International Journal of Business, Human and Social Sciences
ISSN: 2517-9411
Vol:9, No:2, 2015

Challenging the Stereotypes: A Critical Study of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* and *Sula*

Khushboo Gokani, Renu Josan

Abstract**—**Mahasweta Devi and Toni Morrison are the two stalwarts of the Indian English and the Afro-American literature respectively. The writings of these two novelists are authentic and powerful records of the lives of the people because much of their personal experiences have gone into the making of their works. Devi, a representative force of the Indian English literature, is also a social activist working with the tribals of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. Most of her works echo the lives and struggles of the subalterns as is evident in her "best beloved book" *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. The novelist focuses on the struggle of the tribals against the colonial and the feudal powers to create their own identity, thereby, embarking on the ideological project of 'setting the record straight'. The Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, on the other hand, brings to the fore the crucial issues of gender, race and class in many of her significant works. In one of her representative works *Sula*, the protagonist emerges as a non- conformist and directly confronts the notion of a 'good woman' nurtured by the community of the Blacks. In addition to this, the struggle of the Blacks against the White domination, also become an important theme of the text. The thrust of the paper lies in making a critical analysis of the portrayal of the heroic attempts of the subaltern protagonist and the artistic endeavor of the novelists in challenging the stereotypes.

Keywords**—**Subaltern, The Centre And The Periphery, Struggle Of The Muted Groups.

I. Introduction

GAYATRI Chakravarti Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' has created a spurt of arguments in the arena of post-modern literature; some conforming while others negating her assumptions. In the latter category, are the writers engaged in writing post-colonial literature. With the changing scenario, the colonized, once considered as the 'other', have made subsequent progress and are, therefore, challenging the dominant power structures, the so-called 'center' by creating their own texts. A common thread that unites these writers is a belief that, "What each of [their] literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characters is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial Centre [1]." It is in this context that the names of Mahasweta Devi (1926-) and Toni Morrison (1935-) emerge on the literary horizon in that they portray the conflict between the people occupying the central position and those existing at the periphery or the margins in the society.

Khushboo Gokani is a Research Scholar under the supervision of Prof. Renu Josan in the Dept. of English, DEI, Agra, India (e-mail: khushbooggokani@gmail.com)

Renu Josan is a Professor in the Dept. of English, DEI, Agra, India (e-mail: renujosan2000@yahoo.co.in)

II. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*

Mahasweta Devi believes that extraordinary history is created by ordinary men; therefore, in her writings we find common men fighting for a greater cause; a larger good, as exemplified in her novel *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. Written in the year 1980 *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is a novel, "Remarkable for the manner in which it touches on the vital issues that have in subsequent decades, grown into matters of urgent social concern. It raises questions about the place of the tribal on the map of national identity, land rights and human rights, the 'muesemization' of 'ethnic' cultures, and the justification of violent resistance as the last resort of desperate people, amongst others [2]."

Considered to be a seminal work of Mahasweta Devi, *Chotti Munda* deals with the subject close to Devi's heart-tribal mobilization and in her process of writing, she also succeeds in challenging the tribal stereotypes. The novel not only traces the journey of its central character, Chotti, from childhood to old age, who is a proud role model for the younger generations, but it also "traces the changes some forced some welcome in the daily lives of a marginalized rural community [2]."

First of all, the novel raises the issue of the malpractice of bonded labour in which the Munda tribe is entrapped. Dhani Munda, Chotti's trainer in archery tells him that the *dikus* (intruder/exploiter) confiscated the land of the Mundas and made them the labourers. Recalling his past, he narrates how one of his finest accomplices Birsa Munda, fought for the rights of his people and since then police has kept him under constant vigil. He makes his intentions clear to Chotti that he is not to be cowed down as he is also a revolutionary. Drawing the inspiration from his teacher, Chotti takes the first step towards a long battle ahead. He convinces his father that he should stop borrowing from Lala Baijnath if he wants to free himself from the drudgery of the bonded labour. Though Lala gets Chotti's father arrested for saying no to bonded labour, a fear is set in his heart regarding the skills of Chotti. Thinking Chotti's arrow to be spellbound, capable of causing harm, Lala decides to change his attitude. Eulogizing Chotti's small victory, *Pahan* (priest) says, "With no fault we stay scared nine parts of ten. Cos of you they stay one part scared of us. Even Lala's scared [2]."

The question of tribal identity is one of the recurrent issues raised by Mahasweta Devi. The novelist wants the reader to realise a two-fold threat experienced by the tribal community-

the threat to their identity as 'tribals' and secondly as the 'citizens of India.' To reinforce the seriousness of this issue, Devi highlights the act of conversion considered as a last option by the young tribals like Sukha and Bikhna who adopt Christianity as their way out of this slavish life.

