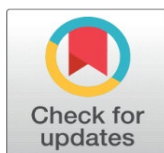


“URVASHI O JOHNNY: A POIGNANT LAMENT FOR THE MARGINALIZED AND A CALL FOR CHANGE IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S DRAMATIC VISION”

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi's *Urvashi O Johnny* (1976) is a powerful exploration of romantic idealism, social ethics, and existential despair against the backdrop of urban poverty in Calcutta. The play follows Johnny, a ventriloquist whose passion for Urvashi symbolizes his quest for personal and collective freedom in a world crippled by systemic oppression. Johnny's relentless pursuit of happiness, his guilt over abandoning One-Eyed Moti, and his ultimate sacrifice mirror the struggles of the marginalized in a society defined by greed and moral decay. Employing poetic language, folk songs, and raw dialects, Devi critiques the suppression of dissent and the dehumanization of the underprivileged, while celebrating their resilience and compassion. The play is both a lamentation of lost voices and a call to action, exposing the fractures of modern civilization and challenging the audience to rethink their role in perpetuating inequities.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, *Urvashi O Johnny*, Romantic Freedom, Systemic Oppression, Existential Despair, Marginalized Voices, Modern Civilization, Social Ethics, Poetic Drama, Calcutta Slums

1. INTRODUCTION

The literature of the marginalized, deeply rooted in postcolonial studies, serves as a lens through which the enduring legacy of oppression and inequality is examined. Among the luminaries of this genre, Mahasweta Devi stands apart for her incisive critique of societal hierarchies and her unflinching portrayal of the downtrodden. Her works resonate with themes of marginalization, exploitation, and subalternity, offering a stark reflection of India's socio-political landscape. Mahasweta Devi's play *Urvashi O Johnny* embodies her literary activism. It chronicles the struggles of Johnny, a destitute orphan who escapes the confines of an orphanage in pursuit of happiness and purpose as a ventriloquist. His companion, the marionette Urvashi, becomes both a medium of artistic expression and a symbol of his dreams. However, his journey is tragically curtailed by throat cancer—a malady that renders Urvashi mute, as her voice is an extension of Johnny's. This affliction metaphorically mirrors the suppression of democratic rights during the Indian Emergency, as noted by Samik Bandyopadhyay.

The play transcends its historical context, addressing universal themes of systemic oppression, class disparity, and the resilience of the human spirit. Johnny's unwavering commitment to bringing joy to others, even in the face of his own suffering, underscores the dignity of the marginalized. Mahasweta Devi's portrayal critiques the indifference of urban

elites, who exploit and dehumanize the underprivileged while perpetuating their own complacency. Set in the slums of Calcutta, Urvashi O Johnny lays bare the harsh realities of life for society's most disenfranchised. Devi's incisive use of satire, irony, and colloquialism exposes the cruelty and moral bankruptcy of the privileged. Her work stands as a searing indictment of the pseudo-intellectual class, whose inaction and complicity perpetuate cycles of injustice. Through Johnny's character, Mahasweta Devi crafts a poignant narrative of hope and despair. His desire to uplift the suffering masses reflects the indomitable spirit of the oppressed. Yet, his untimely demise underscores the tragic inevitability of systemic failure, where the aspirations of the marginalized are routinely thwarted. The marionette Urvashi, once a symbol of artistic communion, becomes a silent witness to Johnny's sacrifices and the broader plight of the subaltern.

In Urvashi O Johnny, Mahasweta Devi achieves a masterful synthesis of art and activism. Her dramatization of the lives of the oppressed extends beyond mere representation, offering a cathartic and catalytic call for change. By spotlighting the intersection of personal suffering and collective historical trauma, Devi's work remains a vital testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring quest for justice.

