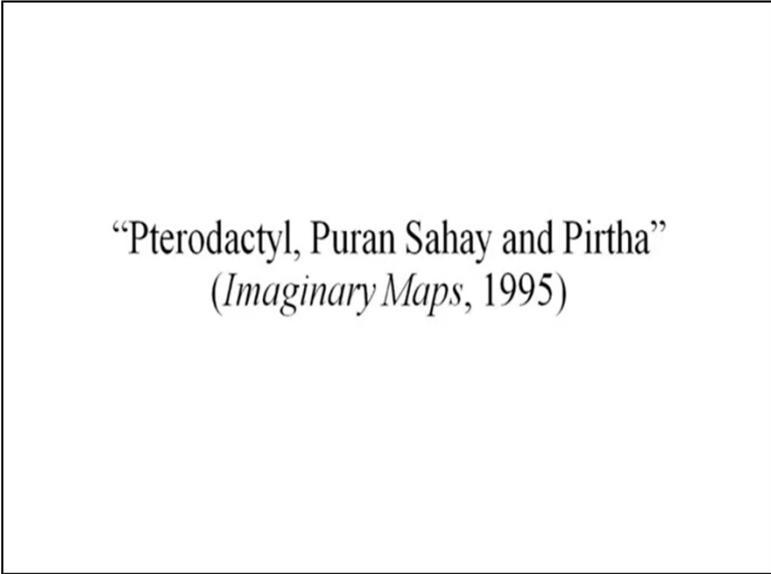


Postcolonial Literature
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Lecture No. #19
Mahasweta Devi's Pterodactyl (II)

Hello and welcome back. This is our penultimate lecture in the series of lectures that we have been doing on postcolonial literature. And as you will know, in our previous two lectures, we had dwelt upon the theoretical lens of the speechless subaltern through the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and we have done so to approach Mahasweta Devi's story "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha".

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"Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha"
(Imaginary Maps, 1995)

In this lecture, we will take up the story proper and see how what we have discussed so far about the subaltern position plays out in Devi's narrative. Now, the story that we have already started discussing in our previous lecture, deals with a journey. It is a story about a journey. A journey undertaken by a character named Puran Sahay. And, Puran Sahay is a journalist who travels to the heart of a tribal area in Madhya Pradesh called Pirtha.

Puran arrives in this region to investigate a strange sighting that has taken place there and an "unearthly terror" that has descended upon the tribal population there because of the sighting. Puran has also learned about an epidemic that is apparently going on in Pirtha and he has also heard about people dying of starvation there.

However, near the beginning of the story, there is not much clarity about any of these issues including the sighting and the unearthly terror that it has apparently unleashed on the local population. Now, in a kind of a frame narrative which perceives the actual journey to Pirtha, we are told about the history of this character Puran Sahay. We come to know that his father has been a member of the communist party and that he was something of an idealist.

We also learn that some of this idealism of his father has rubbed on to Puran and Puran, in his turn, has chosen the career of an investigative journalist and his effort, in fact, to bring to the light the persecution of lower castes and tribals in the newspaper have earned him a lot of praise.

Thus, in Puran, we can recognise a representative figure of the mainstream people who, just like Mahasweta Devi herself or even like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is guided by a sense of ethical imperative to reach out to the disempowered subaltern and to try to help them. Here, however, the story also points out the rarity of such sense of ethical obligation within the mainstream.

So indeed, Puran and his ethical obligation towards the disempowered sections of the society is presented as somewhat of an anomaly within the mainstream society. The news publication group *Patna Dibasjyoti*, for whom Puran works, also brings out a tabloid magazine with Bollywood news and we are told that it is this magazine, *Kamini*, that brings in the most amount of money.

Clearly, the mainstream readership is less interested in stories of massacre and oppression of the marginalised sections of the society than in interviews of bollywood film celebrities. So, even in this frame narrative, we get a clue as to why the marginalised sections of the society remain voiceless. One of the reasons why the subaltern cannot speak is because the mainstream people lack the will to listen to them. We lack the will to listen to the subaltern.

And, this is of course, explained by the fact that the gossip magazine the tabloid magazine sells more than the newspaper which publishes Puran's articles on the persecution of the lower caste and of the tribals. But, a more complete answer to the question as to why the

subaltern cannot speak, emerges during the course of Puran Sahay's journey to Pirtha and it is to this journey that we now turn.

