

**Resisting from Below: A Critical Reading of Female Subaltern  
Voices in Mahasweta Devi's Short Story *Giribala* and Baby Halder's  
Autobiography *A Life Less Ordinary***

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**Abstract**

The socio-economic marginalization faced by the subaltern domestic worker woman is a unique position in which class, caste and gender intersect to create a multiply marginalized subject who is marked by a sense of precariousness experienced on a daily basis. In the short story "Giribala" written by the renowned writer and activist Mahasweta Devi, and in the autobiography *A Life Less Ordinary* by Baby Halder, the central female characters are subaltern women who fight against gender based and economic marginalization to develop an individual identity. This paper closely analyses the intersectional nature of the overlapping marginalizations faced by subaltern women like the fictional character Giribala and the real person Baby, to draw parallels in the challenges they face from their unique socio-economically subaltern position. This paper focuses on the power struggle of negotiating/creating a space for themselves by the women subjugated by the male-dominated social structures and enquires whether it is even a possibility for a woman belonging to the economically marginalized class.

**Keywords:** Mahasweta Devi, "Giribala", Baby Halder, *A Life Less Ordinary*, Third world women, class, feminism, subaltern, intersectionality.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty talks about how the 'third world women'- the real, material subjects of their collective histories are formed (in opposition to the western feminism's representation of the monolithic oppressed "average third world woman" (337)) not in an ahistorical space, but are "produced" (340) through their social relations as well as by being implicated in forming these relations.<sup>1</sup> Taking into consideration the heterogeneous social relations and economic marginalization that form the subjectivity of women in Mahasweta Devi's "Giribala", and the domestic worker Baby Halder's autobiography *A Life Less Ordinary*

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<sup>1</sup> See Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" pg. 333-337 for a wider understanding of "the average third world women" constructed in contrast to the self-representation of the educated Western woman.

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(2008), Talpade's postulation stands true for the women, both the fictional characters in Devi's story as well as for the domestic worker Baby Halder. The subjects of these two powerful narratives are exposed to the hardships involved in the working life of a lower-class woman, and their struggle for finding space for thriving is unique in its socio-economic location. Striving to negotiate their way amidst a quagmire of hegemonic male relations and exploitative employers, both women, fictional and real, share the ethics of courage in the face of hardships that life has to offer; and resist the gendered status quo in their own social spaces despite all attempts by society to appropriate them in the hierarchical heterosexual relationship. This paper focuses on the power struggle of negotiating/creating a space for themselves by the women subjugated by the male-dominated social structures and enquires whether it is even a possibility for a woman belonging to the economically marginalized class.

Mahasweta Devi was a renowned Bengali writer and activist whose contribution to literature and society has been recognized by Sahitya Akademi as well by the Indian government as she is the recipient of prestigious civilian awards Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan. Devi's strong activist background is reflected in the narrative of her short story "Giribala" in which the eponymous teenage protagonist belonging to the poor landless peasant class is married to an older man, Aullchand, an "absolute vagabond" (330), whose exploitative masculine hold over her life brings more trials in her already precarious life. As Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav point out in the introduction of *Mahasweta Devi: An anthology of recent criticism*, the author's firsthand experience and familiarity with the tribes and peasants in areas like Palamau, Murshidabad, Medinipur and Purulia helped her to paint a realistic picture of their social exploitation, and the even more marginalized status of the peasant and subaltern women workers who are often further exposed to the threat of sexual violation as well.<sup>2</sup>

The writer graphically captures the plight of women embedded in the cultural consciousness of the community, by recording oral regional sayings like, "A girl's by fate discarded, lost if she's dead, lost if she's wed." (325) Giribala works at the Babu's house and dreams of owning a home for her family someday. But the patriarchal socio-economic structure in which she is situated denies even her subjectivity, "It had never struck anyone that Giribala might have a heart and mind of her own" (323). As the main breadwinner and economic agent of the family, Giribala's value lies in her economic and reproductive productivity, leaving no space for the development or expression of an individualistic subjectivity. When she gets a sterilization operation done after the birth of her fourth child, her husband abuses her for giving up her reproduction capacity which served to provide him with human resources to employ in the master's house, or worse, sell them (the daughters) in the prostitution racket. "Why did you have

