

The case of Mary's identity as a reversal of gender roles in Devi Mahasweta's "The hunt"

Mag. Ed. Karla Araya Araya

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Resumen

Este artículo desarrolla un análisis literario en relación a la construcción de la identidad de género en el cuento "The Hunt" del libro "Imaginary Maps" cuya escritora es Devi Mahasweta. El estudio se centra en Mary -personaje principal de la historia-, el rol que ésta desempeña en la sociedad de Kuruba y la forma en que ella es percibida socialmente en el texto. Finalmente, se concluye que Mary, a pesar de encontrarse en una sociedad tradicionalmente conservadora, logra transgredir los estereotipos convencionales asociados a la supuesta "inferioridad" femenina reconstruyendo su identidad de género en una mujer empoderada y transgresora de los modelos patriarcales.

Abstract

The case of Mary's identity as a reversal of gender roles in Devi Mahasweta's "The hunt"

This article develops a literary analysis of Devi Mahasweta's The Hunt from the book Imaginary Maps in terms of the construction of female identity. To do so, an analysis of the main character, Mary, is carried out by taking into consideration the role she performs in the story as well as the way she is perceived in the social sphere of the Kuruban society. Finally, it is concluded that Mary transgresses the stereotypical images about women deconstructing the traditional patriarchal gender identities- associations.

INTRODUCTION

Devi Mahasweta's (1995) *The Hunt* opens the contemporary discussion on whether gender identity is a natural innate predisposition or a socio-cultural construction. According to biological arguments, the human body determines the differences between men and women because "biological sex decides our gender experiences" (Buss 7). Buss argues that "the observable differences between males and females

derive from different anatomical organization, which make us different as men and women, and those anatomical differences are the origin of gender inequality" (7); and then, of gender identity. On the other hand, socio cultural studies propose that "the personality traits which we have called masculine or feminine are as lightly linked to sex as are the clothing, manners, and the form of head-dress that a society at a given period assigns to either sex" (Mead

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Devi Mahasweta, The Hunt, Imaginary Maps, identidad femenina, género, transgresión.

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34). Rather than considering the construction of gender as an aspect determined by the sex-constitution of the body, Mead proposes that masculinity and femininity are strongly defined by social conditioning. She subverts the traditional binary gender differences stated by the arguments of biological determinism. According to Mead, 2004:

“human nature is unbelievably malleable, responding accurately and contrastingly to contrasting cultural conditions. The differences between individuals who are members of different cultures, like the differences between individuals within a culture, are almost entirely to be laid to differences in conditioning, especially during childhood, and the form of this conditioning is culturally determined”. (35)

In other words, individuals respond in one way or another because they live in a cultural background that conditions their performance. In terms of gender construction, cultural conditioning implies the acceptance or rejection of certain roles. Culturally, there are socially accepted ways to perform like a man or a woman. Through culture, then, gender becomes a matter of expected behaviors. This process of selecting or discarding personalities and temperaments related to genders is mostly shaped by private and public institutions, traditions, customs and rituals. Social celebrations constitute some of the best spaces to perform according to cultural standards because they require that people interact under certain conditions.

The text *The Hunt* evidences not only the way culture restricts the performative scope of men and women but also the possibilities of gender subversion in certain social activities. On one hand, the characters embody the conditioning of a man-made culture. The scenario shaping gender identity is a hunting festival. This celebration becomes very important to identify the accepted or rejected gender roles because men and women have the opportunity to socialize demonstrating the power of sex and gender. In this regards, the narrator points out that “for people who live in villages like Kuruda, life holds few breaks other than annual festivals” (2). This activity portrays a society regulated by the male worldview; that is why; the speaker states that women “don’t know why they hunt. The men know. They have been playing the hunt for a thousand million moons on this day” (12). Traditionally, hunting has been an activity performed by men because they have been considered the food-providers of their families. On the other hand, hunting also embodies a hierarchical relationship between the prey – the weak object; the award to get – and the predator (the strongest of the two whose mental, physical and cultural capacity gives it the possibility to dominate others). Therefore, hunting as a sociocultural activity has given men the change to historicize their male identity under the premises of strength, power and domination.

In text *The Hunt*, main characters struggle in a social context that opens to the possibility of gender identity transgression. The narrator points out that

“It is revealed that the ritual of the hunt that the tribes celebrate at the spring festival is for the women to perform this year. For twelve years men run the hunt. Then comes the women’s turn. It’s Jani Parab. Like men they too go out with bow and arrow. They run in forest and hill. They kill hedgehogs, rabbits, birds, whatever they can get. Then they picnic together, drink liquor, sing, and return home at evening. They do exactly what the men do. One in twelve years”. (12)

By performing the traditional male roles in a hunt, women demonstrate that the abilities related to hunting (sagacity, physical strength and knowledge about the prey) are not exclusively male-sex conditions. Those features can be also female qualities. In *The Hunt*, women can perform activities that are particularly considered manly. This is especially the case of the main character of the story; Mary.

