

# Subaltern Liberation: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's Writings

**Dr. K. R. Athista**

Guest Faculty

Department of English and Comparative Literature

Madurai Kamaraj University

Madurai

---

## Abstract:

The tribes own individual identity as 'adivasis' with their own language, religion, festivals, dance and music. Tribal history shows elements of subjugation, passive acceptance of suffering, humiliation and starvation. 'Subaltern' refers to the lower rank in the military. In literature subaltern studies mirror the sufferings of the voiceless sections of the society. Mahasweta Devi, (1926-2016) is a chronicler and social activists documenting the sufferings of the *adivasis*. She explores troubling motifs in contemporary Indian life through the figures and narratives of the indigenous tribes of India. Her stories map, in both delicate and violent style, the experience of the tribals and their lives under decolonization. She links the specific fate of the tribals in India to that of the marginalised peoples everywhere in the world. The moneylenders, the landlords, the bureaucrats and the politicians benefit from the welfare schemes and push the tribals to lead lives of poverty, suffering, humiliation, oppression and exploitation. The aim of the paper is to show attempts for liberation of tribals subalternity through resistances by individuals, groups and intellectual thinking. The social activist touch of Devi incorporates the consciousness of the individual raising a voice of revolt against the oppressors. The possible solution to end tribal afflictions is the collective revolt driving the tribals to liberate themselves and their race. Devi's "Aajir", "Water", *Titu Mir*, *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*, "Seed" and *Dust on the Road* bear testimony to this consciousness.

**Keywords:** Mahasweta Devi, Subaltern Liberation, decolonization, oppression, collective revolt, resistance, liberate

The tribes own individual identity as 'adivasis' with their own language, religion, festivals, dance and music. With an enigmatic culture and hospitality, they also significantly hold contrasting patriarchal and matriarchal societies. 'Tribe' is derived from the Middle English having Latin roots *Tribuz* which means a nomadic group of Roman races. According to Oxford dictionary, a 'tribe' is a group of people of primitive or barbarous stage of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding themselves as having common ancestors.

Indian tribes fall into four main divisions: 1. Tribal: Those who still live away from the civilised world in the forest and still maintain their primitive patterns of life. 2. Semi-Tribal: Those who have more or less settled in rural areas and taken to agriculture and allied occupation. 3. Accelerated: Those who have migrated to towns and semi urban areas and engaged themselves

---

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:9 September 2019

Prof. Dr. S. Chelliah, Editor: Select Papers of the International Conference on *Paradigms of Marginality in Literature - Exploring the Nuances*

Dr. K. R. Athista Subaltern Liberation: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's Writings

in ordinary occupations and have adopted the culture of the civilised population and at the same time continuing contacts with their tribal culture. 4. Totally assimilated: Those who have been totally assimilated in the normal urban ways of life.

Anthropologists and sociologists have identified certain common features emerging from the definitions of the tribals. They are:

- a. Living away from the civilized world in inaccessible forests and hills
- b. Speaking their own dialects
- c. Professing primitive religious animism
- d. Following primitive occupations such as gardening, hunting and gathering of forest produce
- e. Living either naked/ semi naked using tree barks and leaves for clothing, having nomadic habits and love for drink and dance.

The term 'subaltern' refers to the lower rank officer in the British army below the rank of Captain, especially a Second Lieutenant. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a feminist critic, labelled oppressed sections of the society as 'Subaltern'. Spivak terms 'subalternity' as "The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite'." (*The Spivak Reader*, 203) The word 'subaltern' loosely derived from the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci designates non elite or subordinated social groups. In post-colonial terms it can mean someone who has been marginalized or oppressed. The sufferings of the tribals continue unabated even after seven decades of Indian independence.

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), a Bengali writer, explores troubling motifs in contemporary Indian life through the figures and narratives of the indigenous tribes of India. The stories of Devi map in both delicate and violent style the experiences of the tribals and their lives under decolonization. Devi links the specific fate of the tribals in India to that of the marginalised peoples everywhere in the world. Originally written in Bengali, her works have been translated into English by translators such as Spivak, R. B. Chatterjee, Samik Bandhopadhyay and so on.

The literary oeuvre of Devi portrays characters who are the products of inhuman exploitation. The sufferings of the tribals as quoted by Devi are:

"After thirty-one years of Independence, I (Devi) find many people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour."

(Introduction: *Five Plays*, X)

Devi had the fortune of encountering a handful of contemporary tribal intellectuals such as Chuni Kotal and Jaladhar Sabar. The sufferings of the tribals in India continue unabated even after seven decades of independence.