Much like Marlow's journey in the *Heart of Darkness*, Puran Sahay, in the story *Pterodactyl*, also only gradually arrives at the location, which is both the geographical destination of the journey, as well as a site of a grave physical and moral crisis. In *Heart of Darkness*, of course, this site, this location, was the inner station where Kurtz was and in case of this story, in case of Puran's journey, it is Pirtha located in Madhya Pradesh.

Again, like Marlow, Puran starts on his journey to Pirtha with certain received ideas regarding the area and the people that he is visiting. And, in Marlow's case, these ideas were shaped by the colonial discourse on Africa and in case of Puran, his notions are shaped by various books, government reports and published statistical data on the region of Madhya Pradesh where Pirtha is located.

Thus, when Puran is on his way to the adivasi area on a supplied truck, which carries government munificence for the tribals in the form of rice, molasses, and popcorn, he opens a book which informs him about the government figures on Madhya Pradesh and these figures are important. The importance of these figures will become evident to you as we proceed with the story.

But these are the figures that Puran reads out from the book- 22.97% of the population of Madhya Pradesh is tribal. The economy of the state is mainly based on agriculture. The main crops of this region include jawar, wheat and rice. The region also grows some "lesser food grains." These are referred to as lesser food grains, not by Puran, but by the book that he is reading and they include kodo, kutki, and soma.

And, in 1983-84, the book tells Puran, the wave of Green Revolution, which have started in Haryana, Punjab, and western Uttar Pradesh, had also swept across Madhya Pradesh and now, the state is on the verge of another revolution, which is the Soya Bean Revolution.

Now, having introduced these data, which forms the official discourse on Madhya Pradesh and its inhabitants, Devi then masterfully interlaces it with stories of rampant poverty stories of exploitation, stories of deaths and suicide among the tribal community. The government

data does nothing to explain these stories, nor does it help Puran explain the reality that he sees in front of him in relief camps of Pirtha.

And this includes the reality of an emaciated old woman holding a skeleton baby in her arms waiting for some sort of food to come her way. This gap between the reality of Pirtha and the government discourse brings us back to the question of the voice of the subaltern because the reason this gap exists is because the old tribal woman carrying her malnourished child and waiting for food in the relief camp of Pirtha cannot speak about her condition.

Now, this absence of tribal discourse, as we learn while we journey with Puran to the heart of Pirtha, is caused by a number of reasons. The foremost among these is, of course, the sheer apathy of the mainstream people, the mainstream media and the government to listen to the voice of the tribals. The discourse on Madhya Pradesh that is ratified by the government and that is apparently supported by objective statistical data, builds up, as we have just seen, a narrative of progress, a narrative of growth.

Even to make an effort to listen to the tribal would mean, therefore, to accommodate within this discourse of progress and growth, a scandalous counter-narrative of disposition and exploitation. To hear the voice of the tribals would actually mean acknowledging the disturbing fact that in a state whose economic mainstay is agriculture and which has undergone the green revolution, the inhabitants of Pirtha suffers perennially from drought and has to make do with the so-called lesser food grains like kodo, kutki, and soma.

And, this too, is often siphoned out of this region by black marketers. As Puran comes to learn and I quote from the text, “Nobody will allow you to say, that an atom of the green revolutionary area of the state of Madhya Pradesh is in the perpetual famine zone of extreme backward tribals.” This is a statement that the institutionally ratified discourse won’t allow to be spoken, won’t admit because, of course, it spoils the narrative of progress, of growth, and of development.

The tribals cannot speak because their speech can potentially undercut the officially sanctioned discourse of growth and of progress. And, the voice of tribal is thus never accorded agency or validity by the mainstream institutions. Instead, his reality is papered over by officials who visit the region of Pirtham for instance, only during the months of rain

and then refuse to admit on paper that the region suffers from severe drought and perennial starvation.

The reality of the tribal is also denied by government regulations, for instance, which stipulate that a certain number of people need to die before an area can be declared a famine zone. In the sparsely populated tribal area of Pirtha that magic number of dead bodies is never achieved, can never be achieved, though death surrounds Pirtha from all sides. And because this magic number can never be achieved, Pirtha never gets classified as a famine zone.

Thus, though the old woman holding the emaciated child sits before Puran's eyes in the relief camp, she is more of a mirage than a reality. Why? Because the government records, the official data which tells the truth to the mainstream people, not only denies her existence, but indeed denies the entire reality of disposition that frames this existence.

Apart from this reluctant to admit the tribal voice and tribal reality within the institutionally ratified mainstream discourse, there are other more mundane reasons as to why the tribals cannot speak. For instance, centuries of deprivation has ensured that the tribals remain mentally and physically incapable to fight for their voices to be heard, to fight for their rights.

