

*Conclusion*

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The preceding chapters have attempted to analyse the various marginalisations undergone by women in India and Southern Africa, particularly South Africa, as they struggle to fight the oppression, repression and suppression that society imposes on them. The approach has been comparative, and in the following paragraphs, the various points of convergence and contrast will be discussed. One thing is however clear, the texts of Mahasweta Devi discussed in this work have largely been through her English translations, rather than the original Bengali, while Bessie Head's writings are original works. Today's globalised world means that one lives in continually changing 'translated' spaces and reads and re-reads texts through translations and various interpretations. This is a great progression from the original purpose of binary comparative studies, discussed in the introductory chapter, which was firmly against translation. A good comparatist was expected to be fluent in and read texts in their original languages. In post-colonial studies and cultural studies however, translation studies has gained new impetus. Jacques Derrida believes that the source text is not an original at all, rather, "it is an elaboration of an idea, of a meaning, in short, it is in itself a translation"<sup>1</sup> Derrida thus obliterates the difference between the source text and the target text, between the supposed 'superiority' of the original over the translation, and thus ends the long held view that regarded translation to a secondary position. As Bassnett points out, "translation is therefore a particularly special activity, since it enables a text to continue life in another context, and the translated text becomes an original by virtue of its continued existence in the new context."<sup>2</sup>

The opening chapter discussed how comparative literature became an important tool and scope of study in the realm of postcolonial theory, as the newly independent nations used it to share their history of exploitation and subjugation with the rest of the world. We have also discussed how the entire focus of comparative literature changed from the traditional Euro-centric perception to one where the West was now being critiqued by the 'Other'. And as various postcolonial literatures gained impetus, translation studies became a major vehicle through which these writings could become accessible to the global audience. Thus, "neither the word, nor the text,

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Bassnett. *Comparative Literature: A Critical introduction*.p.151

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

but the culture becomes the operational unit of translation.”<sup>3</sup> And in more recent times, translation studies has in many ways been informed by this cultural turn, as postcolonial studies, cultural studies and translation studies have together tried to “understand the process and status of globalisation and national identities”<sup>4</sup> giving it an intercultural or multicultural dimension.

This work has attempted to locate the writings of Bessie Head within the domain of space, place, identity and location. Her writings are certainly influenced by her own experiences, but they go beyond the realm of pure ‘autobiography’. Rather than a first person narrative, which characterises most autobiographical writing, Bessie Head’s life and experiences are embedded into the narrative of her texts. Arthur Ravenscroft points out that Bessie’s writings are “strange, ambiguous, deeply personal books”<sup>5</sup> that have as their foundation the “vast caverns of her interior personal experiences.”<sup>6</sup> Recent research on Bessie Head focussing on the Bessie Head papers has also highlighted this point:

Bessie Head herself said that her three novels... were ‘continuous autobiographical records’ in which she was ‘usually the main lead character’. In them, she said, ‘I worked mainly on my own problems’. Of Margaret Cadmore in *Maru* she wrote ‘that passive shy girl was my own eyes watching the hideous nightmares which were afflicting me’ and she describes Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather* as ‘a combination of feminine sensitivity and borrowed maleness. I borrowed the outer male form but I lived inside that form.’<sup>7</sup>

The autobiographical angle of her writings is therefore clear, and is clearly evident in all her works. However, the unique features of her writings take her works beyond the realm of autobiography and the ‘ordinary’. The issues she deals with are certainly not new to Southern African literature, but it is the meaning with which she invests them that make her works unique and allow her characters to rise beyond mere cultural, social and racial groupings. The aim of all her writings is to allow the woman to carve out a place for herself in society and live a life of dignity and self-worth, while all the time living within the fold of the community. The community plays a crucial role in Head’s scheme of things – it is certainly the agent of positive change,

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Bassnett and Andre Leferve. *Translation, History and Culture*. p.8

<sup>4</sup> Bo Pettersson. ‘The Postcolonial Turn in Translation Studies: Theoretical Frameworks Revisited.’ [www.uqtr.ca/AE/vol\\_4/petter](http://www.uqtr.ca/AE/vol_4/petter)

