

# Aajir: A Saga of Bonded Labour

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Mahasweta Devi is a compulsive activist and the socio-economic issues that she engages with transform into the sites of her activism. In “Aajir” she mainly addresses the issue of exploitation and marginalization as a long continuing process embedded in Indian socio-cultural practices. The play is set in the past but it represents the present state of exploitation in spite of a number of legal reforms. Mahasweta Devi’s “Aajir” depicts the intense sense of bondage felt by Paatan, a bonded labourer who is held so by a bond signed by an ancestor. The term ‘aajir’ in Bengali language stands for one who has sold himself/herself into slavery for a paltry sum.

Commenting on the source of the play, Mahasweta Devi says in the “Introduction” to *Five Plays*, “I got the idea for “Aajir” from a slave bond executed by a slave who sold himself into slavery, reproduced in the family history of the Mustafis of Ulo-Birnagar” (xvi). In this social play she gives an artistic expression to the sufferings of the under-privileged as they face the powerful exploitative mechanism which “operates beyond the law and with the tacit acquiescence of an exploited class held in thrall by a load of conventional role- obligations. Legal reforms or legal defences for the exploited have rarely affected the exploitative mechanism sustained by the illiteracy and ignorance of the exploited”(xviii). Mahasweta Devi’s reports in *Dust on the Road* amply demonstrate this:

The rehabilitation measures had, by and large, failed, because they were inadequate, and moreover provided through officials and sometimes the very people who were owners of bonded labourers. The land given was insufficient and unfit for raising any crop. The animals provided by the contractors mostly died within days. Some of the released labourers were getting entrapped into bondage again. Others were being taken away...as contract labour, on terms which were extremely harsh. (xxiv-xxv)

N.D.Kamble rightly analyses this social evil in his book *Bonded Labour in India*:

In practice, bonded labour in India...is an outcome of socioeconomic system prevailing in India. Some people who were deprived of the socio-economic and political powers had to depend on those who enjoyed these powers. Criminal poverty of vulnerable sections exposed them to exploitation in the built-in mechanism of socio-economic system. Economic dependence and poverty of the under-privileged sections of the society forced them to be slaves. (3)

As a social activist, Mahasweta Devi has been a witness to the pathetic lives and struggles of the under-privileged communities. Even after seven decades of independence, the innocent people in India still experience the trauma of inhuman subjugation by the cruel landlords who reign supreme in the villages. In “Aajir” Mahasweta Devi brings to light those grim areas where an individual, simply by virtue of being a descendant of a family of slaves, is subjected to unmerited tortures and reduced to the subhuman level which denies him even the right to love and marry.

“Aajir” is essentially a realistic play. Mahasweta Devi projects the awful and degrading picture of slavery that has been prevalent in most of the parts of agricultural West Bengal. Paatan, the protagonist in “Aajir” is a bond servant, a descendant of a great family of slaves. Like Bakha in Anand’s *Untouchable*, Paatan has to confront a society that denies him a right to live a life of an equal human being. Unlike his ancestors who had willingly spent their lives in servitude by selling themselves and their progeny into the perpetual slavery for a meagre amount of three rupees, Paatan yearns for a free life. He always dreams of a world where there is no master and where he can have a family of his own. He cries, “But where can I go? Where’s there a place without a Master, without the villagers, without you, with the aajir’s bond?” (4.64). He is caught in the conflict between a world which despises and degrades him and a will that wages a relentless war against it to keep his identity. Despite his craving for freedom, Paatan’s protest is silent like Sujata in “Mother of 1084”.

As the curtain rises in the opening scene of “Aajir”, a voice is heard repeating thrice: “The term aajir stands for one who has sold himself into slavery for a paltry sum” (1.45). Paatan, the protagonist of the play introduces himself and narrates the tradition of bonded labour continuing from time immemorial to the present time holding succeeding generations in perpetual servility. Mahasweta Devi talks about their victimization in rural West Bengal by three exploiters—Bhuniya the Zamindar, Sau the moneylender, and Baran the ‘Jotedar’. Running a parallel government in the villages, these three hoard up the essential commodities during famines. They create an artificial scarcity of food and misuse the relief funds meant for the under-privileged.