In 1947, India gets her freedom and the era of reconstruction begins. The government of India is making plans for national development which also includes the tribal belts. Brick kilns are being set up, coal mining is going on at extensive rate and the government is opening up schools, but the money sent by the government for the upliftment and welfare of the triblas is siphoned off to fill the coffers of the capitalists Here, Mahasweta Devi raises a few pertinent questions. She asks, what is the need of such 'tribal welfare programs', if the tribals are not receiving any benefits? The fear of uncertainty of job and underpayment looms large over them and makes Chaggan, Chotti's accomplice cry out in anguish, "We are now the twelve-anna soldiers. We fight where're there's a job, any sort. Whatever the job, twelve annas'll not grow a rupee [2]." Devi also points out that no programmes are implemented to give impetus and boost to the preservation of tribal arts, crafts and culture and establish their identity as Mundas. Instead, they are reduced to the status of being mere farm hands and daily wage labourers as is implicit in the earnest concern of Chotti who has seen his society undergo brutal oppression and suffer obliteration of its identity, "The day is coming. Mundas will not be able to live their identity. In all national development work they will have to be one with those who, like Chagan, are the oppressed of the land, and work as field hand, as sweated workers for contractor or trader. Then there will be a shirt on his body, perhaps shoes on his feet. Then the Munda identity will live only at festivals- in social exchange [2]."

The novelist further highlights another prominent issue of vote bank politics wherein *adivasis* (tribals) are not seen as human beings with their specific identity and rights and privileges but only as countable votes necessary to gain power and authority in the respective constituencies as is clear from the words of Harbans, the owner of the brick kiln. He says, "Go ahead and forget the ceiling, carry on with bonded labour. One thing, keep the vote solid. Use money to secure vote…You want bullock- cart, I want aero plane… this is the moment [2]."

The Naxalite issue that continues to vex the government till today, receives due focus in the novel. The image of a naxal is that of a marauder, plunderer engaged in aggression and violence. But Devi counters the image by highlighting the reason for the tribals joining Naxals in that she relates an incident of the merciless killing of a young Naxal boy who had no other option left but to resort to violent means when the oppression had become intolerable and unbearable. Though Chotti does not approve of the activities of the young Naxal boys who were killing rich money lenders and landowners as a justification of what they did to them, doubts arise in the mind of Chotti when police brands the young boy a terrorist and shoots him dead. It is a very small incident but through this small event only Devi forces her reader to re-think about the "violent resistance" exhibited by these people. She leaves it to her reader to decide who is the actual culprit?

Lack of will and vested interests do not allow the laws meant for the welfare of the poor, to be implemented. Though the Ordinance of 24 Oct 1975, declares the bonded labour system illegal, but it is never implemented. An economist Amlesh Khurana who is quite hopeful regarding the implementation of the act, is perplexed and shocked to hear the Minister's remark, "The Central government understands nothing. Just passes Acts. Look, the Central government knows full well that if an Act is passed for the welfare of the *adivasis* or the untouchable, it should never be implemented. Why not? Because that will light fire. Landlords, money lenders, landed farmers are the pillars of the government. Who gives campaign funds? Who controls the vote? [2]"

Having understood the nefarious designs of the politicians and the capitalists, Khurana enlists the support of Chotti but he knows full well that the road ahead is not easy. These fears come true when Munda huts are set on fire. Despite telling the name of the culprit Romeo, case is not registered against him in the police station. Compelled by circumstances, the Mundas under the leadership of Chotti announce a one-on-one battle to maintain their dignity. As a consequence, Chotti village turns into an open battle field where, "Chotti [is] on one side, SDO, on the other, and in- between a thousand bows upraised in space. And a warning announced in many upraised hands [2]." The upraised bows are a symbol of the unity of the tribals who have resolved not to succumb but to assert their individuality. The tribals seem to 'warn' their oppressors against any such activity which might force them to resort to any destructive means.

At the end of the novel, Devi celebrates the Munda archery festival in which she shows Chotti piercing the bull's eye and afterwards handing over his 'magical' arrow to his son Harmu saying, "I had but one arrer,[2]" Explaining the significance of this arrow which Chotti hands over to his son, Mahasweta Devi says, "… I wanted to say that there had to be a magic arrow, not magic in the narrow sense… this arrow is a symbol for the person who will carry on that continuity [2]." The continuity that the writer is talking about is the continuity of efforts. She wants every Munda to contribute to the betterment of the community so that the efforts of the legends like Birsa Munda, Dhani Munda, Chotti Munda and others should not go waste. After Chotti has handed over the legacy to his son, Devi describes his state of mind in these memorable words, "Then he waits, unarmed. As he waits he mingles with all time and becomes river, folklore, eternal. What only human can be. Brings all *adivasi* struggle into the present, today into the united struggle of the *adivasi* and the outcaste [2]."

