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An Untold Tale from the Margin: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Bedanabala: Her Life. Her Times*

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Abstract

The much neglected and very often condemned lives of the socially despised women are depicted in Mahasweta Devi's novella *Bedanabala: Her Life. Her Times*, in which the novelist makes a sincere attempt to figure out the root cause of the problems embedded in the deep structure of patriarchal society. This is an introspection into the lives of stigmatised women who resurrect themselves from their ignoble condition. But this fictional work is also intended to wage a war against patriarchal hegemonic liberal norms that are strategically maintained in order to perpetuate this tradition. Interestingly, the novelist also subtly points out several other pertinent questions which are inextricably associated with the socio-economic condition of the subordinated gender in the 19th century Bengal.

Keywords

Mahasweta Devi; *Bedanabala: Her Life. Her Times*; Patriarchy; Hegemony; Women's Emancipation.

Mahasweta Devi's *Bedanabala: Her Life. Her Times* is an interesting tale that documents the life-story of a 'fallen' woman named Kamalini (meaning Lotus) who does justice to her name by raising herself above from the sorry state of affairs in which she has been thrown at a very early stage of her life. The lady who is called as Did'ma prevents Kamalini from being pushed into contemptible activities. Mahasweta is widely known for her deft characterisation of marginalized people in fiction and the novella *Bedanabala* is no exception. Instead of sympathising with the wretched condition of these women, the novelist strives to rip apart the rigid patriarchal structure. She assumes the position of an omniscient narrator and narrates from the vantage point of a third person narrative.

The life and times of the central character Kamalini is in fact recounted by her own daughter named Bedanabala. Mahasweta Devi retains a twist in the tale as she hits hard at the male chauvinistic patriarchal system by taking a damned woman out of her cloistered self and situates her at the centre of a story that is delineated in a dispassionate manner to evoke a sense of respect amid her readers. It is a story of several women who are castigated by the society for their own ill-fate but never fall short of clutching onto moral and ethical values that patriarchy always loves to cherish.

Mahasweta Devi resorts to factual elements that she ingeniously infuses with fictional details. In this novella she unfolds the story of almost three generations with occasional references to the Indian nationalist movements. The story of Kamalini whose nickname is Kamal is interwoven with the story of armed Indian rebellion against the overwhelming British and here lies the finesse of Mahasweta who exquisitely knits the whole plot to bring out the coveted result that she aims at. The novelist intends to convey that the story of a disgraced lady

attempting to overcome her maligned state is also tantamount to the abject condition of a colonised nation toiling hard to break free from the foreign rule. The struggle to achieve success against all odds is the striking notion of the novella, as it is very evident when readers find that Kamalini who has once been disowned by the society is welcomed by one and all with due respect. It becomes possible only because of the fact that Did'ma who adopts her is progressive by nature as Mahasweta narrates: "Did'ma was fairly fluent at reading Bengali. She was in fact addicted to reading. Be it Battala books or Khana's Bachan or Kalidasa's riddles or plays and novels or even titles from 'Basumati Sahitya Mandir'—she'd read them all" (*Bedanabala* 21). That she runs a brothel does not dissuade her from taking part in the meetings arranged by Swami Sadananda maharaj of Nabya Hindu Mission that shapes her life differently as she is enormously influenced by the close association that she shares with several noble minds. She is always accompanied by little Kamal who is also immensely benefitted from such gathering as Mahasweta writes:

Did'ma began to visit, taking Ma with her. Saw Swami Sadananda for the first time and was impressed with his words. And what impressed her even more was the gathering--- so many famous actresses sitting there, all of them, their tussar saris drawn low over their face, listening raptly to the swami's reading of the Gita. ... Nanak, Kabir, Tukaram, Meerabai - Did'ma heard of all of them for the first time at the Mission. (*Bedanabala* 25)

It is here where Did'ma along with Kamalini have been introduced to Balaram Ray who has been a member of a zamindar family at Bhagalpur but later on turned into a swadesi and sacrificed his affluent life for the sake of nation. The life-story of the wretched girl is changed altogether when the freedom fighter gets enamoured of her ethereal beauty and expresses his heart-felt desire to her caretaker: "Balaram-babu confessed to Did'ma, from the day I set my eyes on her I've been telling myself, should I be lucky enough to marry her I will feel as though my world is finally complete" (*Bedanabala* 39). This is how Kamalini

is finally restored to the main-stream of society which has once discarded her as she is very happily married off to Balaram who has tied knots twice before.

