

# Apathy towards Aged Women-Socio-Political Voices in Mahasweta Devi's *Old Women*

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### Abstract

*Mahasweta Devi is a reputed Bengali writer and influential social activist. The Jnanpith awardee devotes her time studying and writing about the struggles faced by the tribal communities. Her works raised voice against the mute sufferings of the subalterns in the postcolonial milieu. One of her finest literary contributions is the collection *Old Women*- a collection of two short stories *Statue* and *The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur*. Both stories have old women as protagonists whose fate is to endure alienation and apathy. Liberation and empowerment of women remain a fairy tale even after the freedom of the country. Family and society play a pivotal role in their estrangement. A peaceful retirement in old age is still a distant dream of these characters. They are constantly muddled in poverty, indifference and ostracism. This paper tries to review the socio-political clutches which entangle women and ostracize them with an apathetic attitude.*

**Keywords:** Apathy, poverty, estrangement.

India, the country with multidimensional aspects like social, cultural, religious and linguistic elements has a rich traditional backdrop. The country is famous for practicing rituals, ethics and customs which proclaim the slogan ‘unity in diversity’. Indians proclaim their patriotism by commonly calling their country ‘Bharat Mata’ or ‘Mother India’. This attribution to feminine identity is uniquely an Indian characteristic. Designation of feminine qualities like motherhood, patience and chastity to their native land obviously reflects the reverence offered to women. Veneration of goddesses like Durga, Parvati, Savitri and Nalayini also take roots from the Indian soil. Yet paradoxically there exists only a theoretical belief of women's importance and practically the observed conditions of women are different. From the time of manusmriti even till today women undergo the pangs of dejection, apathy and oppression.

In the rural and interior villages of northern states like Bihar, Bengal and Orissa women are still not exposed to self-developmental opportunities offered by governmental or nongovernmental organizations.

Social maladies like child marriage, early widowhood and ostracism exist in such rural and tribal communities. An even worse condition is that when their physical and emotional strength is being uprooted by their own kith and kin. With blind and fanatic beliefs and actions, society holds on to its superstitions and leaves their own women in destitution.

Apathy, according to the Oxford English dictionary is a lack of interest, enthusiasm or concern. This paper tries to explicate the various inhuman ways by which destitute women are looked down with less or no concern. Destitution is a condition of poverty where one is unable to meet his/her daily needs. It is one of the central themes of *Old Women* –the collection of short stories. Its author Mahasweta Devi is one of the foremost Indian writers who sensitively sketch her characters along with their economic and cultural obstacles which are fed by a larger social superstructure. She is the recipient of Sahitya Akademi award and the Jnanpith award along with other honours. Devi is found to take the platform of literature to stage the ill fate of the tribal and downtrodden communities in the states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. She is also a penchant social activist who works for such poorly fed communities. Her works are often the candid expressions of the tyranny and brutality of the elites like landlords, money lenders and government officials.

In the two short stories *Statue* and *The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur*, the women who undergo such cruel treatment at the hands of the society are old and time worn. The central characters of the two stories are Dulali and Andi respectively who are deprived of their basic rights of life like healthy food, a hygienic shelter to rest and a peaceful household at last few years of their life. Dulali is a victim of child marriage who is married at the age of four and widowed at the age of six. Both metaphorically and literally she is obstructed by exposing herself to the colors of life. “She doesn’t recall that her name was Brajadulali and once she was as diffident and blooming as fully flowering fragrant and white Kamini tree”. (16) She is banned from her house hold stamped as a witch and an ominous presence in the Bhunya house. She is deprived of resources like food grains and clothes and lives with those little grains which she collects from her surroundings. “In fact, all her thoughts are belly-centered ...in her dream she wears a whole cloth and eats a full serving of rice in a bell-metal plate.” (16)

In India, widowhood is considered as a curse and misfortune. Native words like “Dakin”, “Husband eater” and “Randi” are used to brand such widowed

women. One of the cruel handlings of such women is the desexing process where there is a degradation of social status from ‘she’ to ‘it’. Widows forgo their colorful dresses and jewelry, follow a restrictive diet and also shave their heads. By this they allow themselves to be oppressed by the blind adherence of the stereotypical society. Often such women are considered as a social and economic burden in their society. Meera Khanna, one of the contributors of *Living Death: Trauma of widowhood in India* says that a widow is ‘uglified’ to deprive her of the core of her femininity. It is an act of symbolic castration. She is deprived of the red dot between her eyebrows that proclaim her sexual energy.

