

Debunking Patriarchy: Gender Ideology in Select Fiction of Mahasweta Devi and PunyakanteWijenaik

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi and PunyakanteWijenaik, who articulate the anxieties and anguishes of the voiceless and marginalised, offer in their works a space to represent them. They expose and denounce notions of male superiority, the institution of marriage that is responsible for female subservience, domestic violence and gendered homelessness, all of which serve to tyrannise and victimise women. This paper attempts an analysis of select works of Mahasweta Devi and PunyakanteWijenaik where certain notions of womanhood, marriage and widowhood within the patriarchal social order are interrogated and contested.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, PunyakanteWijenaik, patriarchal ideology, widowhood, marital discord, gender discrimination

MahaswetaDevi, fiction writer, diplomat, socio-political activist, and winner of numerous honours and awards including Jnanpith Award, Sahitya Akademi Award, and Ramon Magsaysay Award, has authored more than one hundred novels and over twenty collections of short stories, known for the biting indictment of social inequalities, primarily written in Bengali and often translated into other languages. As a journalist and creative writer who spent several years studying oppressed tribal communities, their customs and traditions, their folksongs and myths, Devi affirms that her stories are the stories of the people of her country and not her creations. She is a writer who brings challenging stories of the unheard groups into her fictional world. Her celebrated story “Breast Giver” represents a feminist literary appropriation:

The text portrays Jashoda as a strong, empowered woman who has overcome obstacles and oppression in her life to do something important for others as well as her own family...Being a woman in a patriarchal society can present challenges, but Jashoda takes them in stride and makes something of herself without being dependent on men or others to provide for her. (cited in Devika 8)

Punyakante Wijenaike, a Sri Lankan writer who began writing fiction in the early 1960s and has published eleven novels and several volumes of short stories is, perhaps, “one of the most underestimated fiction writers currently at work in the English language” (Niven 58). In her writing is found some of the “most powerful registers of the relationship between identity and place, belonging and homelessness in Sri Lankan Literature in English” (56). With regard to the themes in Wijenaike’s writing, Harishchandra writes:

The plight of the woman within the institution of marriage is a feature Wijenaike focuses on. In this writer’s fiction, marriage often poses a barrier to the development of a woman’s individuality. The status of the married woman, the dowry system, the emphasis on virginity before marriage and fertility afterwards, and domestic violence within the marital institution, are some of the themes she explores. (101)

Both Mahasweta Devi and PunyakanteWijenaike, straddling many roles as feminists, realists and humanists, have always lent a voice to the voiceless and the marginalised, and a space to represent them, in their fictional works. They have exposed the gender bigotry, class discrimination and caste hierarchy that lie entrenched in the hegemonic structures of their respective societies and the debilitating effect of these on the underprivileged lot, particularly women. They denounce notions of male superiority, the institution of marriage that is responsible for female subservience, domestic violence, gendered homelessness, all of which serve to tyrannise and victimise women. This paper attempts an analysis of Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast Stories*, *Old Women* and *Mother of 1084* and Punyakante Wijenaike’s *The Waiting Earth*, *Amulet* and *Coming to Terms* to interrogate patriarchy and contest certain notions of womanhood, marriage and widowhood within the patriarchal social order.

Devi delineates the three-pronged oppression of downtrodden women - firstly due to patriarchy, secondly due to poverty, illiteracy, lack of awareness etc., and thirdly, due to ostracism from their own community. Nandini Sen notes that several women characters portrayed by Devi belong to the oppressed sections of the society who are forced to fight for their basic sustenance. Caught in the grim battle of class, caste and poverty, her women protagonists chart out their own paths of self-realization. More often than not, the attempt is not merely limited to debunking patriarchy, but redefining the women’s role in the severest of adverse situations (15). As Sadhana Sharma writes, “She [Devi] “penned [her] stories to render and reveal to our [readers] gaze the charade and duplicity of the democratic set-up in [...] [a] country and to give a picture of the fates of the marginalized women

experiencing and undergoing untold miseries within and without their own communities” (454). Debasish Chattopadhyay affirms that, in her stories,

