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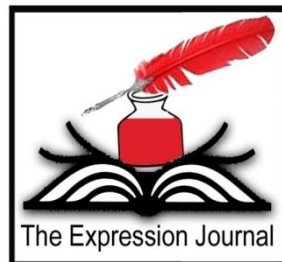
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**A CRITIQUE OF HISTORICAL EVENT OF REBELLION OF 1857 IN
MAHASWETA DEVI'S *THE QUEEN OF JHANSI***

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Abstract

History is a study of past events which are represented in written documents. It is a study of the past incidents, describes man's struggle for progress. It tells about the cultures, traditions, customs, religious and social aspects of the civilization in the past and guide people in almost every field. History obliges the people to think and be responsible. It describes and interprets man's attempt in the past. It cannot be fixed as it moves in time. Man as a rational and social being ultimately forms the subject matter of history. The paper focuses on the historical elements in Mahasweta Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi*. Mahasweta Devi is a historical fiction writer and feminist developed a strong woman character of the queen of Jhansi, Lakshmibai, who fought bravely against the British Rule. Devi has explored Indian history where a woman warrior took command fought till her last breath and defeated the powerful king and the British leaders. In *The Queen of Jhansi* she offered an accurate account of the historical events of the revolt of 1857 truly pasteurizing Kalpi, Jhansi, Betwa, Chakari, Malwa, Kanpur and Gwalior, along with the massacre of these wars. She has described the cause and the effect of the revolt upon both the Indians and the British, because this revolt had shaken the roots of the British Rule.

Keywords

History, New Historicism, Revolt of 1857, Historical Fiction, Indian Writing in English.

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Introduction

History gives the valuable information about the nation and society. The writers and historians describe the real events and incidents, such as war and revolt, which play a significant role in the formation of any nation. Every society has its own history in oral and written form, which describes the features of the society. A.L. Rows described it to be “essentially the record of the life of men in societies in their geographical and physical environment” (Jayapalan 2). Similarly, Lord Action, the great scholar of Modern history at Cambridge characteristically defined history as “the unfolding story of human freedom” (Jayapalan 3). The available set of definitions makes it clear that history is mainly concerned with the activities of human beings. History shows us a complete picture of everything that influenced man directly or indirectly. It is concerned with the origin and development of society. It plays an important role in the development of the people in various aspects and fields, including the political, economical, religious, scientific, social and cultural aspects of their lives.

The New Historicism theory focuses on the idea that history is discovered through literary texts and non literary text, which reveals history. They believes that every age and society has its schemes and tensions and it is the task of the historian to reveal those conflicting and struggling version of the age and societies by paying attention to the anarchic and the counter movement. These movements narrate the history and present them in written form. The new historicism thus believes in the written form of the history, thereby rejecting its oral form. Peter Berry in *Beginning Theory* remarks:

New Historicism is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non literary text usually of the same historical period. That is to say, new historicism refuses to

'privilege' the literary text: instead of a literary 'foreground' and a historical 'background'. It envisages and practices a mode of study in which literary and nonliterary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other. (Berry 116)

In new historicism the literary and nonliterary texts are equally treated by the readers and giving equal importance to literary and nonliterary works. The literary texts are the narratives or stories and contain elements of fiction, whereas nonliterary texts are based on facts and truth.

India has great history, which has been described by many writers and historians in various forms. In ancient time, India had been a wealthy country divided into smaller parts called states which were ruled by their respective kings. These rulers were responsible for the welfare of their kingdom. In due course of time, certain invaders from distant lands entered in the name of trade who consequently started establishing their superiority. Out of them, East India Company defeated all other missionaries as the company started establishing its root in India. This supremacy was, however, challenged by the revolt in 1857. This revolt is considered as the significant first revolt for freedom in the Indian history. This revolution finds place in Indian and English literature as many authors noticed or established their ideas for the freedom struggle.

After a close reading of the historical nuances of 19th century India, it has become quite evident that the rebellion of 1857 is considered as a major rebellion in the history of India, which is known as the first struggle and fight of the Indian for their freedom and to remove the foreign rule from India. History has been an integral part of the society and literature also. They have been a direct force in controlling the society. The Indian revolt of 1857 has played a significant role in the history of Indian literature and also in world literature. It is described by many writers and historians in different ways and styles.