The subaltern tribes are imposed restrictions by the Indian Forest Act of 1878. The act radically has changed the ownership of the forest. It denies them the right over forest land and produce. The encroachment of the outsiders into the forest area has not only implied land loss to the tribes but also to the tribal languages, especially their folklore.

Devi turns her attention to the marginalized tribals and untouchable of India, particularly Bihar and West Bengal. She has made remarkable contributions to literary and cultural studies in India. Her powerful, haunting tales of exploitation and struggle have been seen as rich sites of tribal discourse by leading scholars. The landlords, the bureaucrats, the moneylenders and the politicians push the tribals to a life of poverty, suffering, bonded labour, oppression and exploitation. Devi pens the tribal sufferings in her literary oeuvre.

The trauma of inhuman subjugation by the landlords against the innocent tribes reflects her firsthand experience with bonded labourers. Devi's interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak included in "Notes for Anveshi/ Subaltern Studies Conference", an unpublished work, states,

"In 1965, I started going to Palamu ...an inaccessible district, the poorest in the state of Bihar.... In such backward, feudally oppressed districts, the bonded labour system survives... (which) was introduced by the British.... I have covered all of the (Bihar) district on foot .... Thus, bonded labour system, in its naked savagery and its bloody exploitation ... became clear to me. (4)

In "Aajir" included in *Five Plays*, Paatan seeks identity for himself in a world which has for ages suppressed his kind. He confronts a society that denies him a right to live a life of a human being on the principle of equality with his fellow human beings. He is forced to do a work he hates. Unlike his forefathers, Paatan craves for a free-life. He is a descendant of a great family of slaves that "lived in the Bengali era 1101, corresponding to 1072 of the Hijra era" (48). He thinks of escaping into a world where there is no master and he can have a family of his own. He speaks,

PAATAN. ... The aajir's bond! I'll tear it to pieces and scatter them to the winds. Then? ... Then I'll be a man. I'll marry Bhumidasi.  
Bhumidasi! I'll be an aajir no longer. (55-56)

As a silent protester, Paatan meekly undergoes all sorts of humiliations at the hands of his master, Maatang. Enslaved for life, he is not entitled to human joy. The repetition of the voice "The term *aajir* stands for one who has sold himself into slavery for a paltry sum" (45) reverberates the predicament of humanity which has been exploited and marginalized from time immemorial. The bonded slave, Paatan gets whipping at the hands of his master, Maatang at every alternate hour or day. The conversation between the mistress and the master illustrates the treacherous life the aajir is forced to lead.

THE MISTRESS. Were you beating Paatan?

MAATANG. I had told He's a horrible sinner.

THE MISTRESS. Why?

MAATANG. Why does he forget he's an aajir? His forefathers sold him away. He wouldn't keep that in mind, he'd dream of marrying, having a family of his own .... Is there anyone who'd give away a daughter in marriage to an aajir?  
(49-50)

The initial seed of getting married develops a revolt against the traditional constraints in Paatan. Ranjit Guha echoes a similar view in *Subaltern Studies*. He writes,

When a peasant rose in revolt or any time or place ... he did so necessarily and explicitly in violation of a series of codes which defined his very existence as a member of that ... semi-feudal society. (1)

Paatan rebels not only against the tradition but also against the dictates of his conscience. Desire to live a human life in a world without class status and distinction, drives him to elope with the mistress. When Paatan demands the Mistress to show the bond, the fact that the bond is nonexistent is revealed. She speaks,

THE MISTRESS. It is just a *gaamchha* (takes it out, shakes it) with the bond long turned to dust. There's no bond any longer. (66)

Unable to accept the truth regarding the non-existence of the *gaamchha*, Paatan brutally murders the Mistress. Shocked at the unexpected turn of events, he becomes very assertive in his final confrontation with Maatang admitting that there has not been any aajir's bond:

MAATANG. I haven't seen it myself, my father hadn't seen it, it had turn to dust long ago in this *gaamchha* in which it had been once upon a time. (67)

A fictitious and nonexistent bond has kept three generations of Paatan as bonded labourers. Realizing that there is no bond binding him to his master, Paatan walks proudly to the police station speaking,

PAATAN. Like everyone else in the world, I was a free man (stating a fact), and I alone didn't know. (67)

The thirst for liberty forces the bonded slave Paatan to become a murderer to grab the bond believed to have been executed by his forefathers. The life-like portrayal of the sufferings of bonded slavery that exists among the tribes in Bengal is presented poignantly by Devi in "Aajir". Paatan is a subaltern fighting individually for his liberation.

