

Research Article**Politics of Water and Social Oppression in Mahasweta Devi's *Water***

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Mahasweta Devi is one of the foremost voices of Indian literature whose writings expose the exploitation of marginalized communities. Her play *Water* (Jal), translated into English by Samik Bandyopadhyay, presents water not merely as a natural resource but as a symbol of power, oppression, and resistance. The play depicts the harsh realities of caste discrimination, social inequality, economic exploitation, and state neglect through the struggle of the lower-caste community for access to water. Mahasweta Devi reveals how the denial of basic resources becomes an instrument of domination in a caste-ridden society. The play also highlights the resilience of the oppressed, who challenge the unjust social order despite centuries of humiliation. This article examines the symbolic significance of water, the politics of caste, the exploitation of marginalized communities, and the spirit of resistance portrayed in the play. It argues that *Water* remains highly relevant in contemporary India because issues of inequality, discrimination, and unequal access to natural resources continue to exist.

Keywords: Water, caste oppression, marginalization, resistance, social justice.**1. Introduction**

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) occupies a significant place in Indian English literature through translations of her Bengali works. A novelist, dramatist, journalist, and social activist, she dedicated her literary career to representing the lives of tribal communities, Dalits, and other marginalized sections of society. Her writings combine literary excellence with political commitment and social activism.

Water is one of her most powerful plays. It portrays a village where access to water is controlled by the dominant caste. The deprivation of water symbolizes the denial of dignity, equality, and human rights. Mahasweta Devi demonstrates that oppression is sustained not only through violence but also through control over essential resources. Through realistic dialogue and powerful characterization, the play exposes the deep-rooted inequalities embedded in Indian society.

2. Water as a Symbol of Power

Water functions as the central symbol in the play. It represents life, purity, survival, and equality. However, in the hands of the upper-caste landlords, water becomes a weapon of domination. The oppressed community is denied access to wells and water sources, making them dependent upon the privileged classes.

Mahasweta Devi demonstrates that natural resources are often monopolized by those who possess social and political power. The denial of water reflects the larger denial of justice, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Thus, water becomes a metaphor for the unequal distribution of power within society.

3. Caste-Based Oppression

One of the major themes of *Water* is caste discrimination. The lower-caste people suffer because of their birth rather than their actions. They are excluded from public spaces and

deprived of fundamental rights. Untouchability operates through everyday practices, especially in relation to water. The upper-caste landlords justify discrimination in the name of tradition and religious customs. Mahasweta Devi exposes the hypocrisy of such beliefs by illustrating their devastating impact on human lives. The oppressed are treated as socially inferior despite their hard work and contribution to society.

The play therefore becomes a strong critique of the caste system and its institutionalized violence. Even after political independence, caste hierarchy continues to shape social relations and access to water.

4. Economic Exploitation and State Apathy

Besides caste oppression, Mahasweta Devi highlights economic exploitation. Poverty forces the marginalized community into dependence upon landlords and moneylenders. Their labour sustains the village economy, yet they remain impoverished and powerless.

Government officials and administrative institutions fail to protect the rights of the oppressed. Corruption, negligence, and political indifference strengthen the alliance between landlords and local authorities. Consequently, justice remains inaccessible to the marginalized. The play suggests that exploitation survives because political institutions often support existing structures of inequality rather than challenging them. The absence of effective governance intensifies the suffering of vulnerable communities.

5. Resistance and Human Dignity

Despite continuous oppression, the marginalized characters do not surrender completely. Their resistance may appear small, but it reflects an unbreakable desire for dignity and justice. Mahasweta Devi portrays resistance as both collective and individual. The struggle for water becomes a struggle for equality and self-respect. The oppressed question social customs and reject the belief that discrimination is natural or divinely ordained. Their courage demonstrates that social transformation begins when ordinary people refuse to accept injustice.

Unlike conventional heroic narratives, Mahasweta Devi celebrates the resilience of common people whose everyday struggles challenge oppressive systems.

6. Contemporary Relevance

Although *Water* was written decades ago, its themes remain relevant today. Many communities across India still face unequal access to drinking water, sanitation, education, and healthcare. Social discrimination continues to affect marginalized groups despite constitutional guarantees of equality.

Environmental issues and water scarcity have made the politics of water even more significant in the twenty-first century. Mahasweta Devi's play reminds readers that environmental justice and social justice cannot be separated. Equal access to natural resources is essential for achieving genuine democracy and human rights.

The play therefore continues to inspire discussions on caste, environmental justice, sustainable development, and social equality in modern India.

7. Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's *Water* is a powerful critique of caste oppression, social inequality, and political injustice. By transforming water into a symbol of power and resistance, she reveals how control over natural resources becomes an instrument of exploitation. The play exposes the interconnectedness of caste, poverty, and state failure while celebrating the resilience of marginalized communities.

Ultimately, *Water* advocates equality, dignity, and human rights. Its message extends beyond the specific context of rural India and speaks to universal concerns regarding justice, access to resources, and human freedom. The play remains one of Mahasweta Devi's most significant contributions to socially committed literature.

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