



Mahasweta Devi's *Titu Mir*: An Unsung Hero of the Subaltern

Priyanka Upadhyaya

Research Scholar

Dayalbagh Educational Institute, Agra.

Abstract

In all literary genres, fiction's bond with history has been contiguous and has progressively matured over the years in its array and intricacy. As a result, it becomes inevitable to study history-novel relationship within the theoretical frames of Post-Modernism and Post-Colonialism. The debate pertaining to the history-fiction interface can be traced into the works of the renowned Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi. Her intrusion into history is an upshot of her subalternist project. In the history of the Indian National Movement against Colonialism, selected chapters have categorically been under-written and overlooked. One such event was the Narkelberia Revolt of 1830-31 against the British in Bengal, headed by the poor peasant leader Titu Mir. In this historical narrative, Mahasweta Devi rejuvenates history in the person of a magnetic hero, all the time, entrenching him in the loftier socio-economic circumstances of the period.

Key Words: Mahasweta Devi, Unsung Hero, Titu Mir





In all literary genres, fiction's bond with history has been contiguous and has progressively matured over the years in its array and intricacy. In the West, during its nascent stage, the novel established its base by replicating history. In its middle phase, when it became a popular genus, it made an immense use of history by integrating within its fictional edifice a bulk of concrete social, political and cultural events and happenings. The author's fixation with history has become convoluted in the last few decades. "In its most recent phase, fiction has interrogated and problematized the discourse of history" (Fowler 43). "Even within Indian literary history, this historical paradigmatic schema shows parallels"(Singh 39). As a result, it becomes inevitable to study history-novel relationship within the theoretical frames of Post-Modernism and Post-Colonialism.

The debate pertaining to the history-fiction interface can be traced into the works of the renowned Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi. Her intrusion into history is an upshot of her subalternist project. Mahasweta Devi's writing generates a deconstructive, counter-historical treatise that intends at centring the so far historical margins by reassessing the overriding nationalist history and revealing its elitist predisposition by directing attention to the ignored and the relegated sites. In this regard, Vandana Gupta opines: "She articulates the erased oral history of tribal heroes/leaders/revolutionaries and thus makes an attempt to return to the subalternist their role models. Her narratives counterpoise personal histories of the individual subaltern with the broader socio-political-economic historical context" (Gupta53).

In the history of the Indian National Movement against Colonialism, selected chapters have categorically been under-written and overlooked. It is particularly true of the contribution of aboriginal subaltern who constantly confronted the coalition of territorial expansionism at the grassroot level and structured many remonstrations against the mounting exploitation of the agrarians and the rustics. One such event was the Narkelberia Revolt of 1830-31 against the British in Bengal, headed by the poor peasant leader Titu Mir. This revolt commemorates the authority and strength of the disempowered. This unwavering young man, who has been neglected in our history, battled against the exploitation of the rural poor at the hands of the





landowners and the alien rulers. In this historical narrative, Mahasweta Devi rejuvenates history in the person of a magnetic hero, all the time, entrenching him in the loftier socio-economic circumstances of the period. She opines that “a responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take stand in defence of the exploited.”(Devi, *Agnigarbha* viiii).

The narrative revolves around Titu Mir, a peasant leader from Bengal, who headed a revolt against the East India Company in 1830-31. He made his organization of *Wahabis* (Crusaders) and trained the farmers and labourers to wage an armed struggle against such exploitation. He built a castle of bamboo at Narkelbaria to undertake a battle against the oppressors and became a martyr.

Though born in a peasant family, Titu Mir was courageous and judicious since his childhood. He always took stance for the subaltern and was a savior from his childhood whether it be helping a weaver when his house caught on fire or saving the eighteen month old daughter of Tajuddin from drowning. In his father’s opinion, “Titu is like some uncrowned emperor, born into our house by mistake. Ever since he was a boy, he has been unable to tolerate injustice. He’d give his shirt to the needy; he’d pour out grain for visiting fakirs” (Devi, *Titu Mir* 45).