Devi's "Water" included in *Five Plays* explores the sufferings of a tribal community that is socially, politically and economically oppressed. The drama deals with an untouchable, Maghai Dome, a water-diviner. He is in conflict with the feudal society. The exploiter, Santhosh Babu

keeps for himself a large amount of relief material meant for the tribals during the famine. In addition, he does not allow the untouchables to draw water from the well. In spite of Maghai's own water divining skill, he fails to provide water for his people. Jiten, a selfless servicer inspires the community by constructing a dam across the river to quench the eternal thirst. Foreseeing a threat to his existence, Santhosh Babu informs the authorities that all the untouchables have become Naxalites. Marching along with the police, Babu breaks the dam. The drama ends with Maghai being carried away on the crest of the waves of the furious *Charasa*.

Untouchability is a social evil in India being perpetuated down the ages. The drama opens with the characters openly admitting that they are untouchables. Dhura says "We're untouchables". Also, the upper caste people segregated the tribal community by not allowing them to stay near their huts. Dhura explains the pathetic life of the tribes thus:

DHURA. . . . When we (tribal people) go to distribute the 'prasad' from the Dharam Puja, in the village they wouldn't let us stand under the ledges of their huts. (126)

The attitude of the bureaucrats is callous and against the interest of the tribals. Maghai speaks,

MAGHAI. . . . We have been told that there's no untouchability in our subdivision, and yet Santosh Babu, you your caste brothers and your relations won't let us draw water from any well.(138)

Santosh represents the upper class society. He claims himself to be pious. According to him, the Domes who rear pigs for their living are supposed to be unclean and thereby will pollute the water in the well.

Although law dissuades any discrimination in the society, untouchability persists in India. The gap between the legal sanction against untouchability and its actual practice is indicated thus:

SANTOSH. Maghai, it's not a question of untouchability. You know already that the government has discredited that there'll be no untouchability. I've nothing to say about that . . . We worship our gods in our house instead of pigs and fowls . . . isn't the water polluted if you touch it? (138)

The final speech of Maghai who appears tottering one hand on his bleeding chest is heart breaking. Not to die an ordinary death, he declares:

MAGHAI. . . . I can't let them carry me as a corpse into a bloody morgue. My last journey will be with the water. . . (198)

The passive acceptance of the fact of being an untouchable acquires a turn when Dhura makes an appeal to his father to stop serving the upper-caste people. He says,

DHURA. . . . Why does father have to act the water-diviner for Santosh whenever he asks him- to? . . . for him, the shadow of a Dome pollutes his pitcher, and he'd throw away the water. (143)

Maghai and his son Dhura resist upper caste restrictions individually. Maghai, the water-diviner, is denied water for consumption. He is carried away by the River Charsha finally. Dhura objects to his father serving as water diviner for the upper castes. The revolt of the tribes in "Water" suggests the importance of the collective force against humiliation, oppression and exploitation. Devi's foreword to **Rakasi Kora** in *The Plays of Mahasweta Devi* runs thus: "When they (the oppressed) rise, get organized and fight back, only then history can be changed" (qtd. in E. Satyanarayana 127).

In addition to the bonded labour system, the landlords get wageless labour from the tribals. Devi provides case histories of tribals turned landless in her *Dust on the Road*. In India, the tribes are continuously humiliated, oppressed and exploited. The government welfare schemes do not benefit them. The bureaucrats and the politicians are really benefitted by the welfare schemes. Hence, the condition of the tribal communities remains status quo. The tribals are underprivileged and disadvantaged and they suffer from penury.

*Titu Mir* pens the emergence of the tribal heroes long subjected to acute torture and suffering by British rulers. The charismatic hero Titu Mir organizes a collective revolt against the Indigo plantations which eats up fertile agricultural land. The natural leader defends the rural poor against the exploitation by landlords and the British at the risk of his own life. References to the Wahabi doctrine, the Sanyasi Revolt and the Narkelberia Revolt (1830-31) in *Titu Mir* resurrect the tribal role in the Indian freedom struggle. The revolt of Bisra Munda documented in *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* turns out to be a voice for the liberation of the tribals. *Ulgulan* is a great tumult led by Bisra Munda in Ranchi and northern Singhbhum district of Bihar from December 1899 to January 1900. The movement led by Munda is against land alienation, an attempt by the moneylenders and the traders. The rebellions of the adivasis highlight their claim to the forest land. In the publishers' blurb Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak documents thus:

"After *Chotti*, the text of tribality frees itself from the burden of a merely 'Indian' history . . . *Chotti Munda* repeatedly dramatizes subaltern solidarity: Munda, Oraon, and the Hindu outcastes must work together. Today such a solidarity has a name: Dalit."