Balaram is seen as a rescuer who performs a noble duty by checking an innocent girl to fall from grace. But the fact that he is also charmed by her physical beauty cannot be missed. It is followed by confirmation that the young lady whom he is going to marry is virgin after all. Mani who has been a close associate of Kamal confesses to Bedanabala that the couple lived happily ever after: "... Kamal and Jamai-babu... couldn't bear to be apart for even the blink of an eye. Such love, Bedana! Never seen in all my life. Never will see again" (*Bedanabala* 42). But the fact remains that the way Balaram agrees to come forward and bear the burden of salvaging a fallen woman in a way also suggests that he perhaps unconsciously subscribes to patriarchal norms that take delights in such heroics. Kamal who has previously been a prized possession of an aged prostitute has turned out to be someone who is carefully adopted by a liberal person who engages himself in instructing her how to exist with dignity in a patriarchal society: "It was at his insistence that Kamal began to learn how to sing from Promodini. ... He was fond of keertans. So Kamal took to singing keertans and bhajans" (*Bedanabala* 42). However, Kamalini also manages to learn both Bengali and English as she is very much efficient in reading literary pieces of contemporary stalwarts:

Was she possessed of any less personality? Bengali, English--- she could teach both herself. Bankimchandra, Hemchandra, Nabeen Sen, was there any other author whose works she hadn't read? She'd even read Tagore" (*Bedanabala* 42).

In this way Kamalini is made to conform to what patriarchy asks from her and she is taught all these by none other than a male member who is also a saviour at the same time.

The story of Kamalini is about the rise of a woman from the worst possible deplorable condition but she retains all her innate good qualities throughout. The conflated egotism which patriarchy likes to enjoy saves this innocent girl

from being enmeshed in the rotten atmosphere in which she has unfortunately been placed before. This becomes quite evident yet again when Mani informs: "... She is learning to embroider, she is. Such flowers she can pick out with her needle" (*Bedanabala* 43).

Mahasweta Devi somehow succeeds in unveiling the fact that a fallen woman is always in the clutches of patriarchy even after she is well esteemed in her later life. It becomes ironical when she starts to make retorts with a vengeance as she tells Mani to convey a message to Did'ma whom she does not show any respect after she carries on her enjoyable stay in the household of Balaram as the lady-in-charge of every sort. She echoes the same patriarchal idiom that is taken recourse to when it becomes necessary to keep somebody under control as she avowedly declares: "Tell her, I'm a zamindar's wife. A rich man's wife. ... Hell! I'd been in hell all this while. If I'd not stepped into this haven I'd have never known, that was hell all right" (*Bedanabala* 45-46).

Kamal takes pride in her superior position which is actually no different from the previous one. But she longs for such a blessed life and finally gets herself established in a family that gives her plenty in return. The meek and mild Kamal becomes vocal as she gains confidence in life which every woman like her always pines for. But she never realises the fact that she is entrapped there as well. It is the same age-old tale of dominating the female counterparts who are made to get moulded according to the desire of patriarchy. She is reinstated in the very place again where she has actually belonged to in the early stage of her life before being adopted by Did'ma in her prostitute quarter. This is why she is faced with no problem whatsoever to adapt herself to the new atmosphere as the narrator *Bedanabala* elaborates: "How well Bindu-mashi'd taught her everything. And how well she took to it all. And why not? Stolen from an aristocratic family, she was, after all!" (*Bedanabala* 46). Though she has been grown up in a favourable ambience under the guidance of Did'ma who never makes up her mind to reap benefit from Kamal's physical beauty by engaging her in the trade, Kamal becomes eager to snap the tie very quickly. The novelist

explains the reason behind this as she narrates that all the women who are unfortunately entangled in such condition desparately want “to be a married woman, a householder that was the ultimate in life. A position of unquestioned respect” (*Bedanabala* 49). Did'ma also acknowledges that a girl can hardly slip thorough such a situation and deplores the fact that there are very few men around who are actually willing to protect a girl in this case: “Need a sympathetic man for that. And how many of those are there, tell me?” (*Bedanabala* 49). This is precisely why Kamalini is more than pleased with her fate while she becomes a member of a large zamindar family. It has been a vast estate in which “She was ‘Boro-ma’ to all in the house, for Baba was the eldest son in the family” (*Bedanabala* 51).

But the story here gets an interesting turn as Balaram one day informs Kamalini that a couple of men will visit their household at night. She can recognise one of them who has taken shelter in Did'ma house years before. The man who has been in dire need to save his life from the English rulers happens to be a freedom fighter who is astonished to meet Kamal in Balaram's house because it seems quite impossible for him to admit the fact that he has actually married her. Here Balaram speaks out with all his heroic ideals in support of fallen women who never fall short of coming forward to help swadesis as he loudly mouths out:

We'll take refuge, seek our shelter. Accept their tender ministrations.
Gratefully use their donations to our cause. But when it suits us
we'll turn bhadralok and through this sudden windfall of
respectability, we'll ask 'you married her?' (*Bedanabala* 55).

