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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE MARGINS OF THE WILDERNESS: A CRITICAL READING OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S CHOTTI MUNDA AND HIS ARROW

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ABSTRACT

The present paper critically examines the challenging idea of India's 'Subaltern tradition and culture keeping into consideration the well acclaimed novel of Devi: *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. This paper has been prepared in order to explore the correlation between narrative style, language, and the Subaltern studies. Most of her celebrated fiction deals with the tribal, and the Dalits, and their contribution in the Socio-Cultural Indian History. The major concerns of the present research are to tackle the issues of exploitation, the concern with gender-bias as well as the use of language as a tool to subvert the stereotypical narrative style of the so-called 'Main-stream' authors. The power that lies in the narrative fiction of Mahasweta Devi has been consistently analyzed and critically studied in order to shape the present research. The central focus of the paper remains to be the narrative organization which may include the Tribal Dialogic Exchange, along with the Indian Context. This analysis has been followed by the visible context of 'Resistance', and 'Post-Colonial Studies' in the present works of Mahasweta Devi. These texts also incorporate within them the various issues of class, race, and gender. The major subaltern groups in Mahasweta Devi's fiction dwell in the states such as, Bihar, Bengal, and Orissa. As a whole the paper acts as a complete Discourse of the themes which have been already mentioned above.

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INTRODUCTION

Mainstream society is carrying on a continuous, shrewd and systematic assault on his social system, his culture, his very tribal identity and existence...My contention is that history should be rewritten, acknowledging the debt of mainstream India to the struggles of the tribal in the British and even pre-British days. The history of their struggles is not to be found only in written scripts but in their songs, dances, folktales, passed from one generation to another. (Ghatak 2010: 150). An influential Bengali Writer Mahasweta Devi, in Her Documentary about her life and work says "Language is a weapon, it's not for shaving your armpits". Mahasweta Devi's creative works Speak of this indescribable truth of women's affliction and their power of enduring and resistance they have undergone. In her works readers get the linear story which is derelict in mainstream literature. Her novels give us the idea of the female's figurative position in the society as well as the materialistic use of their body for the social and economic purpose.

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The position of the marginalized women in the society is literally binary based and are living on the edge of Domination and Suffering. But, in Mahasweta devi's novels they do not follow the binarism but deal with the in between situation like marginal living/centered living, man/woman, indigenous women. In our society they are always neglected in all the terms of survival. It means they are not only subjugated in one shade, but in all shades of enslavement and domination. In her works the women characters do not have their own voices, but they receive a 'given' voices by the narrator of the stories as in the actual world these women don't have their own voices, they have to follow the voices of their men. Similarly, Mahasweta devi gives voices to the other characters. Thus, she speaks the 'indescribable' truth which was till now unspoken.

I have always believed that the common man is the creator of history. That belief has always been with me, from the source to the river basin. The Seventies is still very important to me. Not naturally, but because of a serious hammering ... This traveler has never ignored the call of a new journey. But unless I travel all the way I won't reach my destination. I'm still walking (Devi). Mahasweta devi's narratives give voice to the deprived, the disadvantaged, the homeless, and the exploited, primarily women and indigenous people.

The characters in her novels eventually acquire the voices. they are representatives of the resistant, the rebellious, and the other. As she had a long involvement as an activist for tribal welfare, the characters and settings of her novels and short stories have that backdrop. Now coming to the Language in Mahasweta Devi's fiction which enhances confrontation through a mix of registers—a blend of tribal and folk dialects, Bengali of the urban middle class, the Bengali of officialdom—creating a kind of dialectic that sometimes seems to be lost in translation. Mahasweta devi's language is probably very difficult to be translated, because she writes in a mixture of tribal and folk dialects, adding few components of urban Bengali. The issue of class exploitation, the concern with ecology, environmental degradation, and the focus on gender are the major concern in Mahasweta Devi's novels on tribes. Her distinctive narrative style which challenges the conventions of both the creation and reception of prose fiction is the reason for quality and power of her fiction. The present research majorly focuses on the way Mahasweta devi addresses the issue of tribal history and identify through a thematic focus and a narrative organization that places the tribal in dialogic connection with other, more powerful groups in Indian society. Her fictional works have been mostly read as texts that seek to inscribe subaltern history and of representing subaltern exploitation on the bases of caste, tribe, class and gender in the context of colonial and postcolonial Indian nation. She has mainly focused on the lives of these subaltern groups in the states of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

