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## REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE: THE SUBALTERN IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S WORKS

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### ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi, one of India's most influential literary voices, is known for her powerful depiction of subaltern communities, particularly tribal populations, Dalits, and marginalized women. Her works challenge hegemonic narratives and expose the systemic oppression faced by these groups. This paper examines the representation of the subaltern in Devi's literature, highlighting themes of resistance, agency, and voice. Using postcolonial and subaltern studies perspectives, this study critically analyzes key works, including *Draupadi*, *Rudali*, and *Aranyer Adhikar*, to explore how Devi reclaims the narratives of the oppressed, giving them a space to assert their identity and challenge societal structures.

**KEYWORDS:** Subaltern Studies, Mahasweta Devi, Resistance Literature, Postcolonialism, Dalit and Tribal Narratives.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi, an iconic figure in Indian literature, is celebrated for her unwavering commitment to representing the struggles of marginalized communities, particularly tribal groups, Dalits, and women who exist on the peripheries of mainstream society. As a writer, journalist, and social activist, Devi's works transcend the boundaries of fiction, serving as powerful political statements that expose the deep-seated inequalities entrenched within India's socio-political fabric. Her narratives are not mere depictions of suffering; rather, they are acts of literary defiance, bringing to light the voices of the oppressed and presenting them as agents of resistance. Through her works, she confronts the exploitative structures of caste, class, and gender, challenging the reader to recognize the systemic injustices that perpetuate the subaltern condition. Among her most significant contributions to Indian literature is her portrayal of subaltern resistance, where she subverts dominant narratives to showcase the resilience of those at the margins of society. This paper explores the ways in which Mahasweta Devi gives voice to the subaltern in her fiction, examining how her characters navigate and resist the oppressive forces that seek to silence them.

The term "subaltern," originally introduced by Antonio Gramsci, refers to social groups excluded from hegemonic power structures. It was later expanded by the Subaltern Studies Collective to analyze histories of marginalized communities in postcolonial societies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, critiques the epistemic violence that erases the voices of the subaltern, particularly subaltern women. Mahasweta Devi's literature directly engages with these critical discussions, offering a counter-narrative that insists the subaltern not only exists but speaks with force and agency. Through her meticulous documentation of tribal histories, female oppression, and class struggles, Devi ensures that her characters are not passive victims but active participants in their fight against systemic violence. Her stories frequently depict the brutal realities of state oppression, economic marginalization, and gendered violence while simultaneously highlighting the indomitable spirit of resistance among the oppressed.

One of the most striking aspects of Mahasweta Devi's work is her ability to bridge the gap between literature and activism. Unlike many writers who merely document the plight of the marginalized, Devi actively engaged with the communities she wrote about, working tirelessly for their rights and welfare. Her literary career was deeply intertwined with her activism, as she spent decades

advocating for the rights of the Adivasis, Dalits, and landless laborers. Her writing thus becomes a vehicle for political intervention, urging readers to question the status quo and recognize the need for structural change. This intersection between literature and activism is what sets Devi apart as a writer—her works are not detached, aestheticized representations of suffering but rather urgent calls to action that demand a reexamination of social injustices.

Her narratives are often rooted in historical contexts, drawing attention to the long-standing exploitation of tribal and lower-caste communities. *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights to the Forest), for instance, reconstructs the life of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who led an anti-colonial and anti-feudal revolt in the late 19th century. The novel not only highlights the economic and political subjugation of the Adivasis but also underscores their resistance against state and feudal forces. Devi's portrayal of Birsa Munda challenges the mainstream historiographical erasure of tribal resistance, presenting an alternative history where the subaltern emerges as an active participant rather than a passive subject. By reclaiming and rewriting history from the perspective of the oppressed, Devi disrupts the dominant colonial and postcolonial narratives that have historically marginalized Adivasi voices.

Another significant aspect of Devi's representation of the subaltern is her focus on gender and the intersectionality of oppression. *Draupadi*, one of her most renowned short stories, serves as a powerful critique of state-sponsored violence and patriarchal oppression. The protagonist, Dopdi Mejhen, is a tribal woman and a Naxalite rebel who is brutally raped and tortured by the police. However, in an act of ultimate defiance, she refuses to be shamed or subdued. In the climactic scene, Dopdi confronts her oppressors, standing naked and unbroken, asserting her agency despite the violence inflicted upon her. This moment of resistance subverts traditional notions of female victimhood, illustrating how the subaltern woman, often deemed voiceless, can reclaim her subjectivity through defiance. Spivak's analysis of *Draupadi* suggests that Dopdi's final act is a radical assertion of autonomy—one that challenges both patriarchal and state power. Devi, through this narrative, dismantles the idea that subaltern women are mere objects of oppression, instead presenting them as powerful agents of resistance.

Similarly, *Rudali* examines the intersection of gender, caste, and economic deprivation. The protagonist, Sanichari, is a lower-caste widow who becomes a professional mourner. Devi

critiques the hypocrisy of the upper-caste elite, who exploit the grief of the poor for performative rituals while simultaneously oppressing them. However, Sanichari's transformation from a helpless widow to an empowered woman who reclaims agency over her suffering illustrates the potential for resistance within systemic oppression. Devi's portrayal of Sanichari is emblematic of her broader literary project—demonstrating that even within structures designed to subjugate, the marginalized can carve out spaces for defiance and survival.