Devi succeeds in breaking the stereotypical image of the tribals being uncultured, barbarous and vagabonds by projecting an unbiased picture of the struggle of a subaltern hero, Chotti Munda and his community which nurtures the higher values of humanity negated by the people in power for their vested interests. One can decipher in Chotti's struggle the valiant attempt of a subaltern hero in challenging the traditional norms of the society, which does not enlist the

contribution of these tribals.

III. Sula

Like Mahasweta Devi is a pillar of Indian English literature, the Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison is a stalwart of the Afro-American literature. For over twenty five years, Morrison has created characters who struggle to break free from the shackles of slavery, racism and sexism. In an attempt to define their lives, some characters boldly challenge the rule book of the society while others choose to remain conformists, as is evident in her second novel *Sula*. According to the author *Sula* is a novel about black women's friendship, namely Sula and Nel, this is not all the book has to offer. It deals with "female psychological development that defies traditional male-centered interpretation of female development and calls out for an expression of the women centered paradigm [3]." Racism just like sexism is also one of the prominent issues that the novel focuses.

In the creation of her female protagonist Sula, Morrison experiments with anti-conventionalism. In an interview Morrison explains how the character of Sula came into being. She says, "Sula was hard, for me, very difficult to make up that kind of character [4]… she does not believe in any of those [community] laws and breaks them all [4]." Thus, it is clear that Morrison aimed at creating such a character who is a non-conformist and is capable of charting her own course of life.

The first incident that speaks about Sula's courageous and Nel's submissive character is when Sula decides to confront the four Irish boys who often follow the two friends from and try to harass them. The girls usually avoid the path because of the boys though it is the shortest path to their way back home. One day, however, Sula persuades Nel to take the same path. When the boys begin to follow them, Sula takes out a knife and chops off her finger tip. In an assertive tone she tells the boys, '"If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you? [5]"' The boys were scared and therefore, immediately cleared the path for the girls. Sula's act of self-mutilation clearly reflects that it needs courage on the part of an individual to directly confront the oppressive social forces. Moreover, Sula also seem to challenge the norm that since Sula and Nel, "were neither White nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them [5]."

Sula serves as a foil to Nel in that she is shown to be more revolutionary and assertive as compared to Nel. Sula opts for education and adventure and leaves the town, while Nel chooses the conventional path of a housewife. Nel's choice of this conventional mode of living is in consonance with her mother Helen's views who sees wedding as "the culmination of all that she had been, thought or done in this world [5]." These words testify the way Nel later perceives her marriage with Jude, "…greater than her friendship [for Sula] was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly [5]." Like Dickinson and Rich, Morrison also equates marriage with the death of the female self and imagination. The novelist tells the reader that after marriage Nel freezes into her wifely role, becoming one of the woman who had "folded themselves into starched coffins [5]." Nel's definition of the self becomes based on the community's 'absolute' moral categories about 'good' and 'bad' women that result in her separation and alienation from Sula.

Though Nel submissively accepts the ways of the community, she also shows signs of individualism and assertion, when on being humiliated by the conductor for entering the compartment meant for the Whites, she retorts confidently against the racist remarks. She says, "'I' me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me. [5]"' Unlike the mother who chides her for dark complexion, flat broad nose and curly hair, she refuses to internalize her subordinate status in the White world.

Many readers as well as critics believe that the views of Sula's mother, Hannah, and her statement directed to Sula that she likes her daughter but *not* loves her, makes her the iconoclast that she becomes. In addition to this, the community, like shaping many other black fictional characters, also plays a significant role in shaping Sula's personality When Sula returns after ten years; she incites hatred among the Black people of the Bottom as she continues in her wayward manner. The reason Morrison offers for Sula's numerous sexual encounters making up for her supposed wickedness is, "In a way, her strangeness, her naiveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an ideal imagination. Had she paints or clay, or knew the discipline of dance, or strings, had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have changed the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no form, she became dangerous [5]." The repeated reference to Sula's sexual relationships maligns her image in the eyes of the readers and simultaneously they also start believing that she is indeed evil. But after she meets Ajax and starts loving him, Sula gradually learns, "marriage, faithfulness, fidelity; the beloved belongs to one person and cannot be shared with other people-that's a community value [4]…" But Ajax, perceives commitment as a threat to his freedom and therefore, leaves Sula. Thus, the reader is forced to reevaluate his/her opinion about Sula being an immoral character. Morrison, thus, brings to the fore the difficulty faced by a woman in a patriarchal society which only questions a woman's morality and turns a blind eye to the immoral acts of a man. Contrary to the depiction of Black female characters "guiltless victims of brutal White men, yearning for a respectable life of middle-class security; whores driven to their work for lazy White women, Sula represents a fierceness bordering on the demonic [6]."

