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Policies of Survival: Where Happiness Epitomises Freedom: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Urvashi O Johnny*

*–Goutam Karmakar**

Abstract

The post-independent era of Indian English literature witnesses the emergence of feminine sensibility, and women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, Gauri Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Eunice De Souza, Sujata Bhatt, Shobha De, Mahasweta Devi and many others try their best for the literary emancipation of not only women but also the marginalized and exploited sections of the society. Among these writers, Mahasweta Devi is one such who recreates a span of history which contains the mechanics of exploitation, depressed communities of India, politico-economical policies of the upper class and social evils and maladies, and for showing all these, she falls in the category of those writers writing in their native languages whose writings are translated regularly into English. An essentially human vision rooted in her imparts a grand encroachment on the contemporary literary scenario. She sings for those whose songs of suffering, prayer, despair, protest and disillusionment are unheard. In her works she tries to give voice to the voiceless and shows the ways to survive and protest. Her *Urvashi O Johnny* is one such play that deals with survival policies through the character of non-living Urvashi and her owner Johnny, a ventriloquist. The play is written at the time of emergency and in this circumstance Johnny's death because of his throat cancer shows how the democratic rights have been suppressed under establishment. But Johnny attempts to find his own petty way out to survive and for him survival means to stay happy. This paper makes an attempt to show how people, like Johnny, try to survive by searching happiness which symbolises his freedom - freedom from all kinds of oppression in dehumanised human condition.

Keywords: Happiness, Freedom, Survival, Marginalized, Ventriloquism.

* *PhD Research Scholar in English, Department of Humanities and Social Science, National Institute of Technology Durgapur, West Bengal - 713209, INDIA.*
Email: goutamkrmkr@gmail.com

Introduction

> My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness, a curtain that separates the main stream society from poor and the deprived. But then why my India alone?, as the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our own true faces in the process. (Devi 12)

The year 1956 is considered as a turning point in the life of Mahasweta Devi for in that year she had visited an impoverished district Palamu (also used as Palamau) located in Bihar, now in Jharkhand State. There, she had witnessed debt bondage, a despoiled environment, exploitation of poor and lower caste people and state neglect. These savage impacts on indigenous society had been observed by Devi in other tribal districts of India. She was not fully aware of the condition of tribal people before her visit to Palamu and that visit left a deep impact on her mind and her works began to reflect the exploited, downtrodden and marginalized people. She has given through the whole bulk of her creative writings a kind of service to those sections. She wanted to release human souls from sufferings, oppressions and exploitations. Even the commonest human beings like beggars are given huge importance in her works. She had realised that beggars are alone, isolated from the main stream, for the rest consider them as burden of the society. *Urvashi O Johnny* is one such play in which she not only portrays the pathetic existence of rootless and roofless people but also protests against the urbanities and this protest has been shown through Johnny's search for freedom and happiness for not only of himself but also for his own people. Johnny believes that every individual has the right to live freely and enjoy the happiness and should help "educate humanity to recognise the fundamental principles of human living and exercise vigilance in regard to the real enemies of freedom and socialism" (qtd. in Sharma 102).

Seeing the veracities of the life lived on the streets of Calcutta she makes an attempt to link the dehumanized existence of slum dwellers in Calcutta. She begins her anti-establishment movements and tries to justify violence where the system fails to do any kind of justice. She takes Bengal as her ground, for she has realised that: "For a long time, Bengali literature has indulged in a denial of reality and has been plagued by an atrophy of conscience. The writers refuse to see the writing on the wall. The conscientious reader is turning away from them in revulsion. What can be more surprising than the writers living in a country bedevilled with so many problems...should fail to find material for their work in their own country and people?" (Spivak 7) This realization compels her to create Johnny by whom she speaks. Johnny commits his life in search of freedom. In spite of knowing his lower status and insecurity he fights to not only to survive but also to make his people realise that: "Happiness is the greatest jewel one can find in life. I'd have Kohinoors for every of them" (*UJ* 87-88).

