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Subaltern Resistance and Gender Politics in the Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi stands as one of the most powerful literary voices representing the marginalized communities of India. Her writings foreground the struggles of tribal groups, lower-class laborers, and women who are oppressed by structures of class, caste, patriarchy, and state power. This article examines the themes of subaltern resistance and gender politics in Mahasweta Devi's selected works: *Mother of 1084*, *Rudali*, *Draupadi*, and *The Hunt*. Through these narratives, Devi constructs a literary space where silenced voices speak against systemic injustice and patriarchal domination. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Subaltern Studies and feminist criticism, the paper explores how Devi portrays women not merely as victims but as agents of resistance. The analysis demonstrates how characters such as Dopdi Mejhen, Sanichari, Mary Oraon, and Sujata challenge oppressive social structures and assert their identities in defiance of political violence and gender discrimination. The article also investigates how Devi's narrative strategies reveal the lived realities of marginalized communities and question dominant historical narratives. By highlighting the intersection of gender, class, and tribal identity, the selected works expose the mechanisms of social exclusion while celebrating acts of defiance and survival. Ultimately, this study argues that Mahasweta Devi's fiction functions as a powerful form of literary activism that gives voice to the oppressed and redefines the politics of representation in Indian literature. The works thus become significant sites for understanding resistance literature and feminist subaltern discourse in the context of postcolonial India.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, Subaltern Studies, Gender Politics, Resistance, Marginalization, Tribal Identity, Feminist Discourse.

Introduction

Indian literature in English and in translation has long served as a medium through which the voices of marginalized communities are articulated and examined. Among the writers who have contributed significantly to this discourse, Mahasweta Devi occupies a distinctive place. Her literary works reveal the harsh realities faced by tribal communities, peasants, and women who exist on the fringes of mainstream society. Devi's fiction does not merely narrate stories of suffering; it transforms them into narratives of resistance and social critique.

The concept of the "subaltern," widely discussed within the Subaltern Studies collective, refers to groups that remain socially, politically, and economically marginalized. These communities are often excluded from dominant historical narratives and denied representation within structures of power. Mahasweta Devi's literary project can be understood as an attempt to recover these silenced histories and foreground the experiences of those who are historically ignored.

In particular, Devi's works offer a profound engagement with gender politics. Women in her stories often occupy the most vulnerable positions within oppressive hierarchies. Yet they

also emerge as powerful symbols of resistance and resilience. Through characters such as Dopdi Mejhen in *Draupadi*, Sanichari in *Rudali*, Mary Oraon in *The Hunt*, and Sujata in *Mother of 1084*, Devi challenges the conventional representation of women as passive victims.

This article examines how the selected works portray subaltern resistance through the lens of gender politics. By analyzing the narratives, characters, and thematic structures, the study highlights how Devi's literature disrupts dominant narratives and empowers marginalized voices.

Subaltern Theory and Feminist Perspectives

The concept of the subaltern gained prominence through the Subaltern Studies movement, which sought to reinterpret Indian history from the perspective of marginalized communities. Scholars associated with this movement argued that traditional historiography largely ignored the experiences of peasants, tribals, and lower-caste groups. Instead, historical narratives were dominated by elite perspectives.

Feminist scholars further expanded this discourse by examining how gender intersects with class, caste, and ethnicity. Women belonging to subaltern communities face multiple forms of oppression, as they are marginalized both

within patriarchal structures and within broader socio-economic hierarchies. As a result, their experiences represent a complex intersection of power relations.

Mahasweta Devi's works resonate strongly with these theoretical frameworks. Her narratives illustrate how subaltern women negotiate oppressive systems while asserting their autonomy and dignity. Rather than portraying them solely as victims, Devi highlights their agency, resilience, and capacity for resistance.

Through her fiction, Devi also challenges the assumption that marginalized individuals lack political consciousness. Her characters demonstrate an acute awareness of injustice and actively resist structures of domination. This resistance may take different forms, including rebellion, defiance, silence, and symbolic protest. In this sense, Devi's works contribute significantly to the development of feminist subaltern discourse in Indian literature.

Resistance and Political Awakening in Mother of 1084

Mother of 1084 explores the political turmoil associated with the Naxalite movement in India and its impact on middle-class families. The novel revolves around Sujata, a mother who confronts the harsh reality of her son's involvement in revolutionary politics after his death.

Sujata's journey represents a gradual process of political awakening. Initially confined within the domestic sphere, she begins to question the social and political structures that led to her son's death. Through her reflections, the novel exposes the indifference of the urban middle class toward the struggles of marginalized communities.

The narrative also critiques patriarchal family structures that suppress women's voices. Sujata's husband and other family members attempt to silence her questions and emotions. However, Sujata ultimately refuses to accept this silence. Her search for truth becomes an act of resistance against both familial and societal oppression.

In this way, the novel portrays resistance not only as a political act but also as a personal and emotional transformation. Sujata's awakening symbolizes the emergence of a critical consciousness that challenges dominant narratives and demands justice.

Gendered Exploitation and Survival in Rudali

Rudali presents the story of Sanichari, a poor lower-caste woman whose life is marked by continuous suffering and deprivation. The term "rudali" refers to professional mourners who are hired to cry at funerals in certain parts of India. Through this narrative, Mahasweta Devi exposes the deep-rooted inequalities embedded within caste and class structures.