Mahasweta Devi as a Historical Writer:

Mahasweta Devi is an Indian Bengali historical fiction writer and. She is known to have great knowledge of Indian history. Most of her writing about history is based on oral history and folklore. She mentions her purpose of writing in her work *Of Women, Outcast, Peasants, and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories*:

I have always believed that the real history is made by ordinary people. I constantly come across the reappearance, in various forms, of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people across generations ... The reason and inspiration for my writing are those, who are exploited and use, and yet do not accept defeat ... Sometimes it seems to me that my writing is really their doing. (Devi 24)

Mahasweta Devi's historical novel, *Jhansir Rani* has been written in 1956, was translated in English by Sagara and Mandira Sengupta and published worldwide in 2010 under the title of *The Queen of Jhansi*. Devi elaborated the history of the revolt of 1857 and describes how the British ruled India under their different policies and doctrines. She has highlighted the role of various freedom fighters and their sacrifices in the rebellion.

A Study of Historical Events in Mahasweta Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi*

The historic and legendary work of *The Queen of Jhansi* describes her deep knowledge of the history and culture of Jhansi. She has personally visited Jhansi before writing this book. She gives the ancient location of the Jhansi during that time period of the revolt of 1857 and the Queen of Jhansi, Lakshmibai. She describes about the people of Jhansi, who belong to different

religions and involved in different trade. She has explained about the location and the culture of Jhansi:

All kinds of people had made their homes there. Brahmans, Rajputs, Ahirs, Bundelas, Baniyas, Chamars, Kacchis, Koris, Lodhis, Kurmis-all had come to Jhansi. Food grains loaded on donkeys, horses and camels, come annually from outside. They were brought in by three roads: the one that ran from Mau to Jhansi, the one from Jhansi to Kanpur via Kalpi, and the one from Agra to Sager. Owners of horses and elephants also come, as Jhansi was a major center of trade in these animals. (Devi 2, 3)

Devi in *The Queen of Jhansi* illustrates about different culture and religion of the Indian and the British, because Hindus were completely vegetarians, whereas the British were non vegetarians. The writer gives a clear picture of the city of the Jhansi, where the British killed cows and pigs in the middle of the city and supplied meat to the military camp. Devi has mentioned about this sinful act in this book:

At this time there were about 80 Englishmen, both military and civilian, in Jhansi. Because the English ate meat, Skein opened a slaughterhouse in the middle of the city. This was yet another distressing turn of events which mortified the citizens was a slaughterhouse in the heart of Jhansi, where the butcher was slaughtering cows and pigs to supply meat to the military camp. Both Hindus and Muslims felt that an insult had been dealt to their respective religious faiths, sacrament and cultural heritage. (Devi 82, 83)

The Queen of Jhansi highlights the motive of the British and Christian Missionary which was spreading Christianity in India by denouncing the Hindu and Muslim religions. They promoted those government policies, which helped them to develop the Christian religion. They started a mission of conversion of the native people into the Christians. All these things created an aggression and frustration in the heart of the native people that later resulted in the formation of the revolt of 1857. Mahasweta Devi has described the Christian Missionary activities who preached in village after village: "Your religion is false, so your education and your society. Everything you do is false. No one spoke, but as the villagers listening flashed in their eyes" (90).

Mahasweta Devi describes that the British injustice and torture was more visible in the army where even the worthiest of an Indian officer could only seek the rank of Subedar. Although in official letters, the Indian soldier rank was described as equal to the English captain, along with double salary. It is useless to speak of ordinary Indian soldiers who even in high offices were victimized with this unfairness. Such disgrace and negligence of Indians within their own land found rare parallels in any other country. She brings forth this injustice in her book: "An absolutely unnecessary office was maintained in England at the annual expense of 1, 80,000 pounds from India. The English officer on a salary of 1,000 pounds a year made 20,000 pounds and never had to explain it" (98).