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<sup>2</sup> For more on Mahasweta's grassroots activism see Introduction *Mahasweta Devi: An Anthology of recent criticism*, ed. Nivedita Sen et al.

that operation, wife, the more daughters you produce, the more money you acquire” (339). Giribala is stuck in an exploitative matrix in her marriage, created by her husband in collusion with the girl- trafficking mediator Mohan, who orchestrates the marriage of Belarani and Paribala and sells them in the flesh-trade under the guise of marriage with ‘Bihar’ grooms who pay lucrative bride-price. As Sadhna Sharma points out, Mahasweta Devi “penned stories to render and reveal to our gaze the charade and duplicity of the democratic set-up in our country and to give a picture of the fates of the marginalized women experiencing and undergoing untold miseries within and without their own communities.”

The state, the community and the patriarchal family structure come together to exploit the lower-class woman; expected to be at the beck and call of the provider- patriarch, subservient to the employer master and unable to approach the often gender-biased and pro rich police system. When Giribala who embodies this marginalized position seeks justice for her abducted daughters through the legal system,

The Babu explains to Giri’s father, Thana-police is lots of trouble, very expensive too. The damage is done...All this talk of marriage is just a front for girl-trafficking. The racket’s in full swing all over Murshidabad. ... A few crisp notes are enough to make the beggars lose their heads. The police won’t touch a case that’s full of holes (331).

The landless man’s quest for having a home of his own leads him to commodifying the female body, firstly his wife has to produce ‘working’ children, and then selling the daughters under the guise of marriage to men from far off lands. Giribala, a fictional but all too real character is intuitive enough to realize that in the male-dominated family structure where her womb becomes a source of production, and her children, especially girls, are commodified for ‘profit’, she will never be able to achieve any space for safe existence, either for herself, or her children.<sup>3</sup>

The patriarchal anxieties of even the male well wishers are apparent in Bangshi Dhamali’s reservations about the prospect of schooling for Giribala’s children. The ‘products’ of the womb of a subaltern woman existing on the periphery of economic structures are automatically assigned the role of a worker in an exploitative economy, an easy prey to social deprivation and sexual violation.

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<sup>3</sup> “Even the daughters can yield so much profit, see how much money I got...” “Giribala” 332

Giribala's particular socio-economic position extends Beauvoir's argument of marriage being the 'destiny' traditionally offered to women by a patriarchal society.<sup>4</sup> In her landless, tribal domestic worker position, where subsistence itself is under doubt, the constant refrain is, "A woman's by fate discarded, lost if she's wed, lost if she's dead" (332). For a triply marginalized tribal woman like Giribala; subject to economic, caste and gender bias; being wed is equivalent to being dead for her life is discarded by the 'fate'. As Aullchand replies to Giribala while discussing their daughter's marriage, "A daughter means a female slave for someone else's house, after all" (327).

Feminists since the time of nineteenth century German Marxist feminist Clara Zetkins have understood the fissures of class that divides a collective questioning of patriarchy by the monolithic oppressed 'woman'.<sup>5</sup> The upper-class mistress lends only a few morsels in charity or pragmatic 'wise' advice that the daughter is father's "property" (332) and hence, Giribala should give up resistance. Despite her drunkard husband's ruthless and inhumane act of selling their daughters, when Giribala decides to break away from her 'fate' based on her gender role in her class position, she faces collective censure by the male-dominated society. "Everyone is convinced that it's not Aullchand but Giribala who's at fault. An indescribable relief fills them, all of them, when they reach this conclusion" (340). The woman's disruption of the hegemonic patriarchy is immediately vilified and her break away from family structure leads her to ostracization by the society within which the patriarchal family works. Armed with no education to become a skilled worker, Giribala moves towards the city leaving behind her wastrel husband and her saddest thoughts are that she wished she had done it earlier. An innate sense of raw rebellion marks this fictional narrative, and it is one of the major factors which connects it to real-life domestic worker Baby Halder's autobiography, *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006). Facing exploitative husbands, brief childhoods, challenging motherhood, and status as a domestic worker, the fictional Giribala and real Baby are more alike than different.