Thus, agitating for a socio-political agency remains an unaffordable luxury for the old tribal woman sitting in the relief camp, who has to rely on the largesse of NGO's and some well-meaning government officials to stave off death. As one of these well-meaning government officials point out to Puran, the tribals of Pirtha suffering from perennial starvation and scarcity of resources have become resigned to their subalternity.

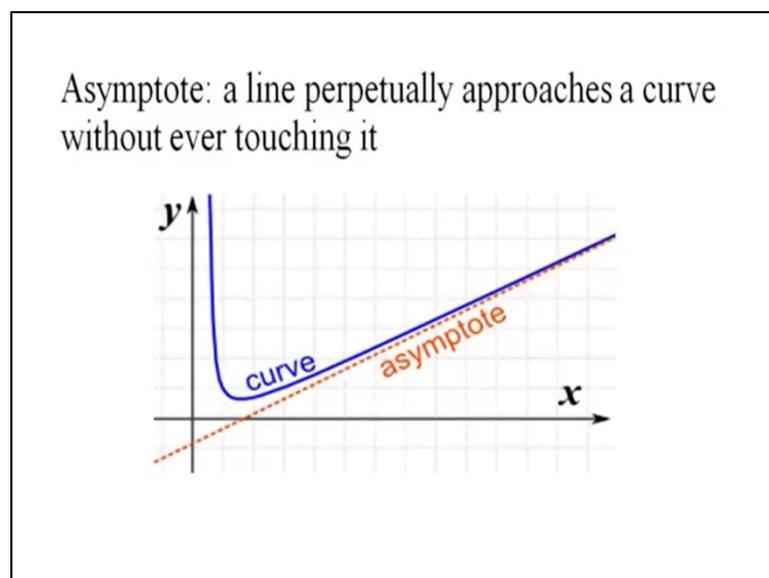
In his own words, and I quote "A few thousand people have now accepted despair. They don't know how to ask, don't ask but they take, if given". Apart from this lack of basic resources like food, what also curtails the ability of the tribals to find their voice within the mainstream is the language barrier."

Now, in any society, the hegemonic discourse privileges certain languages and by doing so, establishes a hierarchy among the various language speakers within the society. Those who

speak the privileged languages of the hegemonic discourse, they get greater access to socio-political agency than others.

And, within the Indian context too, we can see such privileging at work and, of course, within the Indian context, languages like English and Hindi enjoy the most amount of privilege. And this, in turn, ensures that speakers of tribal languages like Ho, for instance, or Mundari or Santali, remain almost completely cut off from social and political agency. This situation, in fact, is imagined in the story through the metaphor of an asymptote.

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Now, some of you will know that, in an asymptote, a line perpetually approaches a curve without ever touching it. There is no point of contact in an asymptote just like there is no point of communication between the mainstream people and the subalternised tribal. In the story, therefore, the tribals that we meet either have enormous difficulty in speaking to Puran, and here I am thinking of this figure of Shankar who can only speak in a trancelike state, or they do not speak at all like, for instance, the child Bikhia.

This theme of tribal speechlessness is most powerfully brought to the fore in the story through Puran's encounter with what the title refers to as the Pterodactyl. So, while staying in an abandoned hut in Pirtha, Puran hears, in a room next to his, the soft breathing of a large birdlike creature and since Puran is accustomed to understanding the reality that is in front of his eyes with reference to books, he reads and identifies this creature as a Pterodactyl- a flying reptile of the Mesozoic era.

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Pterodactyl



But such bookish knowledge makes the Pterodactyl an impossible reality just as the government records and official data makes the old tribal woman in the relief camp an impossible reality. This is in spite of the fact that for Puran, both the birdlike creature, as well as the old woman, exists in front of his very eyes. They both exist in front of Puran as almost tactile reality.

Yet, the other reality that is constructed through books, through government records, through documents, denies this reality that Puran can touch, smell and see before him. So, one of the questions that really come up when we read this story and, as you can see, I have not actually summarise this story like I have not summarised any of the texts that we have read so far in this course and, as usual, I would really encourage you to go to this story and read this very powerful narrative by Mahasweta Devi. You will really like it, I am quite sure.