On 22nd January, 1857, Lieutenant Wright was commanding the Dum-Dum Musketry Depot. The Indian soldiers were against the method of preparing cartridges for the new rifle as it was made from the mixture of cow and pig's fat hurting their religious faith. It is clear that initial reaction among the soldiers that erupted was not out of anger but fear. They respectfully gave a representation why they wanted to avoid the use of these cartridges. Apart from the rumor, then prevalent, the Indian soldiers had good grounds to suspect that there was something wrong with the cartridge. The cartridge of new rifle was made an inch in length and

one fourth of an inch wide at the base. It was actually smeared with fat that had to be torn out with one's teeth before loading the rifle. Devi has illustrated about Dum-Dum Barracks and new rifle in *The Queen of Jhansi*:

This new rifle was introduced in 1857 and its range was 900 yards. A storm of protest greeted the use of these cartridges. At Dum-Dum Barracks in January 1857, a lower cast shudra soldier asked for a drink of water from a certain Brahmin Sepoy's personal pitcher. The surprised Brahman wondered how his status could be maintained if he lent the shudra his own pot to drink from. The shudra wondered how those about to bite cartridge made out of cow and pig fat could still care about losing caste. This instigated heated discussions in the barracks. They informed General Heirs that they couldn't use the cartridge and Heirs notified the Governor General of this. (105)

On 29th March 1857, Mangle Pandey, a soldier of the 34 Bengal Native Infantry, attacked his British sergeant Major Hughson at the Barrackpore parade ground with a sword after shooting him. General Hershey said later that Pandey was in some kind of religious belief and frenzy. There, a British sergeant ordered Jamadar Ishwar Prasad to arrest him who however refused to arrest the latter. In fact, Mangal Pandey later tried to kill himself, but was caught, court-martial and hanged, along with Mr. Prasad on 7 April 1857. The entire regiment later was dismissed. Other regiments of the Bengal army were also dispersed. Thus, the revolt of 1857 started for the independence of India, which shook the foundations of the English Empire for the whole two years. The flame of the revolt spread all over the northern and central India. The army of the northern India was reestablished under the command of King Bahadur Shah Zafar in Delhi. Afterwards, the angry Indian soldiers started killing the English officers and their families. The soldiers were started robbing in English houses, burnt English offices, and, destroyed all sources of communication. They destroyed the cannon factory in Fatehgarh, burnt British residences at Lucknow and Agra, and, blocked the roads and river ways for British army divisions. Mahasweta writes:

Saleh Mahmud gave his word. Led by Skene, 65 English men, women, infants and children emerged one by one. The people of Jhansi came in hordes to watch this unprecedented spectacle. The English people were taken in the Joka Bag garden. Several horsemen from the 14th Irregular Cavalry showed up with orders from Risaldar Kale Khan to kill the English, one and all. Bakhshish Ali the jail warden, included Skene, was murdered (112).

Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi* elaborates the issue of handmade *chapatis* and red lotus that played an important role in the revolt of 1857. There has been speculation that these articles were distributed throughout the Northern Provinces during the early 1857. These were weary coded messages that were passed between rebels to establish contact and enlist support. But this symbolic protest and collective support were closed mysteriously. Handmade chapatis have been circulated from village to village, from the army barracks to another army, along with red lotus petals. Mahasweta Devi has indicated this secret signal: "There is a popular impression that the Queen of Jhansi and Nana Sahib plotted along with the others. Malleson, a dependable historian, has even said that the circulation of the chapatis and lotus petals were introduced by the Queen to spread rebellion in northern India. The date of the uprising was personally decided by her" (101).

Soon the unrest covered whole of central India. Powerful anti-British rebellion all over Malwa, Indore, Gwalior, Banda, Bahrapur, Chirkare, Chanderi, Shahghar and Rathgarh had

shaken British power. Even the devotion of the powerful feudal king of Gwalior, Indore, Nepal and Baroda could not accept the English supremacy and they were not able to control the intense unrest of the masses against the British government. The red flag flew over the skies of Jhansi Fort with uncontrolled pride as if personifying the protest of millions of Indians.

The Queen of Jhansi is an account of the Hindu and Muslim unity and their role in an Indian revolt of 1857. During the eighteenth century, the flags of the Muslim fakirs and the Hindu ascetics flew side by side in the Bagicha Tower. Hugh Rose after seeing such firm resistance everywhere said that, "It was clear that the people have plunged into this struggle of resistance with a strong determination, which seems everywhere. Politically, it could be said that the leaders knew fully that the rebellion in central India would end as soon as Jhansi, the wealthiest Hindu city and the strongest fort, fell" (Devi 195).