The news of installing Dindayal Thakur’s statue in Chhatim village invokes the dead memories of Dulali back to life. The natives of the village consider her as the “source of Dindayal’s martyrdom, the forced departure of the Thakur family, their feud with the Bhunya family...” (16) Dindayal was a revolutionary thinker in such a fanatic community and with the same attitude wanted to marry Dulali – a widow of the Bhunya clan. “Who says life ends at widowhood? Who says there can be no marriage between a Bhunya and a Thakur... ‘You and I’ wanted nothing more than each other. Even that this heartless society will not allow.”(18) The poor widow is well aware of the issues that they would face and half-heartedly lets him marry another girl of his family’s choice. But Dindayal stops his marriage and for this and his absconding Dulali is held responsible. Hence the state of being a widow curbs her of her rightful freedom of self-justification in a threatening situation.

At the weary age of seventy-eight, she endures psychological torment for a bunch of events that happened during her youthful days. Though she is a daughter of a royal line, the caste-duty crossfire ruined Dulali’s life. She is compared to a neglected soil. She looks cracked and dry. “Rapt in her own thoughts she returns home at evening... as if she wanders asking and asking for a bit of attention, affection, compassion, from the community. The village, too, is aging. Getting exhausted.” (59)

In the second story, *The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur*, Andi the protagonist is a poor old woman driven by many false beliefs about her own health. Even at

the exhausted old age, she strives to earn a living for her family. Despite such arduous efforts of Andi, she is not respected but scoffed by her own family members. Durga, Andi's niece, says, 'With four sons why to kill yourself slaving?' (74) On reading the story of the economic and political conditions of Mohanpur is perceived as in disorder. There is starvation, famine and despotism along with dreadful diseases. "The population of the Behula block villages is 7051. There are twenty beds at the health center hospital, on the average, there are sixty patients at any given time. It is a daily sight to see more than one patient to a bed, patients strewn on the floor".(78)

In the post independent India, there has been a sharp rise in social and spatial inequalities. Inequalities could be classified as good and bad, the good one inclined to talent and entrepreneurship. Bad inequalities occur when people are locked out of markets or from the schools, roads and other routes that restrain them from their development of livelihood. This inequality is usually based on gender, caste or ethnicity. In The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur, Hedo Naskar is the despotic landlord who curbs the rightful resources of the people of Behula village. All amenities that reach the Kanpur health center come through the consent and filtration of him.

"Naskar's land is everywhere. Others do the cropping. Although they farm the land, they are not sharecroppers. Naskar pays them according to his own convenience each year. In money and rice... Naskar is also the owner of the fisheries and the cold storage. He is the order supplier for everything at the health center. On top of it all, he is the head of the Panchayat, at the moment." (83)

Such bitter authority affects the whole Behula block and Andi is the miniature victim.

The lack of hospital facility forces the villagers to get relieved of their pain by the pseudo treatment of the quacks. Andi the pathetic old woman almost loses her sight by following such pseudo treatments. She weeps helplessly when Gobindo approaches her after getting practiced as a health care worker. Her family members who ought to have assisted her during times of need are ever ready to find fault with her. None of them accompany her to the medical centre and she walks with her grandson Nodo. The

strange euphoric state of Andi on the news of her getting admitted in the hospital reflects her tragic fate. She is contented that she is sure to be offered meals with a bed. Her entire stay in the hospital, assisted by the altruistic Gobindo is a fairy tale and her only solace irrespective of the major surgery she is to undergo during her stay.

Thus, the old women are the miniature representations of women folk of the tribal communities in north India. They are being oppressed, ostracized and mercilessly scandalized for reasons, which they are not responsible. Mahasweta Devi narrates two emotional tales where India, even after independence undergoes socio-economic oppression. Both speak of the indifference and apathy of the government and also the double oppression of women inside and outside their native communities.

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