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Ravenscroft. *The Novels of Bessie Head*. Pg. 175

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pg.183

<sup>7</sup> Sue Atkinson. PhD thesis *Bessie Head’s Writing as Autobiography*. [www.bessiehead.com](http://www.bessiehead.com)

individual and private growth as well as negative vibes – but Head’s clear belief is that the individual cannot function in isolation. Just as male and female cannot live and function in isolation, similarly, they cannot survive without the community. The grappling with the notion of self and identity pervades through all of Head’s writings and is manifested through her protagonists, all of whom ultimately succeed in finding inner peace and a sense of belonging, derived out of their own inner growth. Elizabeth’s visibly dramatic and possessive gesture of lying down on the land and putting her hand over it is a symbolic manifestation of this sense of mental peace and belonging. Later in life, Bessie Head commented that this lack of identification with a fixed environment was probably a blessing in disguise, as she would “have found an identification with a special environment too small.”<sup>8</sup> Her writings are not constrained by the boundaries of race or nation, and transport us between Botswana and South Africa, between autobiography and fiction, and it is almost impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins. Head therefore does just not remain a South African writer or a Botswanian writer. As someone who had no roots in life, and who lived the majority of her life as a refugee required to register every week with the local police, Head prefers to call herself a “Southern African” writer – this gives her greater universal appeal and also removes her from the dangers of strict compartmentalisation.

The main crux of Western feminist views that have been prevalent since the 1960’s concentrate on the assertion of the woman’s voice, while excluding the male and are simultaneously an assertion of the inherent patriarchal structures of society. The opening chapter of this work has discussed in considerable detail the writings of various feminist scholars on either side of the Atlantic Ocean, their exploration of the prevailing hegemonic structures of society as well as a greater understanding of the female body. Apart from certain shared biological features, the specific dimension of women’s struggles has varied from country to country. African and Southern African feminism too does not fit into the Western stereotype. In fact, as already discussed in the thesis, colonisation reduced women who had previously held positions of power and importance in society to virtual non-entities – a ‘wallflower’, as E.E. Evan Pritchard writes. The construction of the African woman as a subjugated, dormant human being by the Western colonisers has been successfully countered by African

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<sup>8</sup> Craig Mackenzie et al eds. Bessie Head interview. *Between the Lines*. p.14

women writers like Head, Buchi Emecheta and others. Their women characters are neither marginalised nor valorised, but independent individuals contributing to society. Paulina, Thato, Johannah and even Elizabeth are examples of such women. Further, unlike the Western model, sex is seen as a part and parcel of daily life and is not given the all-consuming importance that Western feminists attach to it. In Bessie Head's writings, both men and women are seen as equally capable agents of change in society, and in achieving a society that operates on trust, faith, love and understanding. In this utopia, or "new world", the sexes complement each other and work together. There is no place for the likes of Dan, Matenge, Lebojang or Dikeledi's husband – men who are sources of evil, interested only in the abuse and misuse of power. Bessie also remains unique among her contemporaries in South Africa for many reasons. Most apartheid literature that emerged out of South Africa contained vivid descriptions of the protest against the crippling life-taking Government machinery that denied the individual even the most basic of rights. In the works of most writers writing during the period – Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Dennis Brutus, Peter Abrahams, Alex La Guma, Miriam Tlali, Ellen Kuzwayo, Desiree Lewis, Nadine Gordimer – anger is the pre-dominant emotion. However, in the writings of Bessie Head, one notices a succinct difference. The focus here is not on the anger, but rather on the individual and his/her position within the community. The anger against the system is implicit and subdued. However, the tone of protest is clearly evident – in her handling of the theme of racism, of religion and the conflicts between the old world and the new world. The South African experiences of her early life imbue a lot of her writings – how the turbulence and violence of the city give way to a calmer and more fulfilling life in the village of Serowe, but in spite of the muted anger, there is no ambiguity in her stated position or her commitment. As the only black, exiled South African writer writing in English, she remains unique as the only writer to locate her texts in her adopted homeland and also the only writer to have grown up in the city but deliberately chosen a village environment to live in and also locate her writings. The various journeys – literal and metaphorical that Head took in her life – city to country, South Africa to Botswana, male to female protagonists – have all contributed to her individual growth as a writer and as a person and challenged South African literature's traditional obsession with the male voice, urban space and conflict that concentrates on individual accounts rather than the real life experiences. Normal boundaries fail to define or constrain her, and nor can she be