In the opening of the novel, Mahasweta Devi revives history by referring to the famine of Bengal (1770) which had made the nation a charnel ground. The wretched condition of the farmers in Bengal can be depicted thus, “No crop could be harvested that year as people had died like flies. The sahibs had bought up all the rice cheap, stored it in their silos and sold it at exorbitant prices. That had caused so many deaths”(Devi, *Titu Mir* 8). Owing to the British revenue system, people were groaning under poverty and starvation. In the context of Titu Mir, Mahasweta Devi elucidates that “The famine of 1770 was a fading memory by the time Titu was born”(9) of course, he had not experienced it. But these galling remembrances of the famine, passed from generation to generation, making revolutionaries like Titu Mir aware of the





atrocities perpetrated on Indians by the British and arousing rebellious feelings against their persecutors. Since his childhood, Titu had a passion to fight for the poor.

Mahasweta Devi recounts several incidents which establish Titu Mir the champion of the subaltern. She presents the exploitation of the poor vendors by the policemen and the landlord's goons who subjected them to exaction by coercively robbing their commodities or demanding money in market. Describing the helplessness and poverty of the peasants, Mahasweta Devi says, "the policemen and the armed good began briskly picking the choicest wares out of the vendor's baskets-fruits, vegetables, fishes. The fishmonger threw himself at their feet crying, Sir, I must sell that fish for one *anna*, I have to buy oil and rice for my family. Please don't take that one" (10). Having seen all this, Titu takes away all the fish out of the policeman's hands. Before the Inspector can take further action he is immediately reminded by an associate that the fish is not of his use any longer as it is touched by Titu Mir, a Muslim. After some time, the policeman leaves the place. The faces of the vendors lit up with joy as the policemen leave. The courageous Titu stands up against extortions in the market place. By helping the poor, Titu, shows his retaliation towards injustice in the market. When his mother suggests to him to be a stavesman in indigo plantation, he says, "No. I won't join the plantation and fleece the farmers. Never" (21) Voicing for the destitute, Titu speaks and suffers for the poor, and always stands for truth, justice and love.

The consequences of the Permanent Settlement Act and unhampered plantation of indigo on fertile lands are the two main problems discoursed in this work. The introduction of the new revenue system gave rise to a new army of exploiters who rarely visited the lands they lent out on lease. In the new scheme of the things, traditional *zamindars* were replaced by absentee landlords. The mediators minted money from this new system. They earned wages for their work as *zamindar's* workers and also got commission from the British who deployed them to guard their indigo fields. The conversation between Bhudeb Pal Chaudhary's chief *lathayal* Sardar Rameschand Charkabarti and indigo plant agent Tarini Sanyal clearly depicts their greed





for amassing wealth obviously sucking the blood of the poor. Rameshchand say, “...the sahib won’t talk directly to the people, and the *zamindar* will never come here himself. So you arrange a fat commission for yourself with the sahib; mark off the land and say the *zamindar* has given his permission. Whether the people knuckle down to planting indigo or not, is my job to oversee” (30). These people treat farmers and other poor people as non-entities. They opine, “Yes, let there be a riot. If some heads are broken some of these men will go to jail. That’ll put fear into the rest of them” (30)

Titu decides to protest against the atrocities of the *Zamindars* and instructs the people in the market not to give goods free of cost to the plantation staff. All these things galled both Ramchand and Sanyal. Afterwards, a riot breaks out at Chor Gobindopur between the peasants and Sanyal’s men who sow indigo seeds on the field meant for growing rice. When Titu comes to know about this, he marches towards the plantation along with his army joined by the peasants. The fight ends into deaths and injuries. This victory establishes him as the saviour of the marginalized.

At that time, Syed Ahmed and his followers were trying to propound a new religion or faith named *Wahabi* doctrine which had two main objectives. The first and foremost aim was to overthrow the foreign rule, the root cause of all the problems while the second one was to liberate Islam from the shackles of various superstitions. When Titu comes in contact with the powerful and dedicated leaders of this sect, he comes to know that it is only a holy war, a *jihad* and every follower is a *mujahid* with potential to achieve the ultimate goal. After this discovery, his life undergoes complete transformation and he dedicates himself to get India free from the clutches of the alien regime. Not only Muslims but Hindus and non-Muslims also became followers of this sect as its motto was the welfare of the country and its people. As a true humanist, he remembers the words of Allah’s Prophet “if you see a strong infidel oppressing or harming a weaker one, you must, of course, help the weaker” (64). In this regard, Anup Beniwal and Vandana remark:





Mahasweta's narrative carefully highlights the fact that Titu didn't merely represent a certain section of a religious community; rather his revolt was the revolt of the oppressed against the oppressors. Titu Mir's revolt cannot be compared to the battles fought by Kings and nobles against the encroaching powers of British imperialism which were a threat to their sovereignty. This revolt was fuelled by the desperation and hopelessness of the ordinary people. Bricks and unripe wood apples, spears and lathis were their weapons of war. With these, they valiantly confronted the rifles and cannons of the empire. (Beniwal and Gupta 29)

Titu infuses confidence and boldness in poor farmers and peasants which the *zamindars* retaliate tooth and nail by passing the order that the defaulters will have to leave the village. Moreover, they are asked to pay tax on sporting beard which is a direct attack on *Wahabi* faith because, it empowers the commoners to say 'no' to the *zamindar's* orders. As soon as Titu comes to know about these *fathwas*, he gets infuriated and exhorts not to pay any tax except the one which is due to the *zamindars*. Nobody pays tax to Krishnadeb's man Muchiran and he departs with empty hands.

In order to save the poor from the atrocities of the landlords, Titu Mir proclaims that in future the *zamindars* would pay tax only to him. The order startles all the exploitative machinery. One of the *zamindars* named Kaliprasna unites all the *zamindars* and also sends a word to Davis, an indigo planter of Mallahati, reporting to him about Titu's plans. All these people want to abort Titu's efforts but all their attempts end in a fiasco.

Titu Mir and *Wahabi* doctrine succeed enormously. The anti-socials such as the planters, the landlords, the rich Muslims, and the money lenders flee to other districts. The tax for the planter's vast unofficial holdings is not collected, and the peasants stop planting indigo on the land. Some of the officers of the government secretly support him as he works for the





upliftment of the poor. The Inspector of Police at Kalinga village helps Titu by revealing the secret plans of the *Zamindars* and plantation agents.

Titu Mir has bands of youths from all over the countryside, to join him. His bamboo fort is reinforced with a cladding of earth. Unripe wood apples and bricks are piled up. He encourages the weavers, “When it comes to a fight we will throw those at the enemy: we can’t fight with *lathis* and naked swords|| (Devi, *Titu Mir* 94). The weavers represent the enthusiasm of the downtrodden who want freedom from the English and the rich. The *Mujahids* of Titu loot the homes of the rich Muslims in Ramchandrapur and Hooghly. The village people sing, “That which eluded a thousands pirs Was done at last by Titu Mir”(96). They say among themselves, “Is this real, are we dreaming? The planters have gone, the *zamindars* have gone, even the police have gone. We never knew that you could wield such power with a *lathi*. If only these times could last||”(96).

Afterwards, several battles are fought between Titu and the landlords of various regions which denotes that Titu Mir is a man of substance for whose end the Company has to change its strategy. The Company tries to eliminate him by waging numerous battles against him but receives humiliating defeats. The Company was not in a condition to pocket such insults any longer. Now, the Governor General of India decides to take firm measures to stop the recurrence of such incidents. Barasat’s Joint Magistrate Alexander, Captain Sutherland, Lieutenant McDonald along with Krishnadeb Ray’s men attack the forces of Titu. Titu and his men fight heroically. McDonald, violating the norms of the warfare, turns the cannon towards Titu and he gets severely wounded. The brave *Mujahids* are slaughtered brutally by the British. Alexander orders his armed forces to burn the dead body of Titu along with the bodies of his men by heaping them up in the bamboo castle and set it ablaze. The martyrdom of Titu terrifies Alexander so much that he says, “If we do not burn his body, Titu Mir will not be totally destroyed. If his followers get hold of his dead body, they will start another rebellion. Even his corpse is dangerous. Burn the fort” (111). The English defeated Titu in the battle but it was not the end of everything because by his teachings and thinking as he had taught the people how to





take further the unfinished noble task. This tribal hero fought all the oppressive forces bravely till the end whether they were atrocious landlords or the dominating British.

Through this work, Mahasweta Devi acknowledges the contribution of those unsung heroes whose presence has totally been obliterated from the pages of the history of the Freedom Struggle of India for various reasons. She tries to reinscribe the achievements and contribution of this neglected hero of the subaltern who devoted his life to the struggle for the sake of the country and the upliftment of the marginalized. Thus Titu Mir represents the aspirations of the poor who hail him as their hero. He lived and died only for those people who were relegated to their peripheral existence.

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