Mahasweta Devi's play Urvashi O Johnny is a poignant exploration of social realism, vividly portraying the struggles of marginalized individuals in urban settings. The narrative centers on Johnny, a ventriloquist who brings laughter to the oppressed communities of Calcutta through his performances, despite his poverty and eventual affliction with throat cancer. His journey symbolizes the release of the human spirit from exploitation and oppression, as he strives to bring joy to others, even at the cost of his own life. The play serves as a metaphor for the suppression of democratic rights, particularly during the Emergency of 1975, as observed by Samik Bandyopadhyay, who likens Johnny's throat cancer to this historical reality. Johnny's relationship with his talking doll, Urvashi, underscores his unwavering commitment to his art and the happiness of the oppressed. Despite warnings from his doctor and friends, Johnny refuses to abandon ventriloquism, finding in it a form of freedom and self-expression. His attachment to Urvashi is both profound and symbolic, highlighting his isolation and the sacrifices he makes for the sake of others. His love for Urvashi transcends the animate-inanimate divide, reflecting a desperation that ultimately proves fatal. Even as he faces the loss of his voice and health, Johnny remains steadfast in his mission to uplift the downtrodden, showcasing a relentless altruism akin to the protagonist of *Mother of 1084*.

The play provides a strikingly realistic portrayal of the lives of beggars in Calcutta, shedding light on their struggles, rivalries, and moments of fleeting happiness. Johnny's reflections on their plight reveal the harshness of urban life, where survival often demands compromises and indignities. Through the character of the One-Eyed-One, who turns to prostitution for sustenance, Mahasweta Devi underscores the systemic exploitation of the marginalized, as highlighted by Jai Sen in his observations on urban realities. Yet, amidst the despair, the One-Eyed-One retains her pure love for Johnny, exemplifying resilience and humanity in the face of adversity. Mahasweta Devi's use of symbolism and irony elevates the narrative, with Johnny's throat cancer symbolizing the suppression of individual and collective freedoms. Urvashi's smile becomes a representation of the façade of happiness that conceals inner despair. The play's structure, simple yet effective, is enhanced by dramatic devices such as masks, lighting, and gestures that convey the characters' emotions and struggles with striking clarity. Johnny's songs, inspired by popular Hindi tunes, add depth and poignancy, reflecting his joys and sorrows while connecting with the audience on a visceral level.

The dialogue and actions of the characters reveal the dehumanized existence of slum-dwellers and the harsh realities of their lives. The language of the play, a mix of pidgin Hindi and Bengali, mirrors the lived experiences of its characters, bringing authenticity to their portrayal. Johnny's costumes and mannerisms, reminiscent of street performers, further emphasize his identity as a representative of the subaltern, striving for dignity and purpose. In its essence, Urvashi O Johnny is a testament to Mahasweta Devi's commitment to exposing social inequities and giving voice to the voiceless. The protagonist's relentless dedication to bringing happiness to others, even as he battles personal tragedy, serves as a powerful critique of societal indifference and exploitation. The play's conclusion, marked by Johnny's final, poignant attempt to perform despite his debilitating illness, encapsulates his unyielding spirit and the enduring relevance of Mahasweta Devi's message. Through Johnny's story, the playwright crafts a compelling narrative that resonates with universal themes of sacrifice, resilience, and the quest for freedom. The pathetic story of Johnny presents itself in an episodic manner. There are certain fragments that intercede with other descriptions. Mahasweta Devi gives a graphic picture of Kolkata of the Seventies. She says that the city is a great danger to the city dwellers who are below the poverty line. The opening scene of this play is very similar to the opening of *Aajir*. By allowing the actors to directly address the audience, the playwright destroys theatrical illusion. However, the device of direct address to the audience does not aim to distract them from the stage but it forces them to respond immediately to the predicament of the

character Johnny with, “a baggy, patched trouser, a coloured vest, a coloured handkerchief about his neck, a feathered cap on his head and shoes” (55). People like him are an everyday presence in Calcutta. They are part of Calcutta’s landscape. The urban elite walk past them without any sense of guilt. They represent the weaker sections of people in the society. Johnny as a child is aware of the smothering effects of unethical social values and as such he runs away from those forces that come in the way of his freedom when he, “was a young man ... I took Urvashi on my lap and ... in tongas to Jhansi, Laltapur, Banda, Hamirpur!” (63). He becomes a ventriloquist and since then he has been addicted to Urvashi. He tells the Doctor:

JOHNNY (takes the mask off, to reveal a crying face). You know quite well, Doctor, the show can’t go on without Urvashi. She’ll sing, she’ll talk, she’ll laugh. And the public’ll ask, So, How are you, Urvashi? And she’ll reply, In great happiness ... I’m the Queen of Happiness. Johnny’s kept me in great happiness.

DOCTOR. Enough of that. Come to the facts.

JOHNNY. Dr. Hossain gave me a scare.

DOCTOR. What did he say?

JOHNNY. Said, you’ll go all dumb, Johnny. Your Urvashi won’t laugh, talk anymore.

DOCTOR. Did you realize why he said that?

JOHNNY. Must be something wrong with my throat. (A dumb terror in his voice.)

DOCTOR (gravely). What’s wrong?

JOHNNY. Don’t know what’s wrong.

DOCTOR. It’s cancer of the throat, Johnny.

JOHNNY. Give me medicines, Doctor, injections. DOCTOR (shaking his head). It’s no use any more, Johnny. You had gone to the Cancer Hospital too. Didn’t they tell you?

JOHNNY (cries, a contorted face). They told me.

That’s what they told me. Take pity on me, Doctor.

I’ll starve if Urvashi doesn’t sing or laugh anymore” (56).

The apathetic attitude of the rich towards the long suffering humanity is incarnated through Devi’s artistic revelations. The ethical values embodied in the age-old conventions, civilization, social ethos, political awareness and spiritual richness were all spoiled by the apathetic attitude of the rich. This aspect is further brought out into the open by the fact that Calcutta being the capital city and representing the consciousness of Bengalis rode a number of movements, reforms and ground-breaking struggles. With the advancement of the play the audience is made aware of the several naked facts of life in the urban social fabric. Many critics have alleged that the subaltern work of the writers do not have the ingredient of humour. However, the element of humour is a strong point of the play *Urvashi O’ Johnny* and it is used to intensify the subject matter of subalternity. Mahasweta Devi employs humour to provoke thought and laughter to ridicule the heartless people who are away from sharing happiness. The conversation between Johnny and other characters, like Ramanna and the One-Eyed Moti are the best in humour.

Urvashi O Johnny is written during the Emergency crisis with a social accountability. It is ‘an euphemism for state violence’. It unquestionably reflects the ordeal of the contemporary life which, stripped of its fundamental rights, has been given to dejection and despondency. Thus if Johnny says, ‘Once we are dead there’ll be no one left to raise laughter’ and ‘what do the rich know of freedom?’ he is merely stating the eternal facts. And his utterings such as “Money’s never one’s own. Money’s a whore” (61) have a charming simplicity within the framework of dramatic action, giving room for dramatic irony. Johnny despite his insecurity and uncertainty is committed to the cause of the suffering and struggling masses. He wants the people to realize that “happiness is the greatest jewel one can find in life” (75). Contrary to those disillusioned young men, who are confronted with established institutions which are bent upon depriving the poor and needy of their due, Johnny aims at enlightening the masses by inculcating in them the spirit of freedom. He wants to make them aware of the nauseating conditions in which they are placed. Johnny chooses ventriloquism as a profession to achieve this. No doubt ventriloquism is an acknowledged art form in our civilization and this art makes us realize our social and personal freedom. But the protagonist of this play could not even earn his daily bread by this. Instead it becomes a torture for him and a prop for beggary.

