IN MAHASWETA DEVI’S SHORT STORY ‘DOULOTI, THE BOUNTIFUL’

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I

Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Douloti the Bountiful’ is one of the three stories in the collection named Imaginary Maps. This story brings out how the “bonded labour system” affects the tribal communities in India.

Now, what is “Bonded Labour System”?

Maitreya Ghatak rightly answers this as follows: ‘Under the bonded labour system, a person loses his status as free labour and virtually becomes serf labour under a person from whom he has taken a loan, the amount of which may appear to be ridiculously small. He forfeits the right to seek employment elsewhere and the right to sell his labour or the products of his labour in the open market at market value. He or a member of his family has to work under the creditor till the loan is repaid. But the wages are absurdly low and the rate of interest astronomically high. Bonded labourers are not in a position to bargain over their wages and must accept whatever is customary for the landlords to give them. So once someone gets into bondage, he remains so till he dies and very often his son or someone in the family has to continue as a bonded labourer. Inter-generational bondage is a common feature of the system. (Introduction: Dust on the Road. p. xxiii & xxiv)

The situation in Mahasweta Devi’s “Douloti, the Bountiful” forms a striking instance of this phenomenon. The story is set in post-independence India in the small village of Seora in the district of Palamau in Bihar. The author says, “Bonded labour is sown into the soil of this district. Every house has a bonded labourer”. Imaginary Maps. p.30 (Subsequent references to the book are indicated with page numbers in parenthesis)
II

The story falls into two parts. Part I deals with the sufferings of Ganori Nagesia and Part II with that of Douloti, his daughter. But Mahasweta Devi is more digressive than progressive in this story as she is more obsessed with the national problem of bonded slavery remaining unattended, long after independence. She puts the story into seven units, the first two dealing with Ganori Nagesia the remaining five with Douloti.

The story opens with the pathetic life style of Ganori Nagesia, who is often called as Crook Nagesia. He is a bonded labourer and usually imagines to talk with some “bespectacled town gentleman” (p.19), who persuades the government to abolish the bonded labour (Kamyouti) system.

“All work in the owner’s house is yours?

- Why not, Sir?
- Why must you do all the work in Munabar’s house?
- How can I not have to do it all?

O learned town gentleman with glasses
All Munabar’s work is Crook’s work
I am his bond slave (Kamiya)

- You are his Kamiya?
- I am his bonded labourer (Seokia)
- His Seokia?
- I am his bonded worker (beth-begar)
- Hey, what are you? Kamia, Seokia, or beth-begar?
- I am everything. I am his chattel slave”.

(p. 19 & 20)

The iterative irony of the tone of presentation remains obvious to any reader, because of Devi’s deep involvement as a social activist, aiming at the liberation of these victims of the social and economic system in the country. Thanks to the initiative of voluntary organizations and NGs, Government of India has enacted laws abolishing ‘the bonded labour system’. But our Government machinery’s functioning at gross-roots being what it is, the laws more honoured in the breach. Nagesia seems to say, “call me by any name, I am a bonded labourer”. The practice has grown in India as a result of colonization, agri-capitalism and feudalism.

Munabar Singh Chandela is the owner of Seora village. He is the land lord, Money lender and a Malik. He perfectly knows how to deal with Kamiyas and how to be benefited by them. His power over Kamiyas is not because of a cultural or traditional transmission but because of inequality. As the author quotes, “when did the Rajput brahmans from outside come to this land of jungle and mountain? When did all the land slide into their hands? Then cheap field-labour became necessary. That was the beginning of making slaves on hire purchase”. (p.20)
Crook Nagesia is one of Munabar Singh Chandela’s Kamiya. He is named as ‘Crook’ because his body is bent double when he got injured pulling a bullock-cart at Munabar Singh’s order. Devi in her conversation with Gayathri Spivak, explains the authenticity of her story. The transition from the past to the present tense in her account dramatizes the representativeness of the situation. “I saw Crook Nagesia with my own eyes in the month of June, just before the rainy season…. Palamu has very little rainfall. Under the burning sun the landlord loads the bullock cart with paddy and tells the man to pull the cart to the local market. He could not do it. He fell under it. He was crushed. He became twisted and crooked for the rest of his life” (p.xiii). In response to her query as to why he dealt with Nagesia like that, the landlord revealed his callousness towards the worker under him. To him human life had no value, his bulls were valuable. Her interaction with the landlord is worth quoting in full, as Devi communicates without comment the landlord’s words. The irony is transparent. He said, ‘These bullocks are costly. If I send a bullock, it will suffer in the heat and it might collapse. But these bonded labourers don’t count for much. A man can be wasted, a bullock cannot’( p. xiii)

III

The second part of the story covers Douloti’s experience. Paramanand Mishir, projecting himself as a Brahmin groom seeking for a bride, clears off Crook Nagesia’s bond slavery debt. He pays the amount to Munabar Sing, in mutual exchange for Douloti’s hand, Crook’s daughter. He masks himself as a God, who by marryng a tribal girl, releases/frees her father from the chain of bonded labour system. But his real intention comes to light when he unmaskshis identity by selling Douloti to a Kamia whore house. No one expects that Crook Nagesia’s freedom from the bondage is acquired at the cost of the loss of freedom of Douloti, who takes “the yoke of Crook’s bond slavery on her shoulders”. (p. 73). The chain slavery transmission has continued from father to daughter. What is more distressing is that father pays through labour but Douloti, with her body. The story shows not only the tragic situation of tribal men who were named as bonded slaves/ labourers but also the tragic situation of tribal women as bonded prostitutes. The following account in the story, where Rampiyari, the housekeeper and manager of the Kamiya whore house, substantiates their predicament.