Her *Urvashi O Johnny* is a satire on the urban people who are educated. They know about the plights of the poor and underprivileged but never take any initiative to give them a new hope and identity. The play, which is a short story at first, was

written in the back drop of emergency and the author tried to show the pathetic and helpless condition of people, for the emergency has plunged them into such a condition. Samik Bandyopadhyay, the translator of her five plays into English states regarding this play: "*Urvashi O Johnny* was written during the emergency which is its real setting. Literature should be studied in its historical setting. One fails to evaluate a writer if the writer's setting in time and history is not taken into account" (xvi). The play gets a universal appeal for here she realistically presents the poor's never ending shock, pain, torments and sufferings as seen in Calcutta, the so called developed city and the capital of West Bengal. Being a satire on the pseudo-intelligentsia, the play focuses on self-realization, for it is considered as an individual's extreme need to attain happiness which leads to freedom. The play also projects Mahashweta's passion and commitment for those unheeded sections, for she wrote to show Man's inhumanity to man and she shows this through her protagonist of the play named Johnny. With his ventriloquism and its tricks Johnny wants to give happiness to everyone including the marginalized sections. Being the mouthpiece of the playwright, he merges with the suffering masses. With an unbendable faith in the human dignity Johnny tries his best to overcome the situation in which he is ensnared. To catch the birds of happiness he runs away from the orphanage for the very notion of freedom that becomes his obsession. He says: "Yes, yes, I ran away from your orphanage (crying) to have a look at the world. Was that a mistake?...Dalip...I ran off your hands...to run after birds of happiness" (90).

Ventriloquism becomes his most cherished profession and his talking doll Urvashi becomes his companion. His conversation with the doctor illustrates this in a more vivid way: "JOHNNY. You know quite well, Doctor, the show can't go on without Urvashi. She'll sing, she'll talk, and she'll laugh. And the public'll ask, so, how are you, Urvashi? And she'll reply. In great happiness...I'm the queen of Happiness. Johnny's kept me in great happiness" (72-73). When the doctor tells Johnny that he has throat cancer and he will not be able to speak if he continues his profession then Johnny requests the doctor to give him medicines and injections for if he becomes dumb then Urvashi will be of no use. He cries and says: "Take pity on me, Doctor. I'll starve if Urvashi doesn't sing or laugh anymore" (73). Here the playwright presents an affair between a man and his doll. Bandyopadhyay rightly says in this connection:

> In the animate-inanimate affair Mahasweta Devi sees desperation, a life-and-death involvement that demands from the man a commitment more than human, and a commitment that eventually proves to be fatal. (xvii)

In this play the playwright leaves no difference between herself and Johnny and so creator and character both are merged together keeping the dehumanised marginalised section at the centre. Here also she shows how she is charged for being stereotyped in terms of content but she dismisses this charge by saying that she lives for the sake of others and for giving the people who stand below the poverty level a perpetual place and firm identity. She says:

> I am often asked how long am I to bore my readers with the same themes? My answer is, as long as hunger, poverty, naked exploitation by the rich and

> the landed, oppression by the government machineries continue, I will continue to write the same things. (Foreword, Rakasi Kora)

And in this play she shows this theme along with Johnny's lifelong search for happiness. He becomes the mouthpiece of Devi and brings out the naked facts of our existence. She provides her audience Johnny, an orphan who wants to live a happy life unlike many other orphans. His job of ventriloquism becomes his source of happiness, a medium through which he expresses himself along with earning money. The play opens with Johnny's words where he is seen addressing his audiences in English:

> JOHNNY. Sirs and Madams...Johnny pays salaam to you. This is Johnny...
> my shoes are from the sidewalk,
> my pantaloons from the sidewalk,
> my vest and hankies stolen,
> my cap I made myself!
> *(in prose)* But who am I? *(Goes closer to Urvashi.)*
>
> URVASHI.*(in a long drawl)*. My slave.
> JOHNNY. *(runs up downstage)*. Yes sir. I am her slave, have been a slave for ages- her slave. Haven't you ever seen the play of Urvashi and Johnny? (71-72)

With this very opening scene the playwright gives an overall description of orphan beggars like Johnny who are treated as trash in the streets of Calcutta. Johnny, unlike others, has a soul which can estimate the unethical social values and thus tries his best to stop all those external forces that can curtail his liberty. Johnny is so desperate to gain happiness and freedom that he rejects the love of a one-eyed whole, Moti. She also shows the deplorable conditions of the poor where humanized and filthy professions become source of income. One can easily predicament the plight of the poor people and their desire to attain complete freedom when Moti says: "Aunt once asked Johnny to marry me. *(She shakes her head sadly)* He wouldn't hear of it. The two of them ran away. *(To Urvashi)* They travelled through so many lands before they reached Bombay where they bought you off Hamid. And ever since he's been your slave, eventually I became a whore, then I became old, now I'm slum owner" (85). So this is the condition of a major part of Calcutta populace. Slum dwellers are referred as bedbugs by the elite class who can't survive without the help of this class and unfortunately not such steps have been taken to give this downtrodden class the equal rights and opportunity. Jai Sen rightly comments on this: "they are not only exploited but their lifestyles and livelihood are often made illegal, and then even the illegality is exploited" (Sen 594). People like Johnny and Moti are treated as dogs that do not get even a small amount of food to eat. Devi in this play has successfully presented the true picture of slum dwellers and here Johnny's childhood companion Ramana serves Devi's purpose by saying:

> No, tonight the lame one's gang will fight with Magandas's gang for their rights over the little heap. These are bad days, Johnny. When you see the beggars betraying their faith, that's a sign that the times have come to a monstrous state. The city belongs to the beggars. It's all been divided up. The

> lame one will pick up all the litter in the heap on the right, and Magandas has the right to the heap on the left. But trust Magandas the bastard, he sneaks into the lame one's territory every day. He hasn't had a taste of the lame one's guts. Tonight the lame one will fight for the rights. (77)

So these lines clearly show how the roofless and rootless people stay in Calcutta whose soul has been lost. The rich becomes indifferent towards the poor and they look like the lifeless buildings. Calcutta, the capital city, represents the consciousness of Bengalis' which includes social and political awareness, spiritual and cultural ethos and apathy along with revolutionary movements, and Devi emerges as a reformer in this era. As the play advances the audiences come to know the naked truth of some section in the urban world. In the words of Johnny:

> I went to conquer happiness. Everyone seeks happiness. Even when they can't afford to go to the movies, they watch the queue at the counter, and draw happiness from the sight. Before a sweetmeats shop, beggars lick the thrown-away clay cups, and find happiness. Beggars maimed in their arms and legs roll along in the hot pitch begging for their masters and moneylenders, and find happiness in watching smart things. I showed the play of Johnny and Urvashi. (88)

Johnny gives his best for the betterment of the oppressed and suffering masses inspite of his own insecurity. He is against the establishment of accepted norms and codes and during his journey he has tried to enlighten the poor and struggling classes who are disillusioned. He rises against those who deprive the lowest sections for their own benefits and makes the poor aware about their freedom by installing in them the spirit for revolution for he realises it in a time of the emergency. What Aung San SuuKyi says regarding this must be worth mentioning:

> The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit, born of an intellectual conviction of the need for change in those mental attitudes and values which shape the course of a nation's development. A revolution which aims merely at changing official policies and institutions with a view to an improvement in material conditions has little chance of genuine success. Without a revolution of the spirit of the forces which produced the inequities of the old order would continue to be operative, posing a constant threat to the process of reform and regeneration. (11)

Ventriloquism for Johnny is a medium to attain personal and social liberty. It gives him the revolutionary spirit to reform and regenerate but unfortunately fails to give daily bread and here lies the irony. At this very moment, he tries to find shelter in Urvashi on whom Devi has bestowed human qualities and till the very end the audience is not informed that Urvashi is a marionette. Urvashi, for him, is not merely a medium of romantic freedom but also a deceiving reality to stay forever in happiness. And through this affair he makes an attempt to save himself and others like him from being fallen into a state of alienation, grief and helplessness. Urvashi with her fixed smile represents those who have to put on a cloak of happiness inspite of the torture they endure and

Johnny gives voice to Urvashi only to transform her fixed smile into a real laughter. Johnny's conversation with Ramanna illustrates all these:

> RAMANNA. Give up Urvashi, pal
> JOHNNY. Why do you say that?
> RAMANNA. She'll finish you off.
>
> JOHNNY. I know it, Ramanna, I know it all. Urvashi my beloved,...If I see her no more, it'll be death for me...Is there anybody that'll live forever? You tell me! You know how beautiful life is, every one yearns for happiness, they all ask her: how're you, Urvashi? She says: in great happiness. The public asks her: how are we? She says: in great happiness. (78)

Devi's *Urvashi O Johnny* is a documentary on the lives, joys and sorrows of beggars living in Calcutta and this play reminds the readers Tagore's *The Red Oleanders.* Through one-eyed Moti, Devi shows the poverty-stricken slum life as seen in Calcutta. Even the stage direction and the setting focus on this and one such setting on Moti shows: "she sits downstage dozing and singing. A part of the stage remains almost dark, with Urvashi, half reclining, indistinctly seen against the wings in the darkness. A dim, reddish light on Moti" (2008: 84). But in this same scenario Johnny searches happiness and freedom for others for he bears the responsibility to give joys to the others who have tasted the sorrow continuously. And that is why when Moti says that she doesn't know any songs of joy, Johnny replies: "Go ahead, take me to task, lash at me, I can take all that, but I shake with fear when you talk of your sorrow" (84-85). Moti always wants love from Johnny but fails to get that and when she asks Jonny whether he has wished to accept her love, Johnny replies that his concern is her happiness: "You, citizens of the sidewalk, you need happiness most. I'm Johnny. I'm here to seek out for you, from all over the world, the birds of happiness" (86). In the same way Moti wants to give happiness to Johnny. She blames Urvashi for not caring Johnny and in that same speech she also presents the plight of the slum dwellers:

> (Addressing Urvashi) You witch! You won't look after him; you won't leave him to me. If you gave him to me, I'd treasure him. (Swats a mosquito on her leg) And these mosquitoes! You can't escape them, with twelve families clustering in the slum, with a single bathroom! They let their children shit right at the doorsteps. A real hell, what a hell! (84-85)

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 fees 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 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 but also the disease of every independent nation at the time of Emergency. This cancer snatches way the freedom to speak and rights of happiness of the people. Johnny has a wish to make people articulate in 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. He lends his voice to Urvashi. Samik Bandyopadhyay comments here:

> Urvashi O Johnny...finds in cancer of the throat a metaphor...It is not a metaphor that will bear a crude, literal parallelization but it has a destiny that grows from the ventriloquist's artist image and his dream of catching the bird of happiness. (xvii)

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 rendering. Devi shows that it's our duty to make those happy who give their best for others' happiness and the doll cries out:

> I'm not well, my dear public. I've cancer in my throat, my voice goes mute. There's cancer there- I'll never laugh again, never sing again, never talk again-the Urvashi who'd catch the birds of happiness and bring them to you is not in happiness anymore...How can you remain well any longer? (After a pause one word at a time) My voice, Has, Been, Taken, Away, For, Ever, All, Yours, Happiness. (94)

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 humorously:

> It'll all be free service when Johnny's dead and Urvashi's dead. Everything for free. It's Laila-Majnu passing away, it's Heer-Ranjha giving up the ghost, it's Shireen-Farhad popping off. Who'll ask for money? Once we are dead, there'll be no one left to raise laughs, to sing. We'll carry away with us all the laughter, all the singing all the love-making of the city, all of that! (Puts on his mask and bows ceremoniously) Yes, Masters! (80)

In *Urvashi O Johnny*, 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 the stage to give those people a ray of hope to attain happiness and freedom. In the last scene when Johnny becomes mute the audiences begin to open their mouth, raise their voice, utter a protest in a positive way, and start to make questions and these all what 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 has a fear also that after his death perhaps he will be forgotten by his people:

> It'll be all free service when Johnny's dead and Urvashi's dead. Everything for free. It's Laila-Majnu passing away, it's Heer-Ranjha giving up the ghost, it's Shireen-Farhad popping off. Who'll ask for money? Once we are dead, there'll be no one left to raise laughs, to sing. We'll carry away with us all laughter, all the singing, all the love-making of the city, all of that! (80)

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 the stage and that's what the dramatist tries to show. Not any fatal disease can take the freedom and happiness from anyone if he has the power tom confront it and Johnny does exactly this. The show will continue 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)

Conclusion

Throughout her career Mahasweta Devi serves for the common people who are marginalized, oppressed and exploited. She wants to free them from all kinds of subjugation and bondage. She wants to make people realise their fundamental rights and when the nation carries its democratic freedom then people living here must have their freedom. Self-realisation is very much needed to attain happiness and freedom and in *Urvashi O Johnny*, Johnny tries his best to attain this happiness not only for himself but also for his people. Like Brati of *Mother of 1084* and Paatan of *Aajir*, Johnny is found himself in an adverse situation. But he sacrifices his life to get happiness in which lies his long cherished freedom. He tries to make people happy with his tricks of ventriloquism. His struggle to survive represents the resistance of the suffering humanity and his death comes as a blessing to them. In order to survive, Johnny's motto in life is to fight to attain happiness, to seek freedom for all and to strive relentlessly. Cancer can't deter his will power and spirit for he embodies the very idea of Mahasweta Devi. For seeking happiness and freedom Johnny is ready to take new plans, ventures and ideas and the discussion can be summed up with what G. N. Devy opines regarding Mahasweta Devi whose very presence is represented by Johnny in this play:

> Mahasweta Devi brought to these poor and harassed people a boundless compassion which they instantly understood though they could neither speak her language nor she theirs. She has a strange ability to communicate with the silenced, her best speech reserved for those to whom no one has spoken. (76)

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