Urvashi O Johnny is one such play that deals with survival policies through the character of non-living Urvashi and her owner Johnny, a ventriloquist. The play is written at the time of emergency and in these circumstances Johnny's death because of his throat cancer shows how the democratic rights have been suppressed under establishment. But Johnny attempts to find his own petty way out to survive and for him survival means to stay happy. This chapter makes an attempt to show how people, like Johnny, try to survive by searching for happiness which symbolises his freedom - freedom from all kinds of oppression in dehumanised human condition. The year 1956 is considered as a turning point in the life of Mahasweta Devi for in that year she had visited an impoverished district Palamu (also used as Palamau) located in Bihar, now in Jharkhand State. There, she had witnessed debt bondage, a despoiled environment, exploitation of poor and lower caste people and state neglect. These savage impacts on indigenous society had been observed by Devi in other tribal districts of India. She was not fully aware of the condition of tribal people before her visit to Palamu and that visit left a deep impact on her mind and her works began to reflect the exploited, downtrodden and marginalized people. She has given through the whole bulk of her creative writings a kind of service to those sections. She wanted to release human souls from sufferings, oppressions and exploitations. Even the commonest human beings like beggars are given huge importance in her works. She had realised that beggars are alone, isolated from the main stream, for the rest consider them as burden of the society. Mahasweta Devi very shrewdly takes up the age old subhuman existence of people who find no voice in the society and lends her voice in support of these people. Johnny's search for freedom and happiness not only for himself but also for his own people is the best example for this. Johnny's wish of every individual to live freely and enjoy the happiness is the strong wish of Mahasweta Devi expressed through him. As she makes Johnny realise, she also advises humanity to educate themselves in order to recognise their basic principles of human living and apply alertness to avoid the real enemies of freedom and socialism. Seeing the veracities of the life lived on the streets of Calcutta she makes an attempt to link the dehumanized existence of slum dwellers in Calcutta. She begins her anti-establishment movements and tries to justify violence where the system fails to do any kind of justice. She takes Bengal as her ground, for she has realised that: "For a long time, Bengali literature has indulged in a denial of reality and has been plagued by an atrophy of conscience. The writers refuse to see the writing on the wall. The conscientious reader is turning away from them in revulsion. What can be more surprising than the writers living in a country bedevilled with so many problems...should fail to find material for their work in their own country and people?" (Spivak 7). This realization compels her to create Johnny by whom she speaks. Johnny commits his life in search of freedom. In spite of knowing his lower status and insecurity he fights to not only to survive but also to make his people realise that: "Happiness is the greatest jewel one can find in life. I'd have Kohinoors for every of them" (87-88).

The play gets a universal appeal for here she realistically presents the poor's never ending shock, pain, torments and sufferings as seen in Calcutta, the so called developed city and the capital of West Bengal. Being a satire on the pseudo-intelligentsia, the play focuses on self-realization, for it is considered as an individual's extreme need to attain happiness which leads to freedom. The play also projects Mahasweta's passion and commitment for those unheeded sections, for she wrote to show Man's inhumanity to man and she shows this through her protagonist of the play named Johnny. With his ventriloquism and its tricks Johnny wants to give happiness to everyone including the marginalized sections. Being the mouthpiece of the playwright, he merges with the suffering masses. With an unbendable faith in the human dignity Johnny tries his best to overcome the situation in which he is ensnared. To catch the birds of happiness he runs away from the orphanage for the very notion of freedom that becomes his obsession. Johnny gives his best for the betterment of the oppressed and suffering masses in spite of his own insecurity. He is against the establishment of accepted norms and codes and during his journey he has tried to enlighten the poor and struggling classes who are disillusioned. He rises against those who deprive the lowest sections for their own benefits and makes the poor aware about their freedom by installing in them the spirit for revolution for he realises it in a time of the emergency. What Aung San Suu Kyi says regarding this must be worth mentioning: "The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit, born of an intellectual conviction of the need for change in those mental attitudes and values which shape the course of a nation's development. A revolution which aims merely at changing official policies and institutions with a view to an improvement in material conditions has little chance of genuine success. Without a revolution of the spirit of the forces which produced the inequities of the old order would continue to be operative, posing a constant threat to the process of reform and regeneration"(Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Washington Post: Corrupted by Fear*, October 15, 1991). Ventriloquism for Johnny is a medium to attain personal and social liberty. It gives him the revolutionary spirit to reform and regenerate but unfortunately fails to give daily bread and here lies the irony. At this very moment, he tries to find shelter in Urvashi on whom Devi has bestowed human qualities and till the very end the audience is not informed that Urvashi is a marionette. Urvashi, for him, is not merely a medium of romantic freedom but also a deceiving reality to stay forever in happiness.