Baby Halder's autobiography, originally written in Bengali and published as *Aalo Andhari (From Darkness to Light)* in 2002 was a result of her resilience in the face of patriarchal abuse and silencing which she had escaped when she fled to Delhi and started working as a maid in urban houses. Her chance meeting with Prabodh Kumar, the grandson of Munshi Premchand, who noticed her interest in books and encouraged her to write her story in Bengali, was a turning point in the life of Halder. Written in a matter-of-fact tone which describes the everyday violence and lived experience of precarity, Halder's autobiography became a significant intervention in literary spaces in which the subaltern woman's voice was not prominently visible. Urvashi

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<sup>4</sup> For Beauvoir's Idea of The Married Woman see "The Second Sex", Part V, Ch-1.

<sup>5</sup> Zetkins, the famous German socialist who brought social issues forward in association to the woman's question. For more see Chapter 1 of her "Selected Writings" New York:International Publisher,1984. Print.

Butalia points out in the foreword of English translation of *Aalo Aandhari* or *A Life Less Ordinary*, “Abandoned as a young child by her mother, married off by an uncaring father to a man fourteen years her senior when she was barely thirteen, a mother by the time she became fourteen, trapped in a violent marriage, Baby’s story is not unique” (v). Baby’s quest after and the desire to “read and write” (v) gives her the means to express herself, unlike Giribala. As Butalia points out, the problem in bringing forth the narratives of the women at the margins of economic class is that they are “largely invisible”, moreover, many have not had the “privilege of an education”, and thus, even though they may have strong feelings about issues, they may not be able to give “literary expression” (viii) to them. Baby’s education, however inadequate or intermittent, gives her the means to express her life story and give words to the silent maid, the invisible ‘subaltern’ who exists in the shadows of the privileges denied to them.

Baby’s autobiography covers almost three decades of her life narrating a disturbing amount of psychological, physical and sexual violence, control over her spatial movements by hegemonic male figures like father/brother/ husband, and a normalized and naturalized state of subordination for women in a patriarchal world. Facing marital rape at the age of fourteen, Baby is unaware of her legal rights and the illegitimacy of either child marriage or child labor until she meets her Samaritan employer, Probudh Kumar.<sup>6</sup> Understanding the material and spatial politics of where she has to live is important to understand her problems, unique to her socio-economic position. Born in Kashmir and later living in Murshidabad, she moves to a dingy neighborhood in Durgapur when she gets married to Shankar. Unable to afford a well-equipped house, she shares the bathroom at her neighbor Sandhya’s house in a sort of communal arrangement. Scarcity of economic resources leads to all the community members pooling in money for renting movies, but this communal openness leaves her more vulnerable to the gaze of passersby and sexual predators like Ajit. It is not the predator, but the woman who is vilified in such a situation and her husband imposes multiple restrictions on her mobility and finances. However, Baby’s innate sense of rebellion and questioning makes her intervene in these restricting practices, for instance, when she saves raw rice and tries to sell it back to her husband, or when she starts taking tuitions or working as a domestic worker for financial independence.

The patriarchal anxiety to establish control over a woman’s sexuality leads to multiple restrictions on her movement and behavior in the public sphere. Even women internalize the patriarchal anxiety to control another woman’s sexuality as visible in the behavior of Baby’s stepmother who suspects an ‘abnormal relationship’ between father- daughter because she saw Baby consoling her father once. Thus, patriarchy is exposed as a socio-cultural ideological structure which sustains inequality between the sexes and can be sustained by both male and female subjects. Similarly, the resistance to the patriarchal ideology can also emerge from male

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<sup>6</sup> Baby narrates her marital rape as, “I just endured everything ”pp.39.

subjects like Prabodh Kumar, the latter employer of Baby, who will equip her with the means to gain control over her own narrative.