... Devi actually envisages a three-tier hierarchical structure in the Indian social order composed of the rungs of the non-marginalized or the mainstream, the marginalized or the subordinated, and finally the outcast or the marginalized by the marginalized. It is Devi’s intention to excavate and exhibit the gendered causes lying underneath the socio-political and economic exploitation of these women belonging to a backward minority. The writer reveals the virtual slave trade that festers under the facade of the democratic society of India, and clearly indicates the plight of these women . . . women who are regarded as sub-human and treated as commodities both without and within their own communities. (105)

Wijenaike’s novels too depict the traditional Sri Lankan women of the 1960s subjected to oppression caused by familial and social issues such as poverty, dowry system, denial of education, sexual exploitation, alcoholism and extramarital affairs of the husband leading to marital discord, and so on. Her novels reflect the bitter truth that, in tandem with their victimization and subjugation in the hands of patriarchs, their situation is made worse by class oppression steered by the matriarchs of the family.

In a scenario where women are financially helpless and reliant on their male partners, survival of women as widows or spinsters poses a challenge and contributes to the oppression of women. In the traditional, patriarchal custom-bound Indian society, the death of the husband forewarns his widow not only of personal grief, but also of an unaccustomed life, loaded with extraordinary hardship, poverty, insecurity, powerlessness and abuse. Corbacho and Barrera declare that widows in India become “de-sexed” creatures when they lose their husbands and go from being called “she” to “it” (1). As Uma Chakravarti asserts in her article “Gender, Caste and Labour: Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood,”

The widow’s social death stems from her alienation from reproduction and sexuality, following the loss of her husband and her exclusion from the functioning social unit of the family. Once a woman ceases to be wife (especially a childless wife) she ceases to be a person – she is neither daughter nor daughter-in-law. (2248)

Dipti Sahoo in “An Analysis of Widowhood in India: A Global Perspective” discusses the branding of widows as “husband eaters,” which stems from the victimized status of widowhood in Indian perception (45). According to Mohini Giri, widowed women, whether young or old, leave behind their “ornamental chain given during the marriage ceremonies (that proclaims her status as a wife), bangles, flowers, the *sindoor*, (the

vermilion mark on the forehead), turmeric etc. The dress code aims to ‘desex’ the widow and the final humiliation is the tonsure of her head” (26). “She was ‘uglified’ to deprive her of the core of her femininity” (36-37).

In India, a country with strict gender norms and traditional kinship systems, widowhood is a dreaded phase of life for women. It is a very tenuous period of life, constrained by utter poverty, lack of social support, inability to remarry and with greater risk of mortality due to sexual abuse. Mahasweta Devi, in “The Old Woman,” portrays the misfortune of early widowhood that befalls Dulali, who is married at the age of four only to become a widow at six. She dwells on the social norms of widowhood that fence Dulali from the joys of life and stand in the way of even simple amusements. Dulali cannot revel in the wedding celebrations of her friend Kusum. Her aunt’s deceitfully gentle advice is aimed at putting her in place: “You’re not to see a wedding, dear, you’re not to join in the wife-rites” (*Old Women* 30).

In *Outcast*, a collection of short stories, Devi exposes the societal norms which drive widows into demanding and demeaning circumstances through the portrayal of two widows – Dhouli and Chinta – who find themselves in an economically vulnerable state and entangled in rigid societal norms. She observes, “Widows are often evicted from their homes and physically abused – some even killed – even by members of their own family. In many countries, a woman’s social status is inextricably linked to her husband’s, so that when her husband dies, a woman no longer has a place in society” (*Outcast* 45). In “Dhouli,” Devi illustrates the mournful plight of young widows who are aggrieved more by their insecurity than by their bereavement. It is a common belief that a married girl is a property of the husband’s family, which give them the authority to decide the girl’s fate. Most widows are married off to their brothers-in-law without their consent. This is symbolised in the young widow Dhouli, a low caste widow who is compelled to go back to her natal home on the death of her husband, to escape from the lecherous grasp of her brother-in-law. Dhouli’s life exposes the precariousness of young widows in an unscrupulous, patriarchal community. She is forced to rebuff the *dusad* men to preserve her ‘visual chastity’ after her return to Taharr. Apprehensive of burdening herself with child, Dhouli says, “The same poverty and hunger. The same back-breaking labour. On top of that, a child too? No, she didn’t want such a life” (8).