And through this affair he makes an attempt to save himself and others like him from being fallen into a state of alienation, grief and helplessness. Urvashi with her fixed smile represents those who have to put on a cloak of happiness inspite of the torture they endure and Johnny gives voice to Urvashi only to transform her fixed smile into a real laughter.

This is the condition of the slum dwellers of Calcutta who become the victims of debauched ethics of social codes and moral orders. Johnny also feels the same in a state of disappointment and misery. He becomes the slave of Urvashi because the people, whom he tries to save, give him pain. He is in dilemma between the demand of the society and self. He wants to fulfill his duty for the sake of humanity and concurrently he yearns for assertion of himself.

Devi shows the audiences' meddling as they become intrusive when Johnny cries. Johnny somehow makes people able to speak but his disclosure through Urvashi proves to be touching, poignant and heart rendering. Devi shows that it's our duty to make those happy who give their best for others' happiness and the doll cries out. The very notion of death is clearly visible here, and Devi here gives a humorous touch in this notion by some other way only to provoke thought. Johnny in his conversation with Ramanna and Moti reveals his thought of death and presents it humorously.

Mahasweta Devi gives her best effort to show the pitiable condition of the oppressed and exploited slum dwellers of Kolkata and at the same time she brings Johnny on the stage to give those people a ray of hope to attain happiness and freedom. In the last scene when Johnny becomes mute the audiences begin to open their mouth, raise their voice, utter a protest in a positive way, and start to make questions and these are all that Johnny wants. The audience becomes inquisitive for the first time, and their voices and Johnny's desperate mime symbolise a new beginning, an era where Johnny has somehow managed to create his prototypes and where Urvashi is not needed. Till the last moment Johnny tries to make people happy. He also has a fear also that after his death perhaps he will be forgotten by his people. It will be all free service when Johnny's dead and Urvashi's dead. But knowing all these he never surrenders before the cancer rather the establishment. His sacrifice paves the way for others and people start to realise their roles. The show will never come to an end for another Johnny will come on to the stage and that's what the dramatist tries to show. Not any fatal disease can take the freedom and happiness from anyone if he has the power to confront it and Johnny does exactly this. The show will continue is what the last scene symbolises: What's the matter? Why did you fall silent?...Why is Johnny crying? Urvashi, how are you? How are we? Speak aloud, the way you always do...What's wrong?...What's the matter? What's happened? ... I'm not well, not well, not well...till he uses his fingers to make the gesture of cutting his throat. The desperate mime continues as the curtain comes down. (93-94)

What really holds Urvashi O Johnny jointly as drama is Johnny's emotional attachment to Urvashi, the marionette, which gains a metaphysical facet as the latter begins to occupy his thoughts resulting in his total estrangement from his beloved, the One-Eyed Moti and his patrons who, having been conscious of the impending danger, persuade him to give it up. However much he might get infatuated with it, the marionette cannot be an alternative for his dearly loved. It is only a make-believe means for his happiness. It serves to highlight the fact that he is too poor to have a beloved and a family. It is also an escape route via art heightening the sense of unreality mixed with irony. Furthermore, the playwright endows Urvashi with human qualities. It is around this inanimate character that the playwright revolves the entire drama of human relations by making its sense felt in almost all the senses. In fact, all the characters including the protagonist address Urvashi in a language which we generally use when we speak to a fellow-being. And we are not informed that it is a marionette that Johnny is in love with till the end of the last scene which adds a kind of edginess to the play.