In some of her works she has keenly portrayed the haunting experiences of Dalit women, the difficulties of their survival. She has exposed the dark face of our so-called civilized society through a narration of the unheard and untold sufferings of a tribal woman throughout her life. It is significant to mention here that she has spent many years campaigning for the rights of the Dalit and the Tribal. Mahasweta Devi, a writer with a social awareness, always addresses the issues of exploitation and marginalization that exist in the class and caste system. Her works reflect of the complexities of oppression, and the crisscross of multiple class hierarchies, caste and gender. This chapter on class and caste oppression discusses the Mahasweta Devi's attempt to describe the history of caste and class and the factors leading to oppression and discrimination. The series of tragic and inhuman forms of exploitation highlighted by Devi reveals the grassroots reality of India with its class and caste problems. Mahasweta Devi herself confessed once that "*Chotti* is my best beloved book." It is evident in the present discussion that *Chottimunda and His Arrow* is a piece of authentic document in the shape and form of chronicles that replicates the history of a small village named Chotanagarapur. The tribal culture is a form of marginal cultures, which has its own wilderness, its own story of pain and sufferings to be told. What is interesting about Mahasweta Devi's approach to caste and class oppression is that she sketches her oppressed characters in such way that she reveals the history of their oppression and their reduction to subaltern individuals. The subaltern is one who is subject to economic and cultural dominance of the ruling class. "Subaltern"—a term introduced by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci includes peasants, women, labourers, Dalits and others. The novel which has been considered here for the discussion unfolds the saga of a legendary tribal leader named Birsa Munda, his struggles against the mainstream society, the culture, and the British. The novel presents an eye-opening narrative that unveils the violating hegemonic structures of Indian history.

I find that Birsa's uprising did not die with Birsa. And so, through the figure of Dhani, I wanted to say that there had to be a magic arrow, not magic in the narrow sense, but an arrow that Dhani Munda wants to hand over. This arrow is a symbol for the person who will carry on that continuity. Chotti is an emblem of that. (Devi). The term denotes a range of political subjectivities that are dominated by the hegemonic structures of society and ways in which the socially dominant seek to maintain power over those without it and deny subordinated groups the opportunity to participate in structures of power. According to Ranajit Guha the term denoting the deprived and marginalized category of people is "the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha vii). The feminist and political philosopher, Iris Marion Young views the distinct categories of oppression existing in society as follows exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Young's framework of oppression is useful to understand Mahasweta Devi's approach to caste and class oppression. Marx segregated history into three epochs—that of slavery, feudalism and capitalism—based on the way class was structured in societies. Class-divided societies were defined by relations of exploitation and of domination and subordination, operated through the dominant structures of society and the state. Social classes can thus be defined as:

those distinct social formations made up of groups of people who have a similar relationship to the means of production in society and, as a result, a common social and cultural position within an unequal system of property ownership, power and material rewards (Hartley 39). Modern day postcolonial theorists employ the term "subaltern classes" to point out to those social groups who are subjected to the dominance of the governing higher classes in a society or nation. The term "subaltern", first was employed by the Italian political thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), was a military metaphor which meant "of inferior rank" (Ashcroft). It has become well-known in academic and non-academic discipline with the rewriting of both colonial and nationalist histories of postcolonial nations from the point of view of the subaltern classes by the "Subaltern Studies" group of historiographers from South Asia, particularly India. Mahasweta Devi's works have been read by such postcolonial critics as attempted to redefine the suppressed histories of the subaltern classes of India into the grand narratives of Indian history. But as critics like Gayatri Spivak denotes, the category of class is not a monotonous and self-governed entity in a country like India. The subaltern classes in India are developed by numerous and varied groups of people marked by differences of race or tribe, caste, region and gender. Therefore, any argument of class-related issues inculcates the particular intersections of these categories within its background. Mahasweta's fiction and literature which deal with the tribal subject articulated in the particular inculcation of the category of tribe with the larger picture of class-exploitation in colonial and postcolonial India. Although it tends to be an absolute reality that her works have achieved wide critical achievement under the label of "subaltern" literature, Mahasweta herself does not connect much significance to the term itself. But she emphatically reiterates her commitment to "the other side of the people" by which she means the poor, exploited and marginalized classes of men, women and children of India primarily including the "lower" castes and the so called "untouchables", tribal, and the peasants and laborers who constitute the rural and urban poor.