Many of the widows fall prey to “rape by deception” as the perpetrator uses emotional coercion or manipulation to seduce the victim into consensual sex, as it transpires in the life of Dhouli, who is deceived by Misrilal, the Brahmin. Misrilal makes Dhouli aware of

her beauty and youthfulness, and assures her of a blissful marital life, as opposed to her early widowhood bereft of even trivial joys. Reeling under the ill-effects of widowhood that cast her into a state that forced her to abstain from gaieties like singing marriage songs and admiring herself, she gives in to the desires of her flesh. Forgetting her disciplined widowhood, she succumbs to his sexual advances: “And yet, a sense of triumph. She, Dhouli, a *dusad* girl, had driven a Brahmin’s son crazy” (5). However, her emotional state of triumph is constantly deflated by her memories of the past, of being battered by her overbearing husband, of toiling in the fields, of feeding on leftovers only after the male members had finished their meals and being eyed by her brother-in-law day and night. These instances substantiate that in an organized patriarchal society, a woman is just “a beast of burden with a human face; the master exercised tyrannical authority, which exalted his pride ... Everything he gained he gained against her,” as Simone de Beauvoir would put it (110).

Ironically, the villagers, while ostracising Dhouli for her relationship with Misrilal, happily accept the good lot of “illegitimate Misra children growing up in the *dusad-ganju-dhobi* quarters” (*Outcast* 14). According to the villagers, Dhouli been raped by Misrilal, she would have been protected. But to their dismay, she had fallen in love with a Brahmin and conceived his child, which is an “unforgivable offence” (14). They insist, “It’s always the fault of a woman. For not considering a Brahman’s honour, she’s even more to blame” (13). If the seduced women are taken care of by the Misras, the villagers would forgive and forget the episode. If not, they would see to it that the seduced woman is “forced into prostitution” (14). The villagers would rather kowtow than earn the wrath of the upper class, even at the cost of the women of their own clan getting sexually abused by the powerful upper class community.

Devi describes the horrible widowhood of the eponymous character in the story “Chinta.” Devi acquaints the readers with the people of Danton and Contai region in Medinipur from where they had migrated to Calcutta to take up part-time jobs as maids in large joint families. In her characteristic style, Devi paints the unromantic picture of Chinta thus: She washed huge piles of dishes and ground vast quantities of spices. Late afternoon I would see her returning home with the girl in her arms. As she walked back slowly, her damp clothes attracting the leering glance of the paanwalla, one could make out that she was soon to bring forth another child as playmate to the already malnourished one in her arms. (*Outcast* 85)

Dipti Sahoo's states that, "Once widowed, women in many countries often confront a denial of inheritance and land rights, degrading and life-threatening mourning and burial rites and other forms of widow abuse" (46). Chinta, widowed at an early age, finds herself in the predicament of working as a maidservant in spite of possessing four *bighas* of land, a couple of goats and a cow. As her son Gopal is the sole heir to his father's property, Chinta's in-laws take custody of the property till Gopal is old enough to inherit it. In other words, the woman becomes a non-person when her husband dies, as implied in this practice. It is at the time of Chinta's susceptible widowhood that Utsab turns up, and despite resistance, weaves his way into Chinta's life, forcing her to elope with him. Gopal and his father's property are retained by his paternal guardians, adding to Chinta's impoverishment. Utsab's final desertion of Chinta is the plight of most widows: "He ruined me and then left me. Didn't marry me, didn't give me any ornaments. He would beat me up, take all my money, and after giving me these two daughters, he absconded" (89). Devi seems to caution widows to be shrewd and judicious before rushing into new relationships, as is justified in the case of Dhouli and Chinta.