But when we read the story, one of the questions that we are confronted with is that- is this pterodactyl some kind of a symbol which symbolises the tribals, for instance? Now, there are indeed points of similarity which connects the pterodactyl with the tribals. Just like Puran finds it impossible to communicate with the tribals, for instance, he also finds it impossible to communicate with the pterodactyl whose silence, in the face of Puran's questioning gaze, echoes the speechlessness of the subaltern tribals.

Yet, the story does not really allow us to embrace this interpretation of the pterodactyl as the symbolic equivalent of the tribal reality. The creature presents itself as different things to different people. So, for the tribals, who have seen it hovering in the night sky and who had

described it as unearthly terror, the creature is the incarnation of their ancestors' soul. It has come to them as a warning. This is what the tribals feel.

The pterodactyl, which is an incarnation of their ancestors' soul, has come to them as a warning, as a messenger, announcing the impending doom of the entire tribal community under the exploitation of the mainstream civilisation. For Puran, on the other hand, who draws his categories of understanding from books and from documents, this creature is an extinct species of the Pterosauria class, of the Mesozoic era.

Now, the story doesn't decide either way but nearly gives the expression to the sense of frustration that we feel when we encounter something that we neither know nor we can communicate with. And this is precisely the sense of frustration that the elite, guided by an ethical imperative, experiences when facing the speechless subaltern.

And here, the frustration is not simply because one cannot reach out and help the subaltern, but also, because one cannot know what crucial wisdom the subaltern might hold yet cannot communicate to the mainstream people. So, what ethical action is really possible in this asymptotic situation where there is no point of communication? Because, as you know, from the past lecture, we have been trying to think through this problem of ethics.

So, we again come back to this ethical question- what ethical action is possible in this situation of crisis? Well, Devi in her story, clearly rules out any attempt to bring "development" to the tribals. Though this has been the usual government attitude to develop the tribals, to bring development to them and much like the elite trying to speak for the subaltern, these actions of development, too, presume what the tribals need and desire, without ever consulting the tribals themselves.

The patronising gesture of development, thus, merely results in the imposition of things on the tribal society which intensifies their exploitation rather than helping them in any which way. For instance, the story mentions the government project of building roads from the tribal welfare money without any consultative process and these roads, as the story explains, connect the tribals with the mainstream in disastrous ways. As a text says, and I quote, "These roads have been built with the money sanctioned for tribal welfare."

So the owners of bonded labour, the moneylender, the touts and pimps, the abductors and the bestial alcoholic young men lusting after tribal women, can enter directly into the tribal habitations. So, in a way, the story says that the tribals were better off cut off from the mainstream rather than having roads built which connect them with the mainstream and which, in turn, intensifies their exploitation.

The epidemic that Puran finds raging in Pirtha also results from such misguided government munificence. To implement the government scheme of Farm Aid Week, the story mentions such a government scheme, people descends upon Pirtha and sprays insecticide all over the dusty fields of the tribals lying barren because of drought. A sudden flash of rain in the midst of this drought, washes the insecticide into the wells the tribals had dug to store their drinking water.

Thus, the Farm Aid initiative actually ends up poisoning whatever little source of water the tribals of Pirtha had been able to collect for their survival, and thereby, it leads to an epidemic. And, the story really gives a number of such instances where well-meaning government projects, which are implemented without taking the tribals on board, without having any consultation process, they backfire, they lead to disastrous consequences.

Mahasweta Devi, in her interview with Spivak, and I have already referred to this interview in my previous lecture, thus insists that our first task should be to stop such misguided development of the tribals in which they themselves do not have any stake. But is there any alternative, then? Well, Puran, near the end of the story, presents a report based on whatever he has seen and experienced.

And, in this report he talks about creating enabling conditions by reforming the laws, by reforesting the tribal areas and by building schools and centres for basket weaving, hand loom, and animal husbandry, so that the tribals can regain agency and finally be able to speak for themselves. And this is, in fact, the kind of work that we see activists like Mahasweta Devi and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak engage in.

However, we need to remember, that even this solution might be an imposition of the elites on the tribals. Indeed, the only solution that Shankar, who is a lone tribal voice who can speak to the mainstream society in the story Pterodactyl offers, comes in form of this

question- and I quote from the text, “Can you move far away? Very far? Very very far?” Hence, the only ethical gesture, that might end the subalternization of the tribals, may actually involve stopping all forms of interventions, ethical or otherwise.

But are we, the people who form the mainstream, are we willing to pay heed to this request? Are we willing to listen to the subaltern? Are we ready to allow the tribals to speak? I will leave you to ponder over these questions and we will meet later, in the last lecture of this series, to discuss the future of postcolonial studies. Thank you.