simply contextualised within the genre of 'protest' writing which was the craze during the period. She brought into focus ideas of rural space as opposed to the urban city-space. In doing so, she draws attention "to the possibility of a Southern African literature that is more than the sum of the region's various national literatures."<sup>9</sup> Even today, in spite of the increasing amount of critical and research work being done on Bessie Head, she remains a highly underrated and unexplored writer, someone who has given a voice to millions like herself – especially exiled refugees, battling issues of race, nationality and nation-space.

The ideas and themes governing the writings of Mahasweta Devi are very different in some ways, and similar in others. Her writings are not autobiographical, like Head, yet they are personal, as many of the stories are carved out of Mahasweta's own experiences of working among the tribal and dispossessed landless people of post-independence India. The themes running through her writings are more or less similar – of individuals, especially women from the lower castes and tribal societies, exploited and oppressed by the hegemonic powers of society – the landlords, money lenders, and even their family members. Brutality, rape and other forms of violence are evident in all her writings. The woman's body is her most valuable as well as her most vulnerable asset – from Dopdi to Jashoda, Douloti to Sanichari and Joshmina, Sindhubala to Chinta – it is the body politic that is the most affected. For many of these women, exploitation of the body is not a matter of choice but a harsh necessity. To ensure that her breasts remain full of milk that sustains her and her family, Jashoda has no option but to keep giving birth to children. On the other hand, they only abuse and exploit her and forsake her in the hospital, when she is dying and needs them the most. Jashoda's body thus becomes a commodity with its price tag. She has no alternative if her family has to be sustained. Similarly, to ensure sustenance in the brick kiln at the city, the likes of Sanichari, Douloti and Joshmina have to obey the dictates of their masters and employers. It is a roll-call which decides who is to sleep with whom on a particular night, a strange manifestation of democratic practices, indeed!!!

Like Bessie Head, Mahasweta Devi privileges the community over the individual. The individual is only important to the extent of his/her contribution to

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<sup>9</sup> Rob Nixon. 'Rural transnationalism and Bessie Head.' In Kate Darian smith et al eds. *Text, Theory, Space*. p.249

society, and functions as a cog in the scheme of things in society. But their outlook is different. For Bessie Head, society acts as a source of strength for her protagonists, all of whom derive their strength from the community. Whether it is Makhaya or Margaret or Elizabeth, it is the community that gives them recognition and that also allows them to find their identity. Bessie Head repeatedly stated that a truly effective society could only function if man and woman worked together and complemented each other. The characters of Thalo and Thato in 'Hunting' in *The Collector of Treasures* point forward to such an ideal world. Head's utopia, symbolic of her "new world." In the stories of Mahasweta Devi, the unity of society operates in different ways – there are different unities depending on caste, class and gender. For instance, in a story like *Rudaali* the opening lines clearly state how the ganju and the dushad communities live together; their exploitation, subjugation and marginalisations are also universalised. The community lives together and works together. And Sanichari is clearly embedded in this larger network. As she works in the fields paying off her late husband's death, Dulan and his wife make sure that her child is fed and clothed. In fact, Sanichari comments:

The poor and oppressed desperately need the support of the other poor and oppressed. Without this support, it is impossible to live in the village.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the violence engineered by the likes of landlords like Ramavatar Singh is also universal. There are very few exceptions to this rule. In *Hajar Churaasir Maa* one sees the behaviour of Sujata's entire family towards Brati's death. It seems that there is an unspoken understanding between all the members to hush up the death, as admitting that Brati was a member of the Naxalite movement would go against the mores of middle class morality. Sujata feels suffocated and isolated amidst such a family, who can have an engagement party on the day of the anniversary of Brati's death. She feels equally out of place in the company of the likes of Somu's mother, whose reality is different and who has to move on. While Somu's mother and sister are united in their grief and have in all probability received some help from members of the outer community, Sujata is not welcome in this world. Community here clearly functions at the level of class/caste. Shared grief is not a strong enough unifying factor between these women. However, when the exploitation is shared, women too forge together a bonding at the level of the larger community. Therefore, her fellow comrades play a crucial part in ensuring that Dopdi and Dulan are able to

