

‘A pleased, new Dulan’: Reading Fanon’s theory of counter-violence in Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Bichhan’

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Abstract

This paper tries to draw a comparison between the idea of counter-violence as portrayed in Mahasweta Devi’s short story ‘Bichhan’ and Algerian thinker Frantz Fanon’s theory of counter-violence as explained in his work *The Wretched of the Earth*. Though Fanon’s theory was formulated in the context of French imperialism in Algeria, the oppression suffered by the Dalits in Mahasweta’s story share significant similarities with the violent inequality of a colonised society. Both Fanon and Mahasweta firmly disavow non-violence as a viable means for solving social inequality. Much like Fanon’s natives, the Dalits in Mahasweta’s story are perfectly aware of the unjust nature of the higher castes’ oppressive violence, and like the black native they proclaim their selfhood through rhythm and poetry. The conflict between the landlord Lachman Singh and the Dalit peasants proceed almost exactly in the lines of the anti-colonial agitation discussed by Fanon, where gradually escalating violence from both sides ultimately leads to an unusual outburst of murderous emotion as the level-headed, calculative Dulan unexpectedly kills Lachman Singh in single combat. While Fanon considers counter-violence necessary for restoring the despairing native’s dignity and self-belief, Mahasweta shows Dulan’s gloomy and brooding habits passing off after he has committed the violent murder, leaving him a satisfied, socialising man.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, Dalits, Frantz Fanon

One of the brightest stars in India’s intellectual firmament, Mahasweta Devi has effortlessly executed throughout her life the dual role of a prolific author and a tireless activist. The literary works and social campaigns seamlessly complementing each other, she is perhaps as well known for fictional masterpieces like *Hajar Churashir Maa (Mother of 1084)* and *Aranyer Adhikar (The Right of the Forest)* as for her opposition of the West Bengal Government’s industrial policy during the last years of the CPI (M) regime, and her campaign which led the Jharkhand State Government to free the statue of Birsa Munda. This paper tries to draw a comparison between the idea of counter-violence as portrayed in Mahasweta Devi’s short story ‘Bichhan’, and Algeria based Afro-Caribbean Psychiatrist and thinker Frantz Fanon’s theory of counter-violence as explained in his work *The Wretched of the Earth*.

The narrative of ‘Bichhan’ is set in the obscure villages of Kuruda and Hesadi along the Jharkhand-Orissa border which is home to a significant number of tribal populations. The protagonist of the story is Dulan Ganju, an aged tribal who follows his family calling of skinning dead animals, and survives by deriving small economic benefits on duping his social betters. As a result of the Bhoodan campaign undertaken by the enthusiasts of the Sarvodaya Mission, Dulan is gifted a small plot of barren land by the wealthy upper-caste landlord Lachman Singh, which

enables him to gain government assistance for farming the land by displaying fake attempts to do so. However, things start to get complicated with the arrival of Karan Dusadh, a former peasant agitator, on the scene. Karan incites the poor harvest labourers to demand more wages, resulting in a peasant agitation which is violently suppressed by their employer Lachman Singh. Dulan gets unwittingly involved in the events when Lachman starts using his plot of land for burying the corpses of the peasants murdered during the agitation. The situation grows from bad to worse as the flame of peasant agitation is kept alive by other harvesters like Ashrafi Mahato and Dulan's son Dhatua, and Lachman periodically unleashes his murderous wrath on the protesters, leading to a gradual increase in the number of corpses stuffed away in Dulan's plot. The steadily rising turmoil in Dulan's mind finally bursts out when Lachman kills his son Dhatua during the agitation and subsequently comes to bury the corpse in his plot. Dulan attacks Lachman in a face-to-face encounter, brutally murdering him and finally stowing away his corpse to be devoured by scavenging beasts.

Fanon's theory of counter-violence was formulated in the context of French imperialism in Algeria while violence in Mahasweta's story occurs in a society where the poor tribes and Dalits are oppressed by the wealthy upper castes. However, the violence and deprivation suffered by the poor natives in the hands of the colonisers as portrayed by Fanon has significant similarities with the upper castes' oppression of the dalits in independent India. Devi herself notes the continuity in the Dalit's suffering from the days of British colonials to those of the independent nation's upper-caste government officials:

The British in 1871, branded 200 to 250 tribes all over the undivided India. In West Bengal, there are three such notified tribes- the Lodhas of Medinipur, the Khedia Shobors of Purulia and the Dhikaros of Birbhum...The British declared them as criminal tribes. After independence, in 1952, the government of India declared them as de-notified tribes, i.e., they were no longer declared as criminal tribes but Denotified tribes...Unfortunately in 1999 Bhadra Shobor was stoned to death. Why? To be a de-notified tribe the police kills them, the neighbours kill them and anybody can kill them. In between 1997 and 1999, 37 Lodhas were brutally killed in Medinipur. The government did nothing (Sen, 2011).