This tenacity of purpose and the will to carve a niche for oneself makes Eva, Sula's grandmother, chart out her own course when forsaken by her husband with no money. Though Eva loses a leg, she derives satisfaction from the fact that she is financially independent and succeeds in challenging the exploitative norms.

Racism is one of the prominent issues that surface in *Sula* and is evident in the frustration of the Blacks who were intentionally not given the work in the construction of the

New Road. In another project of tunnel construction, Blacks again face exclusion and in the moment of despair and rage they resolve to demolish the tunnel. Morrison records their disturbed mental state in the following words, "They didn't want to go in, to actually go down in the lip of the tunnel, but in their need to kill it all, to wipe from the face of the earth of the work of the thin-armed Virginia boys, the bull-necked Greeks and the knife faced men who waved the leaf-dead promise, they went too deep, too far [5]…" Morrison, like Devi, wants the readers to decide whether the 'violent resistance' exhibited by the residents of the Bottom is justified or not.

The writer further highlights the ill effects of racism in connection with the employment of the Blacks as soldiers in the American armed forces and their chances of being employed in other sectors. *Sula* takes the backdrop of World War I where even the Black soldiers were serving the nation like the Whites. In the city, however, they were denied the position of a respectable civilian as they were forced to travel by the vehicles meant for the 'coloured people'. The self-annihilation of the shell-shocked soldiers, Shadrack and Sula's uncle Plum, reveals the trauma the black soldiers had undergone during the War which had pushed them to the margins of life.

According to the author, the impact of racism is as severe on an individual as it is on the community. Morrison clarifies that Jude wanted to marry Nel to erase the scar of failure etched on his psyche by the White employers as they consider him unfit for the job on the construction site. Jude, who is dejected and broken, does not marry Nel out of compassion and love. He perceives marriage as a means to exert his masculinity and to make up for the failure he received at the hands of the White masters. The novelist writes, "He needed some of his appetites filled, some postures of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care his hurt, to care very deeply [5]."

All the issues that the novelist raises indicate that the Afro-Americans acquired a marginalized status in the White society and the lives of the Black women was marked by greater difficulties as they were the victims of race as well as gender. However, a few characters try to fight against the oppressive forces in order to write a better tomorrow for themselves. It is true that all the characters do not attain the desired graph of success but in their own way they try to break free from the shackles of colour and assert themselves.

IV. Conclusion

Despite the overall atmosphere of despair and gloom in both the novels, the focus of Devi as well as Morrison is more on the struggle of their characters to maintain their dignity in the face of severe odds posed. The authors present subaltern characters who though pulled by conflicting forces of feudalism, capitalism, racism and sexism, do not become stereotypical victims subjugated by the powerful forces. They instead 'challenge the stereotypes' to assert their individuality. It is the spirit to be vocal about oneself that gains supremacy in both the works which may be illustrated in the following famous couplet by AzeemDehlvi

It is only a rider who falls in the battlefield/
Not a toddler on all fours
Girtehain shah sawar hi maidanein jung mein
Who tifal kya gire jo ghutnon ke bal chale.[7]

References

[1] B. Ashcroft, & G. Groffiths, & H. Tiffin, (Ed.) *The Empire Writes Back*. 2th ed.. London: Routledge, 2002. pp.2.
[2] M. Devi, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. G. ChakravartiSpivak (Trans.), Calcutta: Seagull, 2002. pp. cover page, pp. ibid, pp. 39, pp. 149, pp. 139, pp. 181-182, pp. 364, pp. 363, pp. xi, pp. 363.
[3] D. L. Middleton (Ed.), *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, New York: Psychology Press, 2000. pp. 62.
[4] D. T. Guthrie (Ed.), *Conversation with Toni Morrison*, USA: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. pp.12, pp.14, pp. 15
[5] T. Morrison, *Sula*. London: Vintage Books. 1998. pp. 54-55, pp. 52, pp. 79, pp. 84, pp. 122, pp.28, pp. 121, pp. 161-162, pp. 82.
[6] H. L. Gates Jr., & K.A. Appiah (Ed.), *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, New York: Amistad Press, 1993. pp. 9.
[7] H. Rehman, *Borders to Boardroom: A Memoir*, New Delhi: Roli Books, 2014. pp. Foreword.