

## Comparative Study of Mahashweta Devi's Two Stories in 'The Old Women'

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### ABSTRACT

'Old Women' is a collection of two short stories by Mahashweta Devi translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The two short stories in this collection are 'Statue' and 'The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur' which are touching depict two old, women protagonists. In both the stories Mahashweta Devi discusses the sufferings of old women. The reasons of their sufferings include behavior of the society towards these marginalized women. Superstitious cast ridden society, illiteracy, lack of facilities like health centers, schools, police station, roads etc. in the villages. Hunger is a great reality in the life of both the protagonists and their main goal is to pacify it in their life. They struggle a lot for it till their old age.

### Introduction

Andi, the protagonist of 'The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur' is an old woman suffering from poor eyesight. Through this story the author represents hunger as great reality. Andi considers herself lucky when she was admitted to the hospital for her eye operation and is provided with food and meal without any toil. She tells her son: "*Great if I get in once. A bed to lie on, a belly full of food. Ouf, what a lot convenience, Nodo.*" (p82)

Similarly In "Statue", Dulali (woman protagonist) born with injustice in her life. She kept on ration by her family. she wanders in dense jungle of the Thakur homestead and eats whatever she gets. Hunger is the great reality in the life of both the protagonists and their main motto is to pacify the hunger.



Devi portrays a very miserable picture of village life. In both the stories we found need of proper health centre, schools, roads so that a village can be connected to the city town and transportation facility can be improved. The condition of Irkanpur Health Centre which was described in the 'fairy Tale of Mohanpur' was very miserable. The health centre has no surrounding walls, no security, shortage of beds, doctors and medicines etc. From these details we found that the health centre is for namesake only. Whatever food and medicines supplied by government for the health centre were cut down in quality and quantity by Hedo Naskar. In 'Statue', the village Chattim, is situated on the outskirts of a state forest area. The police station, hospitals, post office are far from this village and there is no road which can connect this village to the town. The villagers remain deprived of all the basic facilities.

The author powerfully portrays the evils of the society in these two stories. The superstitious and cast ridden society is the main evil of that era. It is hard to accept the changes like remarriage of widow, inter cast marriage etc. by this conservative society. Dulali who is the protagonist of the story 'Statue,' faces a lot of ill treatment in the society because of her early marriage and early widowhood. She is strictly restricted to join any auspicious activity in the society because a widow's involvement in any auspicious activity was considered a bad omen.

In both the stories the author portrays some characters like Dinu Thakur, Nabin, Gobindo etc. as *Messiah of the Poor*. Their main aim is the upliftment of the villages and the society. The author makes us feel the struggles of these characters in achieving their goals. In 'Statue,' Dindayal Thakur, the educated revolutionist raises his voice against the social evils like child marriage and ill treatment of the widows. He was of the opinion that the remarriage of widow is possible both by scriptures and civil law. In his letter which he wrote just before his hanging, he strongly questions:

*"Who says life ends at widowhood? Who says there can be no marriage between Bhunya and a Thakur?"* (p18)

Thus the incomplete love story of Dinu and Dulali and Dulali's isolation reflect the class and gender inequalities in the Indian society.

Similarly, Nabin, an educated youth of the village and the compassionate nephew of Dulali, struggles hard for the upliftment of deprived classes and works hard for their betterment. He has a dream of a 'Road' that would connect his village to the outer realms of the society. Despite sacrificing everything, his dream remains unfulfilled. The statue of Dindayal Thakur (revolutionist) is unveiled at a



grand function but the local M.L.A. but he refuses to agree to their need of the Road. This also reveals the farce of the government.

“The statue of a dead man is much more important than other living problems.”

In ‘The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur,’ Gobindo, a dedicated, extremist social worker of Communist Party, toils a lot for the betterment of the poor villagers. He fights with Hedo Naskar (Social Worker of ruling party) to provide little benefits like paraffin, facilities in health centres etc. He fights with Naskar for the rights of poor. He tries to encourage every child of the village for education and wishes to make them literate. He conveys the importance of education to the villagers about how it helps them to choose the right government. He goes to Calcutta for training and reappears as a trained community health worker and serves the village.

Devi also portrays a pure love relationship between Dinu Thakur (a Brahman boy) and the widow, Dulali (Bhunya girl). The narrative reveals crudely how an inter cast love or a marriage is not accepted by the society of that time. Despite facing and overcoming many barriers they are unable to unite. The story aptly reflects the class and gender inequalities in the society, narrow ideology of society and sufferings of marginalized women.