He thus continues to speak eloquently about the moral responsibility that men has to take on their own shoulders in order to redeem destitute women who do not have any fault of their own at all. His thoughtful words move everyone around and leave Kamal dumbfounded. Though he has no evil intention in his mind while he gives vent to those lofty words but he only speaks volume about the onus of the male dominated patriarchal society to bear the burden of being

responsible. He also asserts that nationalistic movement will also turn out to be futile if men remain oblivious to this fact and do not feel the urge within. He calls into question the efficacy of any movement against English oppression if the minds of young people are still submerged in outrageous attitude towards this sect.

As a leader of armed rebellion against the English, Balaram encourages his fellow compatriots and announces: “Freedom is not far. Each one of us a soldier then. Each of you. But how can you fight when your hearts are weighed down with ancient customs? Is just the burning of foreign goods enough? And what about the superstition heaped upon your soul? Locked within you?” (*Bedanabala* 56). He also goes on to accusing them for their contempt towards Kamalini and reminds them the episode when they have been provided with shelter by Did'ma as he contends: “If they can do that, they too can pray, they too can think to themselves, ‘I did something for my country.’ They can seek solace in that thought ... think their lives worthy ...” (*Bedanabala* 56).

Kamalini along with her husband Balaram share a happy conjugal life as he always discusses every important event that occurs around them. He becomes elated when he hears that Tagore has got the Nobel Prize and immediately discusses it with her wife who also cherishes that news. With it also the miserable episode of Snehalata is also shared with Kamalini by her husband who does not hold back his emotion this time. Snehalata has been a young girl who sets herself to fire when her father becomes bankrupt to collect money for dowry. This enrages Balaram who envisages an ensuing upsurge: “It seemed she had set aflame society, too. Set ablaze many, many minds” (*Bedanabala* 65).

Balaram has taken part in the rebellion by providing refuge to the revolutionaries and handing over firearms to them. Kamalini remains profoundly disgusted with her past life but never shows any disrespect to her close associate Mani who returns to her household after the death of Did'ma. Thus the life-story of three generations comes to full circle when *Bedanabala* sums up the narration by mentioning the name of the school, ‘Alo-r Adhikar’ (The Right to Light) that

her mother Kamalini has set up for the purpose of instructing destitute children. In this way the novella comes to an end with a positive note as Bedanabala vouches that proper education only can ignite the light of hope among this sect who are abhorred and despised by others.

Mahasweta Devi delightfully portrays the deplorable class of women who are in fact helpless victims of the situation and searches for an answer to the question that she has raised at the very outset. This cannot match with the domestic activities in which Kamalini indulges herself first. But such this is the journey of the fiction itself that it also corrects itself in the process. It will not be irrelevant to quote Gayatri Spivak who in her analysis of Mahasweta Devi's short story *Breast-Giver* comments: "This is not the rhapsodic high artistic language of elite feminist literary experimentation". (*Breast Stories* 121). It is in fact no scathing attack on the part of the novelist herself as she is engrossed in divulging the poignant tale of a group of women who are more often than not the object of scorn. But Mahasweta Devi does not let this narrative remain naive as she infuses several subtle elements that are deployed in order only to problematize the narration by asking few simple questions. The way Kamalini reacts to her once much loved companion Mani about her past life that has been wasted in the household of Did'ma who has actually brought up with much care suggests that she suffers from insecurity while being settling herself very well in an affluent family. With it also it becomes very clear that she starts to despise the very people with whom she has spent much time before. The uncanny behaviour of an innocent girl does also indicate the class consciousness that is initiated within her mind after being placed in a position to enjoy an economic stability in life. When she has been very content with her superiority in a zamindar family Mani returns to her but she does not greet her with spontaneity. Thus upwardly mobile Kamalini is scared within herself as she is faced with her companion because she is somehow readily reminded of pangs she has suffered from before. The chance of probable humiliation also perhaps goads her to act in such a way. The women who indulge in flesh trade in this fiction suffer from an excruciating

sense of shame and regret as it is infiltrated within themselves by patriarchy that they are meant to be involved in this for generations. Though in this novella both Balaram and Kamalini admit that this trade is being perpetuated only by the male members of the society as they also economically exploit these marginalised women. The gendered self of the castigated women of this novella becomes a trope that stands for victimisation which is occurred by the unscrupulous supremacy being exerted over by the male chauvinist patriarchy and in this studied manner they are obliged to internalise that they are eternally positioned in the doomed state as well.

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