Language plays a crucial role in Devi's representation of the subaltern. Unlike many Indian writers who adopt English as their medium, Devi primarily wrote in Bengali, ensuring that her narratives remained accessible to the communities she represented. Furthermore, her use of dialects, tribal speech patterns, and colloquialisms disrupts the linguistic hegemony that often characterizes literary representation. By incorporating the speech and idioms of marginalized groups, Devi ensures that their voices are not only heard but also recognized as legitimate forms of expression. This linguistic strategy serves as an act of resistance, challenging the dominance of elite discourse and asserting the cultural identity of the subaltern.

Another recurring theme in Devi's work is land dispossession and economic exploitation, particularly of tribal communities. *Aranyer Adhikar*, *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*, and several of her other works address how state policies and capitalist expansion have systematically displaced Adivasis from their ancestral lands. Through her fiction, Devi critiques the development narratives that often justify such dispossession in the name of progress. She exposes the paradox wherein the very communities that sustain India's natural resources are the ones most ruthlessly displaced by industrial and governmental interventions. Her deep engagement with tribal movements and land rights struggles informs her fiction, making it an essential critique of neocolonial exploitation in post-independence India.

Mahasweta Devi's representation of the subaltern is thus deeply political, rooted in an understanding that literature is not merely a medium of storytelling but a tool for resistance. Her works challenge dominant historiographies, disrupt linguistic hierarchies, and expose the exploitative structures that sustain caste, gender, and economic oppression. More importantly, she does not allow her subaltern characters to remain passive subjects of oppression; they resist, confront, and reclaim their narratives. Whether it is Dopdi Mejhen's naked defiance, Sanichari's

economic agency, or Birsa Munda's anti-colonial rebellion, Devi's protagonists embody the spirit of resistance that defines subaltern struggles.

In a literary landscape where subaltern voices have historically been erased or misrepresented, Mahasweta Devi's work stands as a vital intervention. Her commitment to giving voice to the voiceless extends beyond fiction, influencing social activism and policy advocacy. Her literature demands that readers not only acknowledge subaltern suffering but also recognize the agency of those who resist it. By centering the stories of the marginalized, Devi challenges both literary and socio-political power structures, ensuring that the subaltern, far from being silenced, speaks with undeniable force.

## II. THE SUBALTERN IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S WORKS

- 1. Gender and Subalternity: The Case of *Draupadi*** One of Devi's most celebrated short stories, *Draupadi*, centers on Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman and a Naxalite insurgent. The story subverts the Mahabharata's Draupadi narrative, replacing the royal heroine with a disenfranchised tribal woman who is brutalized by the state's armed forces. Despite being raped and dehumanized, Dopdi refuses to submit. In a powerful act of defiance, she confronts her oppressors, rejecting shame and stripping herself of imposed victimhood. This narrative challenges the patriarchal and state machinery that seek to silence subaltern voices. Spivak famously analyzed *Draupadi*, arguing that Dopdi's final act of resistance is a moment of agency—an assertion of subaltern speech through nonconformity and bodily defiance. Devi's portrayal of Dopdi is emblematic of how her fiction gives voice to the voiceless, making the subaltern not only visible but formidable.
- 2. Class and Caste Oppression: *Rudali* as Subaltern Narrative** In *Rudali*, Devi exposes the intersectionality of gender, caste, and economic exploitation. The protagonist, Sanichari, is a lower-caste widow who becomes a professional mourner. The story critiques the feudal system, illustrating how the poor are forced into occupations dictated by their social positioning. Sanichari's transformation from a helpless widow to an empowered woman who reclaims agency over her suffering challenges traditional narratives of victimhood. Devi demonstrates how survival within oppressive structures can itself be an

act of resistance. *Rudali* ultimately critiques both systemic inequalities and the performative aspects of grief that commodify subaltern suffering for elite entertainment.

- 3. Tribal Identity and Historical Struggle: *Aranyer Adhikar*** *Aranyer Adhikar* (Right to the Forest) chronicles the life of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who led an anti-colonial and anti-feudal revolt in the late 19th century. Devi presents Munda's story as a historical counter-narrative to dominant historiographies that often erase tribal resistance. Through Munda's struggle, Devi highlights the alienation of indigenous communities from their land, their economic disenfranchisement, and their resilience in the face of systemic oppression. The novel underscores how colonial and postcolonial state policies continue to marginalize Adivasi populations, reinforcing their subaltern status.

### III. THEMES OF RESISTANCE IN DEVI'S WORKS

- 1. Language and Subaltern Voice** Devi's use of language—blending tribal dialects, regional vernaculars, and colloquialisms—disrupts hegemonic literary traditions. She amplifies subaltern voices by incorporating their linguistic identities, making their speech and cultural expressions central to her storytelling.
- 2. Women as Agents of Defiance** Many of Devi's female protagonists challenge patriarchal and casteist power structures. Whether it is Dopdi Mejhen's fearless confrontation or Sanichari's economic independence, Devi's women subvert traditional expectations, reclaiming autonomy over their bodies and destinies.
- 3. Political and Economic Marginalization** Through themes of land dispossession, forced labor, and state violence, Devi exposes the economic exploitation of subaltern groups. Her fiction serves as an indictment of both colonial and post-independence policies that have failed to uplift marginalized communities.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Mahasweta Devi's literary activism brings to light the struggles and resistance of India's subaltern populations. By centering their experiences, she dismantles dominant narratives that erase their histories and voices. Her works not only document oppression but also celebrate acts of defiance, reaffirming the agency of those relegated to the margins. Through *Draupadi*, *Rudali*, and *Aranyer*

Adhikar, Devi presents a nuanced portrayal of the subaltern—one that is not passive or victimized but resilient and confrontational. Her fiction challenges readers to rethink the politics of representation and to acknowledge the voices that have long been silenced.

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