‘Statue’ (Murti) is a tragic tale of forbidden love which returns after 54 years to haunt Dulali (an old woman protagonist). This is the story of an old woman Dulali who lives in Chhatim village situated in forest area. Farming is not much successful here because of the type of the soil, the laterite soil. Villagers are deprived of many basic and essential amenities like health centre, school etc. Madan Khan of this town was a two-generation rich in the shellac business. Malicious people say that Madan’s father Badan Khan had received immense amount of money from British government for helping them to capture Dinu Thakur, a terrorist in the eye of the government of that time (1924). He was accused of train robbery. But after 54 years, a researcher analyzed records from jail for his thesis writing and published his book in which he declares Dinu Thakur as a revolutionist. He discovered a long letter written by Dindayal Thakur just before his hanging. All the expected stuff of his love of motherland and for Dulali is there in the letter. Indeed Dindayal Thakur was accused of train robbery but his intention was not wrong. He stops the train with his group and enters in Guard’s room saying “*Bande Mataram*” ..... “*we’re taking money for mother India’s work. Money that a foreign government has taken from us by exploitation.*” (p19) But the government accused him of terrorism.



In the middle of the story, the writer introduces readers with Dulali. Her early marriage at four and then widowhood at six bring a lot of sufferings for her. In her youth her beauty attracts Dinu Thakur. His love for Dulali is pure but Dulali's life remains colourless. She has been suffering since childhood and her sufferings continue up to her old age. Dinu is against the narrow mindedness of society, ill treatment to the widows, class inequalities etc. Both of them face numerous obstacles regarding their respective casts. Dinu desires to marry Dulali but his family does not permit. Dinu's family arranges his marriage with some other girl but on the day of his marriage he refuses to marry and openly proposes Dulali. That is the turning point in the lives of both the families and the beginning of their downfall. Thakur Uncle expelled Dinu out of the home. Dulali doesn't have courage to go with Dinu. Next day Dinu is accused of terrorist act. *"Whatever happened in 1924 was a many-layered tragedy. Multiple destructions with one explosion. The explosion was caused by Dinu and became important."* (p61) Dinu's hanging, police's violence in the Thakur house, conflict between Thakur uncle and Mahananda (Dulali's father). Thakur uncle was enraged even by Bhunya's name. Dinu's love returns after 54 years when the researcher publishes his book and declares Dindayal Thakur as a revolutionist. He also declares a letter written by Dindayal which is the proof of his honest love for his native country and for Dulali. The story is a powerful portrayal of the struggles of all the middleclass people who attempt to fulfill their primary goal of life.

In the 'Fairy Tale of Mohanpur' the protagonist Andi (an old woman) loses her eye sight due to the combination of deficiency, deprivation of resource and dispassion of the government.

*"Andi alone knows the fairy tale of Mohanpur. ....In that fairy tale there is no starvation, no famine, no depotism from Hedo Naskar, none of the unbearable suffering of the sharecropper, no disease, no decrepitude"* (75) But this is only a fairy tale. This has nothing to do with reality. The village Mohanpur where Andi lives is completely opposite to the Mohanpur of that fairy tale. It is full of poverty. There is no facility of schools, hospitals, road etc. Andi's struggles never stop till her old age. She toils hard for her belly's sake. One day she shares her daily routine, her struggles for pacifying hunger and her problem of poor eye sight with Durga then Durga suggests her that intake of snails will help her to get rid of her poor eye sight. One day she brings a snail in her gamachha while returning from Behula river. When her daughter-in law asks the reason behind bringing of snail then she replies, *"I don't see clear; snail would have cut the dimness"* (78)

Later, her second grandson rescues her from the mossy pond and here it is discovered that she is going to blind. After that Andi goes to Irkanpur Health Centre with her grandson and takes help of



Enayet who is a peon at that hospital. He is always open with his heart for the poor. The condition of Irkanpur Health Centre was very miserable. There are no surrounding walls, no security, shortage of beds, insufficient doctors etc. “The population of the Behula block villages 7,051. There are 20 beds at the health centre hospital, on the average there are 60 patients at any given time. ” (80) But in this health centre there is a one good thing which wins the heart of Andi. Here patients get meals without any toil or wages. Here Andi says,

*“Great if I get in once. A bed to lie on, a belly full of food, ... what a lot of convenience, Nodo”* (82)

This somehow reveals that pacifying hunger is Andi’s main motto instead of getting treatment of her eyes. She is not worried about her eyes. On the contrary, she is happy to get in to the hospital as here she can take meal and for that she need not do any work. Andi’s sons work for Hedo Naskar. Nasakar has land in every village of Behula bock. He is an owner of fisheries and cold storage and the orders supplier for everything at the health centre.