I write about a country which is class-divided, class-exploited, class oppressed...I believe in class ... the country was not allowed to grow naturally, ... and human beings were absolutely divided by (the) caste and class system. Caste is always identified with class. That's what I believe..." ("Kakatiya Journal"). Her activism involves ground-level communication with the tribal people, detailed documentation of their problems, negotiating with the authorities and helping them to fight legal matters for basic concerns like land, housing, employment, education, health care and so on. Most of her journalistic articles on these subjects have been translated and compiled in the collection *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi* and provide the background for the situations dramatized in her fictional works. As Susie Tharu shows, they reflect her concern with "the real issues of poverty, hardship and exploitation" which are "primarily class questions" (2917).

In the present novel, the "mythic ancestor" Chotti not only represents the calamities of the tribe, but it also continues to depict their aspirations. Their history is recorded in the form of songs they attempt to sing on different events and occasions. These songs can be depicted as heroic, influential, and identifying. The characters in the novels literally became the legends. Mahasweta Devi says that, These people do not find anyone writing about them, and they do not have script. They compose the stream of events into songs. By being made into song, into words, they become something, continuity. Their history is like a big flowing river going somewhere, not without a destination (Devi). In Devi's fictional works, however, she compares class issues like land, labour and wages to the socio-cultural facets of tribal life, thereby providing a holistic picture of the various dimensions of the tribal experience. Her fiction adds the characters from different castes and tribes, who build the large and vast category of India's oppressed classes. However, she never lost sight of the uncommonality of the situation and characters being represented, whether of historic period, region, caste, tribe or gender. In an interview with Pankaj Singh, she notes that the tribal of India, especially the so-called "criminal" tribes have "suffered the most brutal oppression" (9). Because of their different location in the history of India's society and politics, Mahasweta, however, considers the tribal people to be the most suppressed among the subaltern classes of India.

Mahasweta Devi accepts the innovative narrative techniques to develop the tribe's story in their own voice, taking in to consideration the various narrative strategies of story, song and myth that are the unique features of the tribal oral discourse, setting it dialectically against the dominant discourses. The nation's development reflects the turn of their forest and agricultural lands into graveyards and turn them into commodities bought and sold in the labour markets Mahasweta seems to raise the question of "whether real change without the loss of integrity is possible for the tribal and outcaste communities," and seems to suggest a possibility of "subaltern resistance and cultural identity" (59). Mahasweta's fictional narration explains through the whole gamut of discourses-official, academic and social- that deal with the class struggle involving the peasants and tribals. She employs everything from popular film songs, materials from writers like Tarashankar, Tagore, Joseph Heller and Hemmingway, the official discourse on "tribal welfare" and "theoretical" academic papers in her efforts to bring into play the socio-cultural ideologies that create, uphold and redefine a lower-

class structure with the tribal at the bottom of it. Samik Bandhopadhyay signifies the aspect of Mahasweta's fiction: The plurality of languages and cultural references serves to locate the marginalized agricultural laborers and their struggle for their rights in a setting that refuses them, their existence, and exposes the setting itself to a critique that grows from an identification of the historical truth as it comes splintered though the fragmented readings in the distinctly different languages that carry different social and cultural perspectives on the same experience, from the various languages that different sections and classes use in their negotiations with history (Bandhopadhyay). The dominant social and political structure of class, caste and gender oppresses the other. This power relation that in Foucauldian notion works at the very micro level of society that prevents the struggle of tribal women in discursive practices of classifying third world women. The particular modes of representation, particular acuity, insightful, language, and words are not much endowed with that can give a true picture of them. Because power and knowledge work together and texts work as to read what is preconceived and defined and give no room for misreading and errors in blind spots to destabilize the stability. In the present novel Mahasweta Devi has also raised the question of religious conversion of the tribes in India. She blames the "Dikus" for the consequential exploitation of these people.

T' new manager has bound ever'one in bond labour. And then so many demands. Give'em stuff right and left. If someone dies in t' office or his family then either give labour or pay tax . . . He goes from one court to another. We carry t' palquin, we take an' we bring back. He walks and we must run with an umbrella. Life is hell. (Devi 2002: 85-86). The various aspirations and apprehensions of the tribal world and their dialogic expressions through various mediums are well portrayed in the novel. Devi certainly peels "the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the Government" and exposes "its naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation." The present work truly, is the representative of the subaltern fiction, the resilience, the resistance, and the fight for human rights. The margins of the wilderness are hidden from the eyes of the masters of the mainstream cultures, but with the production and publication of such works the differences between the two worlds are becoming blurred. The language, indeed is the most powerful weapon that Devi has used here to put forward her opinion in the most skillful manner possible.

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