REVERSAL OF GENDER ROLES

Mary’s performance transgresses the traditional patriarchal gender identity associations. The narrator constantly states that Mary involves herself in activities considered as demonstrations of masculinity. For instance, she “pastures the Prasad’s cattle. She is the most capable cowherd. She also sells custard apple and guava from Prasad’s orchards, driving terrifically hard bargains with the Kunjaras, the wholesale fruit buyers. She takes the train to Tohri with vegetables from the field” (2). Mary’s capacity to carry out hard works shows that her female nature is weak. Her ability to do jobs that demand a strong physical effort makes her a powerful subversive character. In this sense, the speaker ponders that

“Mary cleans house and pastures cattle with her inviolate constitution, her infinite energy, and her razor-sharp mind. On the field she lunches on fried corn. She stands and picks fruit and oversees picking. She weights the stuff herself for the buyers. She puts the fruit bitten by bats and birds into a sack, and feeds it to her mother’s chickens. When the rains come she replants the seedlings carefully. She watches out for everything. She buys rice, oil, butter, and species for the Prasads”. (5)

In other words, Mary can easily perform activities that are culturally considered masculine – like pasturing and farming -. At the same time, she does “female” activities like taking care of house chores. Her capacity to interact in both conventional male and female spheres challenges

biological and socio-cultural delimitations about polarized gender identities.

Mary's protectionist attitude is another evidence of gender reversal. She plays the role of the villagers' controlling protector, thus exhibiting the paternal side of masculinity. Mary advises the villagers about the tremendous profits Tehsildar was getting with their trees. First, she talks to Prasadji about the embezzlement Tehsildar is trying to commit. Mary firmly says "the bastard tricked you. He took all the profit" (9). Then Prasadji assumes the role of a son asking for advice: "what to do Mary? With no road, have I the power to sell at profit to anyone?" (9). Prasadji realizes that not even his own son – but only Mary – could "take such a trouble so [he doesn't] get tricked over a piece of fruit, a gain of corn" (9). For this reason, Prasadji asks Mary for help to which she recommends: "when you sell trees later, there will be a road, don't give it to him. Go yourself to Chhipador. Talk to the big companies and do your business. Don't be soft then" (9). Furthermore, Mary tries to protect the Kuruda elders. She advises them to refuse Tehsildar's prices for the trees. Again, Mary becomes the advisor and the protector changing the traditional male and female roles assigned in a patriarchal society. She said to the elders that Tehsildar "'is greedy now. He'll come again in five years. Then we'll bargain for three or two rupees. And he'll have to give. Otherwise how will he get an outsider here?'" (9-10). With a paternal attitude, Mary takes the responsibility of revealing "the man's true nature to everyone" (10) in the village.

On the other hand, chivalric attitudes constantly shape Mary's personality. Instead of having her fiancé as her protector, Mary assumes the responsibility to take care of Jalim. The narrator states that even though she "couldn't find a boy of her own kind" (3), Mary has chosen Jalim. Mary is a woman who works outside home so she is economical independent. Because she is self-sufficient, she can help Jalim to save money. She knows that Jalim "has his parents, brothers, and sisters in the village. Here he'll have to rent a lace, buy pots and pans. He won't be able to carry of the expenses" (4). Therefore, Mary assumes the role of the gentleman protector by keeping the promise of marrying Jalim and helping him with the future family expenses. Like a good chivalric provider, she "gave him the first present. A colored cotton vest" (4). She "understands that Jalim is taking many pains to save money. Even so she says nothing, for she has saved ninety-two if not a hundred rupees" (4). On the other hand, Mary tries to protect Jalim from Tehsildar. Even though Tehsildar "doesn't give up chasing Mary" (12), she realizes that telling Jalim about this situation would place him in danger so she decides to take care of the problem by her own. "Jalim might get to know" (12) that she "was getting tired of Tehsildar's tireless single-minded pursuit" (12). However, Mary remains in silence to protect Jalim because she knows "he'd be wild if she let him know. He might go to

Tohri to kill Tehsildar if he got the chance" (12). Mary carefully analyzes the dangers for her and Jalim and realizes that Jalim is the weaker of both because "Tehsildar has a lot of money, a lot of men. A city bastard. He can destroy Jalim by setting up a larceny case against him" (12-13). That is why she will solve the problem by herself on the day of the festival.