Dipti Sahoo asserts that the children of the unfortunate widows are affected emotionally and economically: "Moreover, the daughters of widows may suffer multiple deprivations, increasing their vulnerability to abuse" (46). The story of Chinta and Dhouli, in addition to expressing Devi's concern for the lives of the underprivileged, details how the societal structures have been biased against women. Devi never fails to raise her voice for helpless women like Chinta, who is forced to sell her daughters for ten and eight rupees each. Devi underscores remarriage and inter-caste marriage as solutions to rescue the victims of early widowhood, mandatory for the smooth transition from an elitist to an egalitarian society.

In sharp contrast to Devi, Wijenaik presents the happy life of widows after their remarriage to war heroes. Her portrayal of war widows in *Missing in Action* and short stories, "Home Coming" and "A Message of Love. . ." is vastly different from Devi's depiction of widowhood. In "The Home Coming," Wijenaik represents the life of a Sri Lankan war widow who strives hard to improve the condition of life of her children by working in Oman. Like Devi, Wijenaik also highlights the insecurity and abuse encountered by widows who work overseas: "Apart from keeping his house clean, his food prepared, I had even taken the place of his dead wife whenever he felt the need of a woman" (62). The widow recollects how her husband, "the battle weary soldier" had remarried her to relieve her of her tortuous life under a drunken husband and "fought for his country, facing death" (64). "Missing in Action" is about an anonymous narrator, who is ill-treated by her mother, cheated by her boyfriend, oppressed and deserted by her husband and finally

loved by a war hero. Like Utsab of Devi's *Outcast*, who works his way into Chinta's life using her little son Gopal, Kapila gets close to the widowed narrator through little Danushke. While Devi condemns Utsab for sexual exploitation of Chinta, Wijenaiké extols the kindness of Kapila who loves his stepson, until he is found 'missing in action.' The war widows of Wijenaiké are initially abused by violent husbands, but they are finally liberated by the war heroes, their knights in shining armour. While Devi intends to portray the sufferings endured by widows in an orthodox, tradition-bound, patriarchal society, Wijenaiké uses her war widows to emphasize the brutalities of war and the patriotism of war heroes. Her stories on war widows are actually meant to honour the war heroes through their widows.

If widowhood is a misfortune to be feared, all is not well within marriage either. Both Devi and Wijenaiké deal with marital conflict and its consequences, though the grounds for marital disagreement and domestic violence seem different in their respective cultural contexts. In Devi, marital conflict arises from ego on the part of the patriarch who can neither appreciate nor accept the economic stability of the wife. Extramarital affairs too pose a problem to marital harmony.

In *Mother of 1084* Devi exemplifies the pathetic plight of a woman, struck down by the infidelity of her husband and the waywardness of the children. She presents a typical example of a failed marriage in the marital conflict between Sujata and Dibyanath, which is the result of a series of events that have been poorly handled, so as to deeply impair their marital relationship. In the thirty four years of their marriage, Sujata has never shied away from her duty as a wife and as a loving and caring mother. Sujata, despite her financial empowerment, had meekly and passively accepted the domestic violence inflicted on her, to avoid heated arguments. Dibyanath insists that "a wife had to love, respect and obey her husband. A husband was not required to do anything to win his wife's respect, love and loyalty" (45). Through Sujata, the author underscores the vulnerability of the victims of domestic violence.

Wijenaiké's fiction too focuses on marital conflict and the sufferings of women in marital and cohabitation relationships. However, there is a strange metamorphosis in the author's perception of marriage. While some of Wijenaiké's early heroines like Sellohamy in *The Waiting Earth* solve marital problems through love, tolerance and devotion to their husbands, in her later novels like *Coming to Terms*, Wijenaiké seems to preach the advantages of staying alone: "Why did my heart fill with panic at the thought of settling down? Like becoming part of the social structure that she represented, burdened with

children, working hard to make ends meet until old age and death came. Was that all there was to life?" (5).