Impoverished both by natural and man-induced calamities, the poor are forced to mortgage their property and themselves to the landlord-cum-money lenders. They become indebted for generations together, being unable to repay the amount. The moneylenders in turn provide for generations—oil for their hair, clothes for their bodies, and rice for their stomachs. “Aajir” begins as a street-play, where Paatan recalls how he became an aajir and narrates his woes:

PAATAN. I am an aajir...Watch, gentlemen, how a man becomes a slave from birth. Please allow me to become my forefather, Golak Kura.

GOLAK KURA. Is there anybody here to buy me? Husband and wife, we're here to sell ourselves.

RAAVAN. I'll give you three rupees. Have you ever seen three rupees in your life?

GOLAK and his WIFE. (in thrilled disbelief) Three rupees!...It's too much... .Just too much. (1.46-47)

This passage exposes the whole process of pauperisation and resultant enslavement of the famished and the poor. The cruel practice of a human being bargained away like an animal continues even in the modern age and the society which is responsible for this social evil remains a passive spectator. That is why Golak Kura, forefather of Paatan lashes at the onlookers, "Did you hear that, you bunch of worms? The famine blows the horn of doom, and brings death to all around. You can all go to your deaths. I'll have my three rupees" (1.47). It is interesting to note that this amount of three rupees is used as a leitmotif in many a scene in the works of Indian literature. Munoo, the protagonist, in Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* is offered the same amount of three rupees by his mistress who tells him that three rupees a month is a good wage. It is more money than his mother or father ever saw.

Anand's Munoo, like Paatan, is a representative of millions of unfortunate souls. However unlike Munoo, Paatan does not succumb to the circumstances and toils hard to free himself from the shackles of slavery. Paatan is whipped like an animal by his master Maatang Shunri, a landlord and moneylender, for dreaming of enjoying his basic human rights, "of marrying, having a family of his own, looking upon the face of his own son" (2.49-50). Though Paatan is endowed with a strong physique, he is overwhelmed by a sense of fear and insecurity. He meekly submits to his cruel master who is physically no match to him.

Maatang Shunri uses brutal force to suppress the tide of revolt surging forth in Paatan. Paatan's expression of his desires inflames his master's jealousy. It makes him aware of his own sense of impotency and tries to flaunt his authority over Paatan by beating him and smothering the spirit that he fears in him. But his wife protests against the merciless beating and attests that Paatan is a gem of a boy and helps her a lot. She sympathises with the lot of Paatan because she finds herself as belonging to a subordinate class in relation with her husband and finds in him a potential ally. She tells Paatan, "Master has made an aajir of you and me too" (2.53). As Paatan is enslaved by a bond of slavery, she is bought in the marriage market for her share of the cropland and jewellery. She is

outspoken and never hesitates to defy her husband, “Why did you, you old dotart, you bloody eunuch, marry me? (2.51).

Realising that the husband cannot quench her thirst, she secretly longs for physical intimacy with Paatan who definitely can make a mother of her. It is interesting to note that although, she indulges in the immoral act of wooing Paatan, the audience do not lose their sympathy for her. Mistress of a womaniser, she is one of the many tragic characters of Mahasweta Devi. Even Punnashashi, a professional prostitute, in the play is also a victim of the high handedness of lusty agents of feudal institution. She is made to walk naked on a new moon night to propitiate the rain God.

Paatan wishes to marry only to please the souls of his dead ancestors, believing that if they are denied the offering of water from their descendants, they will burn in hell forever. Though initially Paatan thinks of marriage as a fulfilment of filial responsibility, when his master scornfully comments, “Is there anyone who’d give away a daughter in marriage to an aajir?” (2.50), it becomes a clear hint of revolt against traditional constraints and a sure proof of realisation of one’s inalienable right to happiness.

