



Survival Tactics of the Subaltern in Mahasweta Devi's Story Fisherman

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ABSTRACT :

Mahasweta Devi, a writer with a purpose, spent her entire life for the cause of the marginalized sections of Indian society both urban and rural. She is clear and bold in her exposure of the inhumanity of the establishment towards the weak and the poor. The stories she has weaved out of life of the people living in the lap of nature make us see their pathetic conditions the mainstream society is blissfully unaware of and add to their plight with the exploitation of the natural environment in the name of progress. And any kind of protest from the inhabitants is suppressed mercilessly branding them as anti-social elements. However, Mahasweta Devi narratives being realistic, sets her characters face to face with the very crux of the situation. They make no bones in voicing their protest against the oppressors for they feel that dignity of life and safety of their green habitat can be ensured only through insurgency. In the Fisherman, Mahasweta Devi gives us an insight into the callousness of authorities who marauding as protectors of the society, indulge in all kinds of inhuman acts causing a threat to the very existence of the voiceless. The fisherman learns to pay them back in their own coin, a technique most of the victims in Mahasweta Devi's stories adopt eventually to ascertain their right to life.

Keywords: Marginalised, Establishment, Marauding, Voiceless, Victims

Mahasweta Devi's penchant for the portrayal of horrific events in West Bengal during 1960s and 1970s when the elimination of the young rebels, suspected of having an affiliation to Naxalbari movement or Left ideologies, was carried out surreptitiously by the politician-gangster-police troika, is reflected in her tersely narrated story 'Fisherman'.¹ As Sumanta Benerjee rightly observes:

The troika received a boost in the decade of the 1960s and 1970s when the ruling politicians and the administration sought the help the underworld to destroy the Naxalite movement and eliminate its peasant and student cadres who posed an armed challenge to the establishment with their programme of putting an end to feudal and capitalist oppression.²

The story, appeared in Bait (2004) along with other three stories—Knife, Body and Killers—is located in suburban underworld and deals with ruthless killings of the young activists in the name cleansing the society of its anti-socials. This theme has been tried by Mahasweta Devi in many stories but every time she presents a new perspective and shows the way to resist such inhuman killing of the boys who are “more dangerous than tigers in the forest, more deadly than snakes in their holes.”⁽⁴⁾

Jagat, the central character is a professional fisherman. But he hangs the net in his room and searches for other work. Knowing his skill of fishing and familiarity with water sources in the area, the local policeman employs him to help in recovering the dumped dead bodies from the tanks. He is offered good money. When he becomes drunk, Jagat grows mellow and feels sad about the work he does and his unemployed son Abhay. The more dead bodies of the young he drags out of the waters, the more he is worried about the boy these days. Being a rustic, he feels a close affinity to Nature. He can understand how it works to invigorate his feelings of affection.

When he was young, he learnt that love and affection flowed down, naturally, from the old to the young, from parent to child. Even if the son forgot his mother, the mother never forgot him. It is this philosophy that keeps Indian family system intact, in spite of the onslaught of Western culture. Fortunately, the family bonds in the rural and semi-urban parts of India have not degenerated as they are depicted in the mainstream fiction.

Jagat is an ordinary person with minimum needs. He lacks in pluck to face the challenges and realities of the life in modern times. Moreover, he is so innocent that he makes no attempt to think different from what he is told to believe. When he confronts with the dead bodies every other day, he looks casual and shows no qualms for the work he does.

Abhay is his dear son. Though he himself is an illiterate, he does all odd jobs and gets his son educated. This is really a privilege for son of a fisherman. Abhay becomes the cynosure of all the eyes. It also earns wrath of the local police man, for the latter's son, a failure and sells film tickets on the black market. Ironically, it is this officer who engages Jagat to do the inhuman work in the tanks.

However, Jagat and his son inhabit two different worlds. They fail to understand each other. This gap widens further when Jagat helps the Darogababu in bringing out the dead bodies from the tank for seven rupees a corpse. Abhay feels that his father is foolish but he never explains to him why says so. But he loves his father very much. When Jagat- that dark, grey-haired savage-looking man- is sober, Abhay does not talk to him for Jagat does not speak his language. It is his failure to make out the *language* – the language of a rebel in the making --the language of a modern sensitive individual who has a hidden agenda to save the innocent and the weak from the clutches of the feudal and capitalist society that spreads a sense of terror by killing the rebels.

Whenever Jagat is to recover more dead bodies, he feels frightened. He is too innocent to understand strategic killings of the young men. Bhamini, his wife, is worried about her son. Bhamini, like Sujatha of *Mother of 1084*, does not talk much, although she takes care of all his needs. “Deep in her heart is an ache, a shaft of pain. She loves her son very much, but she does not know what he is like. (8)

Abhay is a stranger to both of them. In fact, he has been an activist more than a son. He knows that his parents are worried about his future. His father's usual question "Did I do you harm by sending to school?"(8) makes Ajay feel sympathetic towards his father. He feels very happy when his father tells him that he will raise money to make him a partner in Mohan's workshop. Jagat wants to make up for his mistake by finding him a job. When father thinks that his son is hurt for not finding a suitable job in spite of searching high and low, Abhay hesitates to tell him the truth, "Baba...it's not looking for a job that ...There's something ...Baba dearest, how will you know what really hurts...?" (11)

Like every mother, Bhamini wants her son to get married and have children to bring joy to the family. But when he is spotted in the company of a girl and two boys, she feels that this stranger-son will never marry. She seems to have smelled of impending danger. And so she asks Jagat,

Can't we send him away?

