

Urvashi O Johnny --- An Epitome Of Urban Suffering

Dr. M.V. Ramanamoorthy.,

*Associate Professor of English, K.L.E.F Deemed to be University. A.P. Khajashanini Begum.,
Ph. D Research Scholar, K.L. University*

Abstract

Mahasweta Devi in her plays weaves a complex web of marginality, exploitation and suffering in the society 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

Keywords: *Marginalization—exploitation-- Post-colonial*

1. INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi lends voice to the voiceless by exploring several hidden types of subjugation which are prevalent in the Indian social hierarchy and highlights the urgent need to restore their legitimate rights. Mahasweta Devi creates a different kind of social ambience in her play than all other women writers. The women writers before her adopted traditional methods 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 stranglehold of zamindars, landlords and money-lenders who form a strong but invisible frame work of the feudal system. They replace the middle men who so notoriously yet unconsciously sustained and promoted the erstwhile British Raj. Authentic and life-like portrayals of characters like that of the prostitute Moti in the play *Urvashi O Johnny* (1) add a unique flavor to her plays and remind one of Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (2). Like Dickens, she displays an unusual blend of incorrigible realism and essential humanism which set her off from all her post-colonial contemporaries.

The class repression which is a constant refrain of her work like that of another modern Russian writer Dostoevsky deepens in the play *Urvashi O Johnny*. It traces the travails of Johnny the poor orphan, his flight 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 defines the chosen arena for the set themes that Mahasweta Devi chooses to give literary space to --- the intolerant attitude of the upper class, the 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 an acute and sublime 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 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 relentlessly trapped social segments and tribes of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa and their long-lasting plea for some respite – social, political or human. It is this aspect of MahaSweta's work that puts her in a different domain than the overtly extreme political movements of the times.

The KheriaSabars, Santhals, Ganjus and Mundas, the low tribes living in the above regions are the most subjugated. In particular, the Sabars were the worst affected by social stigma and exclusion which only extended from 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 more cathartic and catalytic process. We observe a similar phenomenon in the later works of the great Russian writer and political reformist like Tolstoy. In both cases, the outcome is not a result of political indoctrination but a genuine temperamental transformation.

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 ethical crusade through art and activism to enable the affected people to find a just and honourable place in India's mainstream and nationhood. The condition of the weaker sections during emergency was atrocious. They were the most vulnerable in the country's communal mosaic, facing centuries of discrimination and exploitation and even today, in spite of legislation to safeguard them in a fast-growing urbanised society, they cannot find relief from extensive prejudice, discrimination and violence. Delienating the character of Johnny, she seeks to explain how the urban conditions violated the privileges of a young individual. Mahasweta Devi considers drama a more serious instrument of expression and representation to deal with certain issues which the male 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 from a satirical point of view. Her objective is to make people realise certain harsh realities, to preserve every individual's basic right, 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 movements revolving around the question of bonded labour, continuing feudalism in rural polity, *Urvashi O Johnny* deals with the people who lack social identity as in Victorian terms and the roofless family identity. By creating this play Mahasweta Devi seems to challenge persons who, possessed with the mission for the materialistic delight have ended up, cruel and failing to perceive the ethical like Shylock. It is a satire on the disinterested, amoral academic urban setup which, particularly mindful of the explanations behind the sufferings of the underprivileged, but lack vision and only runs as one with the foundation. 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 of the poor. 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 the other 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 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 misled urban middle class readers. 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. Here she makes us face vis-a-vis the dehumanized existence of the slum-dwellers in the city of Calcutta. Most of her works reveal the fact that the more a man is oppressed; the stronger the man's spirit to survive becomes. 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.

Unlike her other plays, this play moves back to the urban society exploring the hidden realities of the life 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., particularly 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. It deals with the love affair of Johnny with Urvashi, a marionette. He is brought up in the slums and longs for happiness and flees 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 SamikBandyopadhyay, "*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 of the underprivileged. 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. 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 .

For the setting of the play, she fittingly selected the city of Calcutta one of the progressive cities of India. 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, who are engaged in the pursuit of the materialistic pleasures. 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, but choose to remain indifferent. These people with their innate apathy do not allow the innocent people to live of their own accord. Their voice 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 to provide them the much needed help. 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. Perhaps, this is the reason why Mulraj 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 emergency is not only a political gag but it extended to be a social gag and then even a personal gag. The play brings a live picture of life on the streets of Calcutta. 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 all that 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.

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.

2. REFERENCES

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