“These are all Paramananda’s Kamiyas. Douloti and Reoti and Somni
Field work, digging soil, cutting wells is work
This one doesn’t do it, that one doesn’t do it, the other one doesn’t do it –
The boss has turned them into land
The boss ploughs and ploughs their land and raises the crop
They are all Paramananda’s Kamiya
They are all some people’s meat –
Near the foot of the Himalayas in Jaunnar – Banar
They don’t say Kamiya, they are called maat
Tulsa and Bisla and Kamla
Kolta girls are some people’s meat
Only field work and shoveling soil is work
This one doesn’t do it, that one doesn’t do it, the other doesn’t do it –
The boss has made them land
He ploughs and ploughs their bodies’ land and raises a crop
They are all some people’s meat”. (P.60)

Mahasweta Devi often got glimpses of tribal life also from their popular oral songs. Here she quotes one of them. This focalizes the experience from one of the victims of the system. Such sexploitation occurs across India under different names as Kamiya, Seokia or Maat.

Ecofeminism is a significant dimension of Ecocriticism. Annette Kolodney in her book, The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters (1985) stresses the predominant gendering of the land as female, by traditional male writers. They stress a parallel between the domination and subjugation of women and the exploitation and spoliation of land. The devastation of natural scene is often figured as the rape of a virgin, as for instance in Wordsworth’s poem, ‘Nutting’. Here in her short story, ‘Douloti, the Bountiful’ Mahasweta Devi interchanges the vehicle and tenor and studies the exploitation of the tribal women as an extension of the spoliation of land. Douloti becomes a victim of such exploitation.

Some of the other metaphors that are spread throughout the story are as follows: “calf turning to old cow” (p.55), “whorehouse becomes the factory. Rampiyari is Paramananda’s overseer and you are all labour.” (p.70), “The cow gives milk if she’s fed. If the human daughter turns Kamiya, no meal, no water, put riders in the saddle and take the money”. (p.83). “These (Douloti) goods are threadbare now”. (p.77)

Everything is business trade. Paramanda gets more money for having found Douloti. The lust for the land and the women are closely inter related in the context of bonded labour system. Mahasweta Devi rightly says “The social system that makes Crook Nagesia a Kamiya is made by men. Therefore do Douloti, Somni, Reoti have to quench the hunger of male flesh”, (p.62)

Mahasweta Devi in her conversation with Gayathri Spivak condemns the Government of India as, “The present Government of India had to introduce, in 1976, the Bonded Labour System Abolition Act. In 1970, the Government of India had supposedly liberated a handful of bonded labourers in Seora village on top of a hill. And, on paper, had given them land. What land? Land on top of the hills, no water level, where nothing could grow. And the people who kept them as bonded slaves were low echelon government officials themselves. It was through their hands that the Government gave money to rehabilitate these people. Naturally nothing reached the tribals. They were in desperation. They said: we will now go back to bondage.
again.” (p. iv & v). In the story, Douloti also expresses their predicament, “Sir! What will come of the gormen abolishing bonded labour? Without land, without food, hunger will drive the people of this society to become Kamiyas again. (p.73)

The story comes to an end with the death of Douloti. She is just 27 years old and her body is affected by venereal disease and hunger. She was once a beautiful tribal girl but now looking aged and weak because of her body being ploughed, exploited, wasted and abandoned. She moves slowly to the village of Bohri, where Mohan Srivatsava, the schoolmaster who sympathises with tribal Kamiyas, has been getting ready for the Independence Day Celebration and in connection with it, a huge India map has been drawn in the courtyard of the School. Douloti realizing her end falls down near it and closes her eyes. Mohan with the Indian tricolor flag in his hand comes out to see the pathetic scene. As Mahasweta Devi writes, “Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread eagled, Kamiya – whose Douloti Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs.”

Today, on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India”. (p.94)

The story moves from the particular to the general. The agony of rook Nagesia and Douloti not only represents the bonded labourer/prostitute systems of Seora village but also voices concern for such systems across India. As Mahasweta Devi says in her conversation with Spivak, “Douloti is still true, and true for the rest of India”. (p. xiii & xiv)

Government should take steps for restoring the peaceful life to the tribal community. The steps should be such that they should not make the situation worse. The story remains a peg for Mahasweta Devi to hang her thoughts. In that sense, it is more a sociological document than a well-shaped art piece.

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