In "Seeds" [Bichhan] included in *Bitter Soil* Lachman Singh, the landlord has nexus with the BDO (Block Development Officer), SDO (Sub Divisional Officer) and the police officer and threatens the tribals for forced labour. He gives them twenty five paise each whereas the tribals

expect eight annas. They say, “He’s (Singh) giving four annas. This will be our 25 – paise battle for an additional four annas.” (34). Singh kills six tribals – Karan, Asrafi, Bulaki, Mohar, Mahuban and Para – who demanded additional wages and objected to his hiring contract labourers from outside for harvesting. Dulan Ganju meets Singh alone and takes revenge against him. He smashes Singh’s head with a piece of rock and kills him. Dulan distributes paddy to his fellow men for cultivation and apostrophises “Dhatua, I’ve turned you all into seed” (58). Thus, seed becomes a symbol of revenge against oppression and exploitation. *Titu Mir*, “Seeds” and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* suggest collective revolt for subaltern liberation.

Devi, a champion of the tribals, voices for tribal uplift in her writings. She implicitly and at times explicitly suggests subaltern solidarity to end tribal sufferings. The ending of her narratives is gripping and they suggest the ways for liberating tribals from their endless serfdom and subjugation. To ameliorate the sufferings and to preserve the tribal identity, individuals uprise from tribal groups. Although the mainstream society accuses their struggle against exploitation as sessionist activities, the seeds for liberation continue to exist. Generally, individual uprisings are curbed by the manoeuvrings of the rich people, politicians, the bureaucrats and the police. Devi suggests collective revolt as a measure to end tribal sufferings. Intellectually, Devi has prepared the tribals for their liberation. From 1980 Devi edited *Bortika*, a quarterly magazine, inviting articles from tribal contributors. The magazine functions as a platform for the downtrodden tribals in Indian society — the dispossessed tribals and the marginalised segments like the landless labourers of Eastern India. The tribals articulate their sufferings for redressal. *Bortika* documents Devi’s research on tribes conducted through unconventional means such as oral history.

In *Dust on the Road*, Devi suggests the formation of *Samithis* (a grassroot level organisation) to implement the Government sponsored Welfare programmes for tribal uplift. According to Devi, the village panchayat administration, the Block Development Office and the Revenue Departments usually have callous attitude to tribal uplift. Programmes carried out by these offices exclude tribal participation and involvement. *Samithis* on the other hand involve the tribals in development programmes meant for them. Discussions precede prioritization of programmes. The implementation of the programmes takes place with tribal participation. These may include digging wells, farming vegetables, maintaining aqua culture, establishing cottage industries, preparing art and handicraft and so on. Hence, the tribals get due payments for their labour. Middlemen cannot exploit their labour. There is avoidance of misuse and wastage of funds on administrative machinery.

To sum up, tribal afflictions continue unabated in India. The mainstream society absolves the tribal culture of its distinctive vitality and identity by oppressive forces. Devi is a concerned and committed social activist writer who has documented in her writings tribal oppression and ways to liberate themselves. “Aajir” shows the emergence of individual heroes to liberate the tribals. “Water”, *Titu Mir* and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* show collective revolt to end tribal afflictions. *Bortika* edited by Devi triggers the tribal contributors of articles to reflect on their

problems and intellectually resolve issues. Devi suggests samithis as an alternative to Government machinery for effectively implementing welfare programmes meant for the tribals.

---

### Works Cited

#### Primary Sources

- Devi, Mahasweta. *Bitter Soil*. Trans. Ipsita Chanda. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Five Plays*. Trans. Samik Bandyopadhyay. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Titu Mir*. Trans. Rimi B. Chatterjee. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000. Print.

#### Secondary Sources

- Guha, Ranjit. "The Prose of Counter – Insurgency," *Subaltern Studies II*. Ed. Guha. Delhi: OUP, 1983. Print.
- Landry, Donna and Gerald Maclean. *The Spivak Reader*. Ed. Landry. New York & London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Sayanarayana, E. *The Plays of Mahasweta Devi*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000. Print.
- Spivak, Gayathri Chakravorty. "Notes for Anveshi/Subaltern Studies Conference" (Unpublished and Shelved at Anveshi Research Centre for Women, Hyderabad).