Powerful as a man in a chauvinist society, Mary's aggressive nature reverses her femininity to acquire a more phallic condition. Her machete is a symbol of her power. Penetrating as a character, she uses her machete to protect her and others. For instance, Mary keeps her right of picking the fruit of the four mahua trees on the Prasad property by using her machete. Therefore, "no villager has been able to touch the fruit even in jest" (4) because "Mary has instantly raised her machete. This is hers by right" (4). When men "had wanted to be her lover, Mary had lifted her machete" (3). She empowers herself through her machete due to the fact that it gives her security and power to dare even a man like Tehsildar. Consequently, "as she moved on she took a sharp machete and said in a lazy voice, 'brokers like you, with tight pants and dark glasses, are ten a rupee on the streets of Tohri, and to them I show this machete. Go and ask if you don't believe me'" (10).

Like the phallus, the machete constitutes a key symbolic object to set the bases for her authority. Being in a patriarchal society has caused that Mary positions herself in terms of her possession of the machete. That is why she firmly says to Tehsildar "'if you bother me again I'll cut off your nose'" (11). Mary realizes that she has the power to face men. With her machete, Mary ends with Tehsildar; "she lifts the machete, lowers it, lifts, lower" (16) and kills him in the hunt.

Mary has a state of independency that allows her to demand for better living conditions. According to Mead, (2004)

"a culture may take its clues not from one temperament, but from several temperaments. But instead of mixing together into an inconsistent hotchpotch the choices and emphases of different temperaments, or blending them together into a smooth but not particularly distinguished whole, it may isolate each type by making it the basis for the approved social personality for an age-group, a sex-group, caste-group, or an occupational group. In this way, society becomes not a monotone with a few discrepant patches of an intrusive colour, but a mosaic, with different groups displaying different personality traits". (37)

This is precisely what happens in the Kuruba's society. People know that Mary is different not only "because she is the illegitimate daughter of a white father" (6) but also because she is the most skillful individual in the villa-

ge. Although "Oraons don't think of her [Mary] as their blood" (6) because she has Australian blood, "[s]he is accepted in the village society. The women are her friends, she is the best dancer at the feasts. But that doesn't mean she wants to live their life" (3). Mary works for having a better life than the one her mother or other women can have in Kuruba. According to the narrator, Mary has gained the power to question her boss. She firmly asks Mrs. Prasadji: "Why should I take a cheap sari? I'll dress well, use soap and oil, give me everything" (5). Mrs. Prasad has to satisfy this request; he "is obligated to dress her [Mary] well" (5). Mary has the power to treat the Prasads like equals because the kind of family relationship they have. In this sense, Mr. Prasad explains Tehsidar that his wife "thinks of her [Mary] as daughter, she respects [them] as her parents" (9). As a man can do, Mary can enjoy a better social status. For instance, "she gets down at the train station like a queen. She sits in her own rightful place at the market. She gets smokes from the other marketers, drinks tea and chews betel leaf at their expense, but encourages no ones" (3).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the text *The Hunt*, considering such traits as aggressiveness or passivity to be sex-linked is not possible in the light of the facts. Mary's attitude, temperament and behavior deny any biological determinism or God-given law stated over the male and female sex. In *The Hunt*, physiological sex differences become irrelevant; especially, when making reference to Mary. Sexes as well as genders are distorted by social practices; they are made of social fabric. Even though men and women differ in many ways, the festival as a social performance transforms the male and female identity by producing a transgression of gender roles. Therefore, neither sexes nor genders are pure classifications to identify someone as a man or a woman in terms of polarization and discrimination.

Contradictions in a patriarchal society become evident because Kuruba is a culturally mixed group that has displayed social differences into different groups. So "incongruous" gender personalities can be reversed during the hunt and with individuals whose roots are not entirely

set on Kuruban heritage like it is the case of Mary. Even though, Mary's attitudes can be considered grotesque for her female nature, her intelligence, strength and courage subvert any misogynistic convention on gender. Consequently, standardized personality differences between sexes are of this order, cultural creations. More than a literary work, Devi Mahasweta's *The Hunt* is a social portrait of the contemporary transformations in gender roles and relationships people are suffering in everyday life.

Even in societies where sex-distinctions are very important to organize the social dynamics of communities, there is room for transgression. Mary, as a cultural agent, evidences how hard it is to support gender differences based on the superior and the inferior categorization. Instead, she demonstrates the inconsistencies of patriarchal societies where gender stereotypes and limitations are mostly a socio-cultural and economical state rather than a divine/ biological condition. At this point, gender transgression becomes an issue not because Mary is able to act "like a man", but because male and female roles become sexless. In order words, differences between men and women are not denied. They are celebrated to show that aggressiveness, strength, passivity, weakness, courage, bravery among other qualities are states of the mind acquired through socio-cultural censorship rather than through sex-cause- limitations. Finally, limitations in performance exist but, in ontological terms, they are the result of the very particular characteristics an individual can have as a human being. That is why the reversal of roles performed by Mary disrupts the notion of the female-male roles per se because it denies the existence of gender roles as exclusive sex-conditions.

NOTAS

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