Paatan pleads with a gipsy woman to marry him and even attempts to escape with her. But this escapade of Paatan miserably fails and he has to pay heavily for having dreamt of a new life. The master’s wife herself sets men on him and captures him because she does not want to lose him once for all. The cruel flogging is repeated and the feudal high caste mob decides to shed the blood of this aajir believing that shedding of human blood will bring prosperity to them. “Paatan falls, is beaten, rises to his feet, made to walk with voices roaring ‘Stone him! Stone him’. Paatan seems to cower under a torrent of stones and writhes in pain as they hit him” (3.60).

Paatan realises that his fate is doomed as long as the bond exists and dreams of a day when he too can lead the life of a human being. He is sure “an aajir can have everything, once he tears the aajir’s bond to pieces” (4.64). Surprisingly, he is unaware of what is written in the bond that binds him, what are its terms and conditions and how far it is legally valid. He finds himself in bewilderingly incomprehensible world of suffering while not being responsible for it. Therefore, he raves at his ancestors in a moment of uncontrollable anger, “You, bastard, Golak Kura for a paltry three rupees you signed an aajir’s bond and left generations enslaved for life. I’ll bring your line to end. If it were no death for the aajir’s bond I’ll finish it off with my death” (4.60). He feels that there is no escape for him. But the consoling words of the mistress and her promise of setting him free for ever once again

raise his hope. When she tells him that she has the aajir's bond bound in a *gaamchha* (towel), all his apprehensions about the consequence of elopement with the Mistress gets subdued.

He is strongly tempted by the desire to live a human life in a world where class and status are obliterated and where everyone is regarded as human. Defying not only the tradition but also the dictates of his conscience, he ventures to elope with the Mistress, who is decked up in ornaments. As they flee, when his demand for his bond is relentless, the Mistress casually reveals the truth:

THE MISTRESS: Paatan dear, listen to me. (Pleadingly) There's no bond to bind you, it's all turned to specks of dust. (In pain) Look at me. Where d'you hope to find a woman as luscious as me? (4.66)

With impotent rage and gripped by the fear of being thrown once again into the abyss of servitude, he becomes aggressive. He holds her by the throat and strangles her and the Mistress becomes a prey to her own selfish designs. The last scene is a tour de force of dramatic moment and has a deep symbolic meaning. As Maatang shrieks at the sight of his dead wife, he also confirms that there has never been an aajir's bond, "I haven't seen it myself, my father hadn't seen it, it had turned to dust long ago" (4.67). The realization that he is a free man leads Paatan to challenge his master, "Come, bind me, do whatever you like to me. There's no aajir's bond. So it seems I was never a slave after all....Like everyone else in the world, I was a free man. (looks at the dead woman lying at his feet). This luscious woman was for me. I didn't know" (4.67). Paatan realises that though he is a free man, at present he will have to face legal charges as a murderer. He accepts his ultimate fate. As the mob moves closer, the man who knows that he is now free but trapped because of his crime walks voluntarily to the police station, his hands stretched out in regal dignity.

Usually, Mahasweta Devi hurls irony at the upper middle-class elites of the society to shake them out of their complacency and hypocrisy and see the injustice and inhuman act committed against the marginalized. She skillfully uses irony as a powerful stylistic tool in all her works to highlight the innocence of the ignorant marginalized and exposes the hypocrisy of the elite. Paatan who is held as a slave by a bond signed by his ancestor—a slavery that denies him the right to love and marry—discovers that the bond has long turned to dust, but only too late. It is a heart-rending irony as Samik Bandyopadhyay remarks:

...this is a metaphor, for the traditional constraints that bind the individual in India long after their legal authority has given way. Exploitation in India operates beyond the law and with the tacit acquiescence of

an exploited class held in thrall by a load of conventional role obligations. Legal reforms or legal defences for the exploited have rarely affected the exploitative mechanism sustained by the illiteracy/ignorance of the exploited. (xviii)

Thus, Mahasweta Devi makes a political intervention in the play and sides with the marginalized. She exposes the evils and makes a plea for socio-political reform.

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