However, the spirit of resistance had always been there in Baby, as seen in the incident where she ruptures the hypocrisy of patriarchal society which stigmatizes Shashti, her neighbor because she has male visitors and does not live with her husband, but the man who visits her faces no such stereotypes. In an act of asserting her individuality, Baby insists on keeping her social relationship alive with her childhood male friend Dulal, and despite her husband's violent outbreaks, does not stop visiting her friends. The woman who has once faced sexual violation in her marriage becomes a go between the two lovers, and develops an almost veiled sense of sexuality, by refusing to accept patriarchal notions of being a desire less object of subjugation. Baby questions the paternalistic behavior of her husband "What do you give me...other than a few morsels to eat? Do you think I have no desires at all in my life?" (Halder 53)

The theme of state and judicial injustice towards the marginalized is reiterated in Halder's real life narrative. No case is lodged against her elder sister's husband, who strangled her to death; and there is a narration of a wife- burning incident in Halder's neighborhood in Durgapur, in which the husband goes scot free. There is no intervention from local police to stop the rampant domestic violence or the practice of child marriage. It becomes ironic when the doctor asks a fourteen-year-old Baby giving birth alone in the hospital, "Why did you choose to have a child so young?" (61). Her dependent and deprived position in a male-dominated set up leaves her with no material choices to make, let alone personal and psychological.

The narrative of the 'invisible' women that inhabit Baby's autobiography, and the seemingly endless struggle against patriarchy from her marginalized position on the basis of her gender, as well as her socio-economic position is reminiscent of Sharmila Rege's concept of 'testimonios', in the sense that the life narratives of the marginalized are distinguished from the bourgeois- individualist notions of autobiography, as their stories are not simply the journey of an individual consciousness. Instead, much like the Dalit narratives that are self-consciously representative of the years of exploitation they have faced as a group, Baby's narrative is also reflective, a 'testimonio' of thousands of 'invisible' and silent domestic workers who are never able to give a 'literary expression' to their life narratives because of their under privileged status.

As defined in Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*:

A testimonio is a narrative in book or pamphlet form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or significant life

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experience. In a testimonio, the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment and struggle.<sup>7</sup>

Baby's story, as Urvashi Butalia points out in her introduction, is "not unique" (v). It is the story of thousands of silent women, the domestic workers whose real life and its material conditions play out in a different space than the one they work in. Baby's search for work in the metropolitan NCR led her to experience the spatial politics of a new city, living in intersectional slums, she worked for exploitative employers where there was no space for her children to have a safe and nurturing atmosphere. As a single mother, she is constantly harangued by the son of her landlord in the workers' settlement and denied work opportunities because of the absence of her husband. It is her fortunate encounter with the kind Samaritan, Premchand's grandson Probudh Kumar who gave her a "pen and notebook" (Halder 153), and a psychologically nourishing and motivating environment for both her children and herself, grooming the writer in her which led to the writing of her life narrative. Even though it is through the tools provided by the superior intellectual, the 'subaltern' does speak in her narrative, and is widely heard.<sup>8</sup>

Mary E. John points out, "Baby Haldar, acutely conscious of the exploitative nature of paid domestic work, ends her story with all the excitement of seeing her book in print. Does such work become less exploitative when the employer has helped make you a writer?" (205)

It is not pragmatic to imagine that every Giribala or Baby Haldar that breaks away from her exploitative marriage to find work in the city is able to carve a niche of safe environment for herself like Haldar does. It was her education and sheer luck that helped her survive the hegemonic structures that wanted to appropriate her into a submissive role in a heterosexual relationship. The question of gender equality for women based on the margins on socio-economic structures, and their specific intersectional positionality in relation to the feminist project in India is an internal critique of bourgeois society in the midst of which many Giribalas and Baby Halders still exist.

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<sup>7</sup> Qtd. In Rege pg. 13. Rege cites 'Testimonio' from Beverley, John, 1992 "The Margin at the Center: On 'Testimonio'". Smith and Watson ed., *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*.

<sup>8</sup> Phrase usage inspired by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

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