Mahasweta Devi explores the protesting provinces such as Rathgarh, Kalpi, Jhansi, Gwalior and Kalpi. She describes about the military preparation in Rathgarh Fort, which was sufficient for a long-drawn battle. There were enough meals for three thousand people for a year and a huge mold for casting cannons were in their stock. As an evidence of participation in the revolution, she found the paintings on the fort of Jhansi including the severed head of an English woman made of straw and three red banners with raised hands. Devi has described about the Rathgarh massacre: "In the Rathgarh struggle, five were killed and 16 wounded on the British side. On the Indian side, 127 were hanged and the number of the dead was between 200 and 300" (168). There are references to Barodia war, where a number of Indian soldiers were killed in comparison to the opposition.

The British took revenge on Indian soldiers. Hugh Rose gathered all information about the Indian camp and finished up their arrangement for war on the night of twenty-one May. He positioned the right flank of the military on the south-west side of Kalpi, so that they can attack from the left. They were attacked mercilessly with siege guns, heavier guns and horse artillery before the decided date of the war. The military of Nawab of Banda and Rao Saheb out on the battlefield and the Queen appeared from the ravines with her soldiers and joined the broken Indian military. Her presence spread the new hope of victory in the Indian army, because she defeated the entire right flank of Brigadier Stuart and his horse was killed during his combat with her. Devi elaborated the queen's bravery in this battle:

Mounted on her white horse, the Queen fought with sword, showing unparalleled courage and utterly unaware that her blue Chanderi turban had fallen off. Her head armor gleaming in the sun and her pearl necklace swinging, she encouraged her soldiers by crying out '*Har Har Mahadev*' The British gunners, seeing her appear like a goddess of war, forget to fire. Her fiery enthusiasm ran through all the Indian soldiers like electricity. (249)

Hugh Rose praised the Indian soldiers in *The Queen of Jhansi*, who participated and fought bravely in this revolt. He wrote about the Indian soldiers "The Valaities and Pathans fought with their accustomed courage, several of them, even when dying, springing from the ground an inflicting mortal wound with their broad swords" (170). The massacre of Barodia has been mentioned by Mahasweta Devi: "As in other battles, the number of dead and wounded was minimal on the English side in Broda too. While the English had three dead and 20 wounded, the Indians had 500 dead among whom 300 were farmers who went forward to face the English with rocks, bows, arrows and spears" (171).

In the evening of 15 June 1857, Hugh Rose arrived with his plan and expert warriors like, Brigadier Stuart, Brigadier Napier, Captain Abbott, Lieutenant Harcourt and others. The queen wore a red color male soldier's dress. The British soldiers had not realized that the leader and Mandar was actually woman in male garb. They killed the Queen and Mandar. In this way the British army under the leadership of Huge Rose won the war of Gwalior. Finally, on 20 June 1857 the British control over Gwalior after defeating all the Indian leaders. Tatia Topi, Rao Saheb and the Nawab of Banda fled away from the battle after the victory of the British.

After the death of the Queen, the Indians lost the Gwalior war and the British killed the fled Indian leaders. Tatia Topi was caught by the British and he had to spend three days in Sipri with death sentenced hanging over his head. After the revolt, the East India Company's rule ended in 1858 and it was transferred in the hand of the Queen of the England.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi describes a true account of the history of the revolt of 1857. For this purpose, she uses the historical characters and gives a true description about their region, tradition and culture. She highlights the freedom fighters glorious personality and for their sacrifices, they remain live in the heart of the Indian people for example Maharani Lakshmbai, Tatia Tope, Nana Saheb and Mangle Pandey.

Devi emphatically highlights the Indian bravery and weakness, along with, the British officers' intelligence and their strategy of the war. She almost impartially describes about the massacre without favoring any single side. There has been an authentic data of the soldiers fighting from both the sides and exact number of casualties of the war. She presents history with the help of the historical documents, includes historical letters, biographies, describing the true history of the India. She illustrates the history of the revolt of 1857 with the help of literary and non literary sources.

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