Sanichari's life reflects the systemic marginalization experienced by women belonging to lower social strata. She faces poverty, social discrimination, and personal loss throughout her life. Yet despite these hardships, Sanichari demonstrates remarkable resilience.

The irony of the story lies in the fact that Sanichari, who has endured immense suffering, cannot cry for her own losses. Instead, she eventually becomes a professional mourner who performs grief for the funerals of wealthy individuals. This ironic transformation highlights the commodification of emotion within hierarchical social systems.

At the same time, *Rudali* also depicts solidarity among marginalized women. The friendship between Sanichari and Bikhni becomes a source of emotional support and collective resistance. Through these characters, Devi illustrates how

marginalized women create their own networks of survival within oppressive environments.

Body, Violence, and Defiance in Draupadi

Draupadi is perhaps one of Mahasweta Devi's most powerful and controversial stories. The narrative focuses on Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman who becomes involved in an insurgent movement against state oppression. After being captured by the military, Dopdi is subjected to brutal violence and sexual assault.

However, the story reaches its climax when Dopdi refuses to clothe herself after the assault. Standing naked before the authorities, she confronts her oppressors with defiant courage. This act transforms her violated body into a symbol of resistance.

Through this powerful imagery, Devi challenges patriarchal notions of shame and honor that are often imposed on women's bodies. Dopdi's refusal to submit represents a radical assertion of agency. Rather than internalizing humiliation, she exposes the brutality of the system that seeks to control and silence her.

The story thus becomes a powerful critique of state violence, militarization, and patriarchal domination. Dopdi's defiance demonstrates that resistance can emerge even in the most oppressive circumstances.

Tribal Identity and Female Agency in The Hunt

The Hunt explores the life of Mary Oraon, a tribal woman who embodies courage and independence. Unlike many female characters in conventional narratives, Mary refuses to conform to patriarchal expectations imposed by society.

Mary's participation in the annual tribal hunt symbolizes her strength and autonomy. However, the story also exposes the exploitation faced by tribal communities at the hands of powerful landlords and outsiders. When Mary is threatened by an exploitative man, she ultimately takes a decisive and violent stand against him.

This act represents a form of resistance rooted in tribal traditions and collective values. Mary's character challenges stereotypes that depict tribal women as passive or submissive. Instead, she emerges as a powerful figure who defends her dignity and community.

Through Mary's story, Devi highlights the intersection between gender politics and tribal identity. The narrative demonstrates how cultural traditions can serve as sources of empowerment for marginalized communities.

Intersectionality: Gender, Class, and Tribal Marginalization

One of the most significant aspects of Mahasweta Devi's works is the intersectional nature of oppression experienced by her characters. The women in the selected texts are marginalized not only because of their gender but also because of their class position, caste status, and tribal identity. For instance, Dopdi Mejhen's experience of violence cannot be understood solely in terms of gender. Her identity as a tribal insurgent places her in direct conflict with the state's military apparatus. Similarly, Sanichari's struggles in *Rudali* are shaped by her lower-caste status and economic deprivation.

This intersectionality reveals the complexity of subaltern experiences. Devi's narratives emphasize that systems of oppression operate simultaneously across multiple dimensions of identity. Consequently, resistance also takes diverse forms that reflect the specific conditions of each character's life.

By presenting these layered experiences, Devi challenges simplistic representations of marginalized communities and highlights the need for nuanced social analysis.

Mahasweta Devi's Literary Activism

Mahasweta Devi's writings are deeply connected to her activism and engagement with tribal communities. She spent significant portions of her life working among marginalized groups and advocating for their rights. This direct involvement shaped her literary vision and gave authenticity to her narratives.

Her works function not only as artistic expressions but also as forms of social intervention. By documenting the struggles of marginalized communities, Devi seeks to raise awareness and provoke critical reflection among readers.

In this sense, her fiction can be described as a form of literary activism. The stories challenge readers to confront uncomfortable truths about inequality, injustice, and systemic violence. At the same time, they celebrate the resilience and dignity of communities that continue to resist oppression.

Through this combination of artistic creativity and political commitment, Mahasweta Devi has established herself as one of the most influential voices in contemporary Indian literature.

Conclusion

The selected works of Mahasweta Devi provide profound insights into the experiences of marginalized communities and the complex dynamics of resistance. Through powerful narratives and unforgettable characters, Devi exposes the structural inequalities that shape the lives of subaltern women. At the same time, her stories challenge conventional representations of victimhood by highlighting the agency and resilience of marginalized individuals. Characters such as Dopdi Mejhen, Sanichari, Mary Oraon, and Sujata demonstrate that resistance can take many forms, ranging from subtle acts of defiance to dramatic confrontations with oppressive systems.

By integrating themes of gender politics, class struggle, and tribal identity, Devi's works reveal the interconnected nature of social oppression. Her literature thus contributes significantly to feminist and subaltern discourses in postcolonial studies.

Ultimately, Mahasweta Devi's fiction reminds readers that literature has the power to amplify silenced voices and inspire social transformation. The narratives examined in this article continue to resonate as powerful testimonies of resistance, dignity, and the enduring struggle for justice.

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