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<sup>10</sup> Mahasweta Devi. *Rudaali*. p.63

escape from the police repeatedly; Douloti gets help from her colleagues at the brick kiln. These are just a few examples. Similar roles are played by the likes of Pauline and Dikeledi in Bessie Head's novels. At times, even violence is justified by the community, and this occurs in the writings of both the writers. Therefore, the title story in *The Collector of Treasures* by Head and *The Hunt* by Mahasweta Devi depict how the women protagonists go beyond the level of stoic acceptance and react with violence. In the first story, Dikeledi, fed up of the continuing sexual violence that she is subjected to, kills her husband by chopping off his genitals with a kitchen knife, knowing full well the repercussions of her act. In fact, when she goes to prison, she befriends four other women who are there for the same crime, and thus, within the larger prison community, a smaller community of bonding forms between these women. In *The Hunt* the ancient ritual of Jani Parab is reinvested with new meaning, when Mary Oraon lures the predator, Tehsildar Singh into the jungle on the day of the festival and butchers him to death. In both these stories, it is the community that provides support to the women that allows them to actually assert their power and authority over the male. Ultimately, she has no choice to resort to violence and dehumanisation in order to save her body from further humiliation and insult. In the story *Dhouli* too, the power of the community is made manifest in another way. Impregnated by Misrilal's son, who professes to love her but marries someone else, Dhouli has no option but to resort to prostitution to ensure her survival. When she returns to her native village, the same masters who are responsible for her plight now pronounce judgement on her, accusing her of defiling the community and prohibiting her from earning her living, banishing her from the community. However, as one community ostracises her, leaving her alone, Dhouli realises that now, as a professional prostitute, she automatically becomes a part of another community, and it is this community that will allow her to fight back. After all, "the collective strength of society was far more powerful than an individual's strength."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in many of the stories of Bessie Head too, one notices incidents when it is the community as a whole that decides on certain matters. 'Kgotla' is one such story. Therefore, while privileging the community over the individual may be seen in general as a mode of suppression of the individual voice by embedding it into the larger community, the writings of both these writers are able to retain their individuality. In fact, one notices

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<sup>11</sup> Mahasweta Devi. 'Dhouli'. *Outcaste* .p.32

that despite the same name being assigned to different characters in different works, the individuality and self of the characters is not lost. The Dikeledi of *The Collector of Treasures* is clearly distinct from the Dikeledi of *Maru* just as the Draupadi (Dopdi) of *Draupadi* is different from the Draupadi of *Bashai Tudu* and the Sanichari of *Rudaali* is clearly distinct from the Sanichari of *Sanichari*. Both Bessie Head and Mahasweta Devi envisage a role for the woman within the fold of the community, but while the writings of Bessie Head generally end on a positive note, indicating towards her “new world”, the writings of Mahasweta Devi generally have a bleak ending. The women have no choice but to succumb to the exploitation, and as symbolised by Douloti lying dead on the map of India, Mahasweta sees this as the general condition of women in India. And indeed, whether it is Dopdi or Douloti, Sanichari or Joshmina, Jashoda or Jati, Ketki or Sujata, Chandi or Sindhubala – the final escape from oppression and exploitation lies only in death. *Rudaali* is an exception; a rare story, where by the ending Sanichari is actually well-equipped to tackle and deal with society on her own terms. A positive ending that depicts women fighting the forces of patriarchy and oppression and emerging victorious.