In *The Waiting Earth*, Wijenaike exemplifies the heroine's fondness for a harmonious family life, in which the marital discord between the couple could be solved by patience and submissiveness from the side of the woman. With her strong belief in the institution of marriage, Sellohamy draws her husband and children towards her through her selfless love and sacrifice. Sellohamy, as a custom-bound wife, considers marriage as a dissoluble bond that is made strong by the wife's love, and her love for her husband even takes the form of tolerance and passive acceptance of domestic violence. The marital relationship of Sellohamy and Singho is threatened by financial crisis. Just as a bad workman blames his tools, Singho, to cover up his inability to make both ends meet, casts the blame on Sellohamy. But Sellohamy not only remains passive to his acrimony but also discharges her duty promptly. Thus, in this early work, Wijenaike reposes faith in the success of a marriage in spite of appalling situations like a husband's allegations of infidelity on his spouse. But in *Coming to Terms* written in her seventies, she appreciates the empowerment of women through economic independence. She also justifies the freedom-loving attitude of women who stay single: "Once a man gets control of a woman she is no longer an individual but a shadow of him" (23).

In *Coming to Terms*, Wijenaike's modern women denounce the institution of marriage as a quagmire that curbs their freedom. Revathi's friend Fathima shuns marriage, to soar high as an empowered woman. Born in a community which restricts women's mobility and freedom to interact and participate socially, Fathima's decision to remain single is a daring one indeed. Fathima motivates her friend Revathi to attain financial stability: "I will have money then and we need not listen to anyone" (25). Wijenaike clearly implies that financially secure women are empowered to be free of patriarchal bondages.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, "women have never set up female values in opposition to male values; it is man who has invented that divergence. Men have presumed to create a feminine domain – the kingdom of life, of immanence – only in order to lock up women therein" (96). From her weak-willed, hopelessly-dependent and non-assertive moral position, Sujata in *Mother of 1084* is reconstructed to a morally assertive, politically enlightened and socially defiant individual, which again intensifies the marital conflict. Sujata is sick and tired of her promiscuous husband who is "desirous of maintaining masculine prerogatives," (96): "Refusing to leave her job was Sujata's second act of rebellion. Her first act of rebellion was when Brati was two. She refused to be a mother for

a fifth time” (5). Manisha in *Amulet*, who is characterised to “represent the new breed of womanhood that is emerging today” (121), lives out her life to feminist expectations. She clarifies, “Mine will be a marriage of mind as well as body, of two people, not horoscopes and property. We will be two people who need each other for support through life” (84). Wijenaikē too portrays the problems that afflict the marital life of her female protagonists. Dibyanath Chatterjee of *Mother of 1084* and Senani of *Amulet* exemplify the extremes of male chauvinism in controlling the likes and dislikes of their spouses. Although money is not everything in a relationship, money could make or mar a relationship. In *The Waiting Earth*, Wijenaikē portrays how PodiSingho’s greed to possess a land of his own triggers marital discord.

Both Devi and Wijenaikē highlight the patriarchal norms that are predominant in their respective societies - of India and Sri Lanka. Devi reiterates the ill-effects of child marriage and widowhood in *Old Women*. She illustrates the most distressing plight of young widows who are grieved more by sexual threat from other males than by the loss of their loved ones. Wijenaikē records the emotional trauma of Sri Lankan Civil War widows in *An Enemy Within*. Both the authors decry the sexual subordination of females to patriarchs, be it their spouse or their oppressor. Wijenaikē laments that in a male-centred society, women’s awareness of the fact that they no longer have any right to their parental house or property after their marriage, forces them to accept all sorts of insults heaped on them by patriarchs.

Both the writers expose the myriad manifestations of women’s oppression. They **decry the fact that women are constantly dehumanized and reduced to objects to be groped, harassed and catcalled.** Wijenaikē depicts the institution of marriage as an oppressive system against women and denounces the patrilineal nature of the society, which sectionalizes men and women. While Devi records the exploitation of women in the tribal societies of India, Wijenaikē’s portrayal of women’s oppression in Sinhala society ranges over different kinds of cultural issues that demean the status of women. Both these authors delve deep into the world of subordinated women and unveil how these women redefine their role, by shattering the chains of constricting customs. While many feminist writers expose gender oppression of women, Devi and Wijenaikē deal with the issue of gender subjugation sheathed within class or caste oppression, making their call for women emancipation and empowerment truly exceptional.

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