Why?

Everyone's sending their young boys away, haven't you noticed?

Those're babu families, bhadraloks.(9)

Although his commitment to idealism makes him refrain from opening his heart to them, Abhay is really possessed of an intense affection for his parents. Having been unaware of his son's real activities, Jagat attributes Abhay's queer behaviour to the changing times and depression for finding no job. He goes to the Darogababu to help him find work for his son. Daroga-babu is in the know of Abhay's activities and sensed a potential threat in him. When his offer is rejected stoutly by Abhay, he warns Jagat "I'm telling you...there's much suffering in store for you. Much suffering. And all you'll do is pull corpses out of the water and sell eggs in the market.(10)

It is not an empty threat by the Daroga-babu. Like other youth of the period, Abhay is not happy with the system and his drifting towards the anti-Establishment group is evident in his frequent outbursts at his father for the latter's support to the Daroga-babu, and also in his reticence while being in the company of his dear mother. Being unsophisticated, the parents do not understand why their son is not free with them and what actually is on his mind. But his movements are very known to the police man whose job is to keep a watch on the prospective rebels, like Abhay and finish them off in the name of encounters. Besides, Daroga-babu has other reasons to hate Abhay.

Jagat's son has passed out from a technical school whereas Daroga-babu's son only sells film tickets on the black market. Hence Daroga-babu nurses a secret grudge, a rage that simmers within. Jagat is not aware of this. Jagat does not understand.(10)

Labeling the people they hate, as rebels or anti-social elements, is a strategy adopted by the Establishment to finish off them in the spurious encounters. Whereas its agents like the Daroga-babu go a step further and kill the young men to satisfy their vested interests.

Jagat, the fisherman, thinks nothing else except for his son's future. He decides to work harder to earn enough money to make his son a partner in cycle workshop. Sumanta Benerjee maintains in the translator's note:

It was a common practice with police in those days to round up young boys in cities or , and surreptitiously kill them if they were suspected of any Naxalite connections, and then dispose of their bodies in some distant place or pass off their killings as cases of unaccounted murder. In Calcutta, the blind lanes and alleys provided the police with ideal spots for dumping these bodies. In the villages, the tanks were the dumping spots.³

Unmindful of this brutality, Jagat continues his work of dragging out the bodies of the young from the tank for money. More work means more money for him. But it also means abetment of systematic silencing the voice of a whole generation of young boys smitten by the ideal of questioning the injustice meted out to the underprivileged people.

But it is money that makes Jagat dive into Raypukur by the light of the full moon. He scrupulously follows the Daroga-babu's instructions to "Come late at night, Jagat. There's work. And a lot of money"(12). He finds it unusual. "Or else why should so many people wait at the tank, even Daroga-babu? Why that black van?(12) For all his questions, he finds answers from the bottom of the tank when he takes out not one but six bodies. Jagat is shocked to hear that their killers are at large.

What he fails to understand is the police strategy of wiping out the young boys. Interestingly, he has not an iota of doubt that he himself becomes victim of Daroga-babu's wicked plans. He could not understand his warnings. When Abhay is killed, it is not Jagat who drags up his body. He never gets to know how he was killed or who killed him. But he is saved from the tragedy of dragging out the body of his own son for whose sake he has taken up the heinous work. He runs to the police station to know the facts about his son's death. But the Daroga-babu is nonchalant and professional in his behavior.

It is very typical of a police man who, imbibed the feudal laws in all its brutality, does not understand the grief of a father who has lost his only son. The plight of Jagat here recalls a similar situation in Mahasweta's short story 'Seed' where the son of the protagonist is killed by the landlord whose patch of land becomes a graveyard for the rebels. The innocent fathers, being pathetically unaware of the crooked designs of the masters, have become a party to their inhuman suppression of the rising tide of protest. In Jagat's case, it is dragging up the dead bodies from the tank, while in Dulan's, it is hiding the bodies in earth. In both the cases, the fathers are silent spectators to a systematic elimination of a whole lot of rebel sons. But they take a cue from the revolutionary spirit of their sons, though late, and resort to the same strategy as their oppressors in killing the latter, shunning their usual indifferent attitude to the happenings in their surroundings.

The fisherman avenges himself on the policeman who killed his son. The police officials call Jagat to dive in the tank to find whether Daroga-babu's corpse lies there. The junior daroga-babu warns entire Raypukur of dire consequences, if his father is found dead. Interestingly, Mahasweta does not describe how the police man is attacked or who attacks him. She just leaves it to the reader's imagination to find the real killer through suggestive language or symbolic gestures.

Jagat smiles mockingly. The enigmatic look on his face is so unsettling for the perpetrators of crime against gullible people. It displays his satisfaction in outwitting his detractors at their own game of deception. The agents of the blood-thirsty Establishment, who have deprived many parents of their innocent young boys branding them as Naxalites or insurgents, find themselves at the receiving end.

Jagat's action reciprocates the unethical methods of the feudal lords in killing their fellow beings. The fisherman in the story has stepped into his son's boots and thus marking a departure from his earlier thinking. With his violent response, he has adorned the mantle of revolution which is a characteristic trait of the rebels that Mahasweta Devi's activist work is peopled with.

NOTES :

1. Mahasweta Devi, 'Fisherman', Bait Trans. SumantaBenerjee (Seagull Books:Calcutta,2004)..All page references are to this edition.
2. Quoted in SumantaBenerjee, introduction, BaitbyMahasweta Devi (Seagull Books:Calcutta, 2004), p.xii
3. Ibid.