Gobindo, an honest person and social worker of communist party, works for the upliftment of the village. He wants to send every child to school. He wants to educate every child in the village. He tries to convey their guardians that they’ll be benefited tremendously if they learn to read and write. He says, *“If they remain dumb cattle like you, they’ll vote for the congress party, not the communist party (Marxist).”* (86)

An old man responds to Gobindo’s words by saying that those whom he was calling *dumb cattle* were the ones who voted for him for communist party. Villagers need a lot of paraffin, why don’t they provide it. Giving education to children is a good thing but how can one know whether the result of book reading will be good or bad. He says to Gobindo that you are educated and are thinking about the welfare of the poor. Contrary to him is Prannath Naskar who also passed high school and is now exploiting the poor. Gobindo understands the judiciousness of the old man’s words. Naskar has filled his house with permit-sanctioned paraffin and he gives it to those who feed him the necessary adjectives or information and work for him. He realizes that this is the reason why, despite his own honesty and sincerity, Hedo is still useful to the government. Gobindo motivates villagers and village boys to see the dream and chase it. He says one of his uncles when he asks him that he would be a doctor, *“I’m not going to be a doc. I’ll inoculate for smallpox, give cholera shots - look after minor wounds, cuts, burns, get patients into hospital.... My worry is about you. Even with me around there’s no end to your misfortunes. What will you do when I’m gone? I’m worried.”*(90)



The villagers understand the sincerity behind his words. Gobindo reappears in the village as community Health worker. After he returns from training, he went to Andi's home and learns that Andi has an infection in her eye due to administering a wrong eye-drop which she brought from a vendor. Gobindo assures Andi that everything will be alright. He takes her to hospital. Again Andi is not worried about her eye sight. She is satisfied that if she stayed in the hospital, she would continue to get food and for that she would not have to do any kind of toil.

Hunger, Illiteracy, Superstitious Cast ridden society, poor condition of villages, lack of basic facilities like schools, hospitals, road, police station etc., miserable plights of women protagonists, cast barriers are some common themes in both the stories. The only difference is that 'Statue' is a tragic tale of forbidden love while, 'Fairy Tale of Mohanpur' is a story of an old and her day-to-day life's struggles to pacify hunger.

'Statue' is the story of sacrifices given for the nation by Dindayal Thakur. It also deals with tragic and incomplete love story between Dindayal Thakur and Dulali because of cast barrier. It reflects society's ideology regarding widowhood. On the other hand 'Fairy Tale of Mohanpur' is the story of an old woman protagonist Andi. It is a combination of dispassion of government, social indifference and hunger. It deals with protagonist's day today's life struggles to pacify the hunger. It reflects the conflict between political parties (Congress vs Communist). It deals with the disappointment of Nabin because of the unfulfillment of his dream of 'Road.'

In first story Statue, Dulali's early marriage at four and early widowhood at six are the main reasons of her sufferings. Because of her widowhood, she receives ill treatment everywhere. Narrow ideology of society towards widows, class and cast barrier in the society, inter-cast love affair of Dinu and Dulali, Dinu's pure love for Dulali are some other reasons which bring a lot of sufferings for Dulali.

In 'The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur,' Andi's sufferings are caused by the combination of poverty, hunger, her blindness and poor condition of health centre. She falls into the trap of a wrong vendor and using of wrong medicine (eye drop) given by this vendor causes eye infection in Andi's eye.

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**‘Mooting the Muted: Reading Mahasweta Devi’s Old Women,’** Harsha Viswanath, Ass Prof, M. S. M College, Kayamkulam:

[https://www.academia.edu/8007326/Mooting\\_the\\_Muted\\_Reading\\_Mahasweta\\_Devi\\_s\\_Old\\_Women](https://www.academia.edu/8007326/Mooting_the_Muted_Reading_Mahasweta_Devi_s_Old_Women)