Fanon notes that the very structure of the colonial society is maintained through violence:

In the colonial countries...the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence and their frequent and direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by the means of rifle butts and napalm not to budge. It is obvious here that the agents of government speak the language of pure force. The intermediary does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the domination; he shows them up and puts them into practice with the clear conscience of an upholder of the peace; yet he is the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the native (1991, p. 38).

Devi makes it clear how the upper castes of Kuruda and Hesadi villages also maintain their supremacy through an unashamed display of violence, as Dulan's wily plan to gain government assistance for farming is unanimously appreciated by his fellow villagers:

Everyone in the village became pleased. The government never cares about them. The B.D.O. employed by the government never assists their farming activities in any way. Their children are never allowed entry in the basic schools set up by the government. Lachman Singh and Daitari Singh compel them to give harvest labour in return for the day's meal or the paltry sum of four annas...If they agitate for better wages, the S.D.O.

comes with police and puts the farmers under arrest. He never says anything to Lachman Singh or Daitari Singh (n.d., p. 13).

It is interesting to consider at this point the views of Fanon and Devi on non-violence. Fanon believes that the problems of a society of violent inequality like that of a colonised state can never be solved through peaceful means. For Fanon, a preference for non-violence during a political movement signifies either self-interested compromise or pusillanimous cowardice:

In its simplest form non-violence signifies to the intellectual and economic elite of the colonized country that the bourgeoisie has the same interest as they and that it is therefore urgent and indispensable to come to terms for the public good...This idea of compromise...involves both the colonial system and the young nationalist bourgeoisie at one and the same time...Moreover, there are some individuals who are convinced of the ineffectiveness of violent methods...They are beaten from the start (1991, p. 61-3).

Mahasweta is no less uncompromising in her disapproval of non-violence as an effective means for struggle, as she explains with scathing contempt the actual uselessness of the Bhoodan campaign undertaken by the enthusiasts of the Sarvodaya Mission, who were ardent believers in Gandhi's message for non-violence. The Bhoodan campaign ultimately failed to solve the plight of the hapless peasants as the lands donated under this campaign were barren anyway. The only people who are benefitted by this donation are the landlords themselves:

The donation of lands fulfilled all purposes. It got rid of the barren lands. It ensured lifelong service from the recipients. It helped strengthen one's position with the government. And like the final icing on the cake, it brought the self-congratulatory feeling of being benevolent (Devi, n.d., p. 10).

Fanon says that the natives are always aware of the oppressive reality of their situation, a situation where he is a subject of the coloniser's violent ill – treatment:

Confronted with the world ruled by the settler, the native is always presumed guilty. But the native's guilt is never a guilt which he accepts; it is rather a kind of curse, a sort of sword of Damocles, for in his innermost spirit, the native admits no accusation. He is overpowered but not tamed, he is treated as an inferior but not convinced of his inferiority (1991, p. 53).

The Dalits are similarly aware of the unjust oppression of the landlords, and the evil nexus these landlords form with the upper-caste government officials. This becomes evident when Dulan warns the peasant agitator Karan about the hugely unequal odds he is pitted against:

Lachman Singh, the B.D.O., the S.D.O. and the police inspector are drinking buddies of each other...The government officials will always help Lachman. They won't say anything even if he fires a gun, but will pounce on you if you only reach for your stick (Devi, n.d., p. 14).

It is precisely because the Dalits are aware of the unjust oppression which is their daily lot that Dulan suffers no pangs of conscience on secretly killing Lachman Singh's buffaloes for skinning, or on stealing from Lachman Singh's holy offerings during Chhat. This is also the reason why the villagers, who are well informed about these crimes, never reveal them to the landlord. However, such crimes are more of an opportunistic capitalisation of one's weakness rather than a defiant assertion of one's dignity. In his book *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon explains how the coloniser has robbed the black man of his identity, building a world around him where the lack of his

original identity is substituted by a hollow stereotype constructed by the coloniser himself, to which the Negro is expected to faithfully conform. His own selfhood is well-nigh obliterated from the official history of the colonized nation, it is never considered as something worth reckoning by the colonisers- 'Two centuries ago, I was lost to humanity...' (Fanon, 2008, p. 91). Similarly, the Dalits have been relegated to such a pathetic position by their social deprivation, that they are no longer considered a force worth bothering about. It is precisely this position of obscurity which falls below any suspicion or alarm which Dulan makes use of while committing his crimes- the suspicion for killing Lachman's buffaloes fall on Daitari, another wealthy landlord (Devi, p. 9); it never appears to the upper castes that a puny underling such as Dulan can have the guts to commit such daring crimes. Thus, though these acts provide Dulan the secret pleasure of outsmarting his social betters, they cannot enable any defiant assertion of his presence before the upper castes.