Mahasweta Devi's Urvashi O Johnny delves into the complexities of romantic freedom, societal ethics, and the relentless pursuit of happiness amidst oppressive realities. At its heart lies Johnny, whose passionate attachment to Urvashi transcends mere abnormality, symbolizing his quest for liberation—not only for himself but for the downtrodden masses around him. Urvashi emerges as a representation of romantic and existential freedom, yet her unyielding smile betrays the resignation of "the dumb millions," forced by societal conventions to mask their misery. Johnny's tragic endeavor to transform her lifeless smile into genuine laughter, even as his own voice succumbs to cancer, epitomizes the suppression of individuality and democratic rights, as noted by Samik Bandyopadhyay (xiv).

At the outset, Johnny abandons One-Eyed Moti—once beautiful as the moon—in his pursuit of Urvashi, whom he believes can lead him to the elusive "birds of happiness." Yet, his conscience remains burdened by guilt, as evident in his remorseful dialogue with Moti:

JOHNNY: Why do you sing sad songs?

THE ONE-EYED ONE: Because I don't know any songs of joy.

JOHNNY: Go ahead, take me to task, lash at me, I can take all that, but I shake with fear when you talk of your sorrow (65-66). Moti, despite her suffering and unrequited love, retains her humanity. Her soliloquies reflect both a deep yearning for Johnny and a bitter lament against Urvashi, whom she accuses of neglecting him. Yet, even in her anger, she cares for Johnny, showcasing the resilience and compassion that define Mahasweta Devi's marginalized characters. Johnny's journey reflects the existential plight of Calcutta's underdogs—a space akin to the "Yaksha Town" in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Red Oleanders*, devoured by material greed and moral decay. Calcutta becomes a microcosm of modern civilization, soulless and fractured, where systemic oppression prevents the likes of Johnny from attaining personal or collective happiness. Scene IV poignantly captures this despair, juxtaposing Moti's unfulfilled love with Johnny's physical and spiritual deterioration.

Johnny's sacrifice stems from his relentless commitment to finding joy for the downtrodden, even at the cost of his life. The metaphorical "cancer in the throat" silences his voice—the very instrument through which he spoke for the oppressed—and symbolizes the suppression of dissent in a callous society. His hallucinations, confrontations with masks symbolizing his failures, and descent into despair poignantly dramatize the alienation and futility of his struggle. Mahasweta Devi weaves poetic beauty and popular songs throughout the play, using them to amplify its emotional and thematic resonance. These interludes, often replete with biting commentary, reflect the lives of the marginalized and their yearning for dignity. As Ramanna sings, moved by Johnny's suffering:

2. RAMANNA: CANCER IN THE THROAT, NEVER HEARD A THING LIKE THAT.

Don't give me cancer, my man, don't give me cancer, my man. (58)

The local dialect and raw language, including expletives, add authenticity to the characters' voices. As Devi herself remarked, "Using dialect, or the specific idiom of their language... enriches language" (19). For her, the "living language" of the oppressed becomes a powerful tool to expose systemic injustice and humanize her subjects. In the climactic moments, Johnny reaffirms his devotion to Urvashi and prepares for his "last show of the season," which tragically becomes his final performance. His haunting words, "My voice has been taken away forever. All your happiness," (71) encapsulate his role as a ventriloquist of the oppressed—his silence signaling the broader muting of marginalized voices. Through Johnny's character, she lays bare the cold indifference of modern civilization, the moral compromises of the privileged, and the resilience of the oppressed. Her engagement with these themes—anchored in her own privileged position—underscores her commitment to activism through literature. As a work of art and advocacy, Urvashi O Johnny not only illuminates the lives of the dehumanized but also compels the audience to confront their complicity in perpetuating inequality.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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