As already discussed in the previous chapter, *Rudaali* is one work of Mahasweta Devi that has a positive male character, Dulan, who emerges as Gramsci’s “organic intellectual.” And the help that Dulan and his family extend to Sanichari and her family plays a major role in Sanichari’s ultimate empowerment. It has also been discussed how most of the other male characters who permeate her writings are actually predators, whose only interest in life lies in exploiting and oppressing those over whom they are in a position to exercise power. In fact, most of Mahasweta’s male characters are posited in powers of authority and hegemony – as landlords, moneylenders, policemen etc. – who continue to subscribe to age-old traditions and structures and refuse to change with the times. And by choosing to use power equations rather than a relationship of companionship and harmony between the sexes, they further reinforce the practices of marginalisation that have traditionally been reserved for women in society. Senanayak – the irony of the name is not lost -, Misrilal, Ramavatar, Tehsildar etc – all are cast in the same mould. In such a situation therefore, it is almost impossible to envisage an ideal “new world” for Mahasweta Devi as one can clearly do so for Head. It is not as though negative characters do not exist in Head’s works. Demons such as Dan and Gisorego do exist, but most of her

male characters are 'grey' rather than pure 'black' or 'white.' Therefore, while Gilbert Balfour makes a great success of the village cooperative in Golema Mmidi, at home, he prefers to exercise his male authority over his family. Maru is the compassionate village chief, but does not hesitate to even sideline his best friend Moleka when it comes to ensuring that Margaret's affections are channelised towards him. Similar characters are manifested all through Head's writings, marking a clear difference between them and the uni-dimensional villainous males that largely permeate the writings of Mahasweta Devi.

Another point of convergence that exists between the writings of Bessie Head and Mahasweta Devi is the fact that both women situate their writings within their societal frameworks. Therefore, the hierarchy that exists within the societal setup is seen as something that is omnipresent. There is a dominant and a dominated sections. In the writings of Mahasweta Devi the former consists of the upper class and upper caste masters, landlords, moneylenders etc. who control the reins. Therefore, Jashoda is deified and respected in spite of the fact that she is a wet-nurse for the children because she is a Brahmin. Sujata too is a Brahmin, but located in upper middle class urban society, she is removed from the harsh realities of class and caste power that manifest themselves latently, particularly in rural India. Similarly, for Misrilal, making Dhoulis pregnant is an assertion of his power, but refusing to acknowledge his son being brought up by a prostitute is a part of his social conditioning. When Chandi is declared to be a witch or bayen and is ostracised from the village, her husband is helpless against the powers. Rather than fight the system and give his wife her rightful place, he prefers to tell his son that his mother is dead!!!! Mahasweta Devi writes about these incidents with the eye of a documentator. These are the harsh realities of life, and a reality of modern day India, which manifest themselves through her writings. She has often commented that the historical perspective is important for her, and her stories document the same. Whether it is historical events embedded into the narrative of the story like *Jhansir Rani* or *Hajaar Churaashir Maa* or a historicised documentation of the becoming of a rudaali in *Rudaali* or the becoming of a bayen in *Bayen* or even the exploitation of women working as bonded labourers years after the system has been abolished and untouchables and tribals marginalised from the mainstream, the writings of Mahasweta Devi present a microcosmic documentation of

postcolonial and post-independence India. And although this is certainly not the entire story, it is certainly a crucial part of subaltern Indian history.

Similarly, Bessie Head's writings too are deeply embedded within the prevailing structures of society. The challenges of Head's own life, and particularly her experiences in apartheid South Africa form the backdrop of many of her writings, and many of her protagonists like Makhaya or Margaret or Elizabeth are actually coloured like her, thus lending a new dimension to her stories. The journey from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period is clearly documented, as are the brutalities faced due to racial discrimination. *Maru* is an extremely sensitive text in this context and even in *A Question of Power* the politics of gender and racial superiority make themselves manifest. One way in which the writings of Bessie Head clearly differ from that of Mahasweta Devi is through the incorporation of her personal experiences, i.e. the autobiography. Her personal experiences play a major role in enriching the quality and substance of her works. However, Mahasweta Devi, it may be presumed is clearly removed from the caste, class and gender inequalities and exploitation that she depicts in her writings. Her personal background has ensured that she has never really faced the brunt of these marginalisations in the manner that many of her protagonists have. In many ways therefore, Mahasweta Devi is like her character Senanayak in *Draupadi* or even like Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak – caught between the realms of theory and practice. Mahasweta Devi too remains fixed within her class origins. She has repeatedly called herself as a “documentator” of the plight of the tribals and the downtrodden, by saying so she is immediately detaching herself from the immediacy of the moment. As a documentator, she must be critical and unbiased. She has also stated that she made a conscious decision in “ignoring the mainstream” and “choosing” to go to the tribals.<sup>12</sup> This is therefore a conscious, studied, academic decision that once again draws parallels between Mahasweta Devi and Senanayak. They are both politically aware, educated and erudite elite of society, who can **theoretically** identify with the ‘Other’. The difference lies that while for Senanayak, this awareness leads to a desire to destroy and obliterate the ‘Other’, for Mahasweta Devi it has led to a desire to know and understand this section of society and document their histories. It is interesting though that in none of her writings does Mahasweta Devi talk about a smooth amalgamation of the tribals into the rest of