Fanon explains how he reclaims the true Negro identity through the discovery and proclamation of rhythm of poetry- against the rationalistic superstructure of Eurocentrism: 'Little by little, putting out pseudopodia here and there, I secreted a race. And that race staggered under the weight of the basic element. What was it? *Rhythm!*' (2008, p. 92-3) In *Bichhan*, it is also through rhythm, through Dhatua's song during the Holi celebrations, that the Dalits proclaim their defiant refusal to forget the ones who fought for the lower caste's dignity:

Where did Karan go?
 And Bulaki?
 Why is there no news of them?
 They got lost in the police files.
 Where is Ashrafi Hajam?
 His brother Mohar?
 Where are Mahuban and Paras?
 Why is there no news of them?
 They got lost in the police files. (Devi, n.d., p. 20)

Fanon shows how the spread of national consciousness among the natives is noticed with fear by the colonisers, who begin escalating their acts of violence- '...police are increased and military reinforcements are brought in...They call for energetic measures...They arrest one or two leaders, organize military parades and manoeuvres, and air force displays ' (1991, p. 71). G.N.Devy also notes how violence arises from a fear of impotence or powerlessness, tracing the cause for Hitler's extreme brutalities to his past life of deprivation (2009, p. 10). Similarly, when Lachman Singh notes the seething discontent among the harvest labourers, he opts for an increased show of violence by parading his rifled horsemen through his fields and making them use abusive language towards the labourers (Devi, n.d., p. 24).

Fanon notes that such measures of violence on the coloniser's part completely fail to deter the agitating natives, and in fact end up providing further impetus to their movement- 'Mass slaughter in the colonies at a certain stage of the embryonic development of consciousness increases that consciousness, for the hecatombs are an indication that between oppressor and the oppressed everything can be solved by force' (1991, p. 72). The gradually escalating violence on both sides eventually leads to a stage which Fanon calls 'the point of no return' (1991, p. 89), which finally decides that the decolonisation movement can ever come to a conclusion only through violent means. Similarly, in 'Bichhan', Lachman Singh's measures of violence only result in a hardened reply from the peasants, who strike back at his cronies with scythes and daggers, and the 'point of no return' is reached once Lachman murders the son of Dulan, his most

important albeit unwilling ally among the Dalits. Dhatua's murder finally blows the lid off Dulan's already turmoiled mind, and he finally decides to go against Lachman Singh by harvesting his plot in open defiance of the landlord's orders. When the landlord arrives to rebuke him for his 'insolence', Dulan strikes the final blow by brutally murdering Lachman Singh in single combat.

Fanon points out the positive effect counter-violence has on the native's mind- 'At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and his despair and his inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect' (*Wretched*, 1991, p. 91). The Dulan we see after his murder of Lachman Singh is also a 'pleased, new Dulan' (Devi, n.d., p. 28), a far cry from his earlier brooding version. He is a satisfied, socialising man, giving off his entire harvest as *bichhan* (starting grains for cropping a land) for his fellow villagers, which is his personal way of perpetuating the memory of the martyrs in the peasant agitation.

One final point remains to be made. Though Dulan finally throws off the iron grip of Lachman Singh's oppression by killing the landlord, the fact remains that he is careful enough to commit the murder only after ensuring that there is no witness around. And as a result, he again escapes punishment in precisely the same manner in which he escapes from the clutches of law earlier; the suspicion for the murder expectedly falls on Lachman's brother and rival-in-business Daitari Singh, as it never occurs to anyone that a powerless Dalit like Dulan can even think of committing such a heinous act. Thus, the fact remains that Dulan's open defiance of authority and assertion of identity remains only partial at the end; it is witnessed by only a dying Lachman Singh. In the eyes of the other higher castes he is still the dirt-poor, powerless Dulan. How much will Dulan's strategy of secret murder avail to once the S.D.O. becomes aware of his criminal past? The story leaves such questions unanswered.

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