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<sup>12</sup> Mahasweta Devi. Interview with Subhoranjan Dasgupta. *The Reaction has been so minimal among the urban educated.*

Indian society. In fact, by declaring them as different from the 'mainstream' is she not further enforcing these differences? True, tribal societies have their own unique traditions and cultures, but that is true of Indian society, and rather than making such distinctions, attempts should be made to amalgamate them with the rest. The academic critique is certainly there in her writings, and the third person narratorial voice is one that historicises and locates the roots of oppression in the prevailing power structures of society but unlike in Bessie Head, who clearly talks of a new idyllic world, where men and women work in unison and complement each other, and whose writings point towards such a world, Mahasweta Devi's writings offer no such solution, no ray of hope for the days ahead. Her characters – both male and female – will continue to live on the edge, on the margins of society – there is no ray of hope. Her writings attempt to destroy the conventional, romantic notions of village life, and present a world far removed from the realities of her largely urban, educated reader, but as has already been discussed in the previous chapter, she leaves it at that, hoping that the collective consciousness of society will be raised and incited towards reversing the paradigms of caste, class and gender hegemony and moving towards a more egalitarian and less patriarchal society. Till then, solutions will remain at the level of academic discourse, at the level of conceptualisations and suggestions. The Dalit movement has seen a significant number of subaltern Dalit histories, fiction and documentation happening, that has definitely led to positive changes both within the community as well as in the larger domain. A similar movement perhaps needs to take place within the tribal societies of India – a fight not just at the political level, but at the larger social level. Till that happens, the tribals and the 'mainstream' will continue to move parallel to one another, with no point of convergence.

The focus of this thesis has been the study of both these writers within the prevailing socio-cultural and historical domains. And in spite of the different backgrounds, one notices many shared features in their writings. Both Bessie Head and Mahasweta Devi also occupy a unique position in the literary history of their respective countries. Head is the only exiled writer to locate her texts in her adopted homeland and like Mahasweta Devi, she is also a rare writer who has grown up in the city but chronicled rural life in her writings. Mahasweta Devi is today one of the most well-known writers and social activists in India, and as has been commented by many people, her writings focus on the woman question certainly, but are more concerned

with the larger society. This sets her apart from many of her contemporaries writings in various Indian languages. A number of critics have noticed similarities between the apartheid system in South Africa and the Indian caste system. And it is interesting to note that many a time, Head compared her own individual situation to that of the 'untouchable' in Indian society, and found many points of similarity in Hindu Gods, Goddesses, religious practices and her own beliefs. This fact has not been explored in this thesis and may be a possibility for further study.

Both Bessie Head and Mahasweta Devi therefore remain writers situated within their prevailing socio-cultural milieus and write according to the prevailing social and cultural conditions and their personal positions within these conditions. In both their writings, the woman is in search of a space and identity of her own, a distinct place in the societal framework that will empower her and uplift her from her marginalised and subjugated position in society. Yet, at one level, their writings transcend this microcosmic boundary and move towards a more universal, humanist outlook – one that sees both men and women living and working within the societal structures. One can therefore conclude with the following, a comment by Mahasweta Devi, which is probably equally apt for Bessie Head:

It is my conviction that a story writer should be motivated by a sense of history that would help her readers understand their own times...I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest...I have a reverence for materials collected from folklore, for they reveal how the common people have looked at an experience in the past and look at it now...<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Samik Bandopadhyay, introduction. *Five Plays*. p.xiii

