

## CONCLUSION

I Claim elsewhere to have always written about the 'culture of the downtrodden'. How tall or short or true or false is that claim? The more I think and write and think some more, the harder it gets to arrive at a definition. I hesitate. I falter. I cling to the belief that for any culture as old and ancient as ours to have survived over time and in time, there could only be one basic common and acceptable core thought: humaneness. To accept each other's right to be human with dignity. This then is my fight. My dream. In my life and in my literature. (Oct21, 2006 Devi's inaugural speech at the Frankfurt Book Fair.)

The purpose of this thesis has been to show different shades of subalternity portrayed by Mahasweta Devi in her works. After going through her works in detail, it can be safely argued that Devi has raised the issues of subalternity most strongly than any other Indian writer in her works. The naked and brutal picture of the all forms of subalternity has been depicted in such an eye-opening manner that any of the readers can certainly feel himself blessed that he is able to see all the sufferings from a safe distance. With a clear agenda in her mind, Devi presents a heartrending picture of this so-called 'shining and developing India' from which we cannot escape by calling it fictitious since it is based on the true experiences of Devi. She believes in documentation and feels that after reading her works the reader should know the facts and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India.

In the first chapter, I have tried to show that subalterns were very much there in the ages of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* but now the number and the width of gap between the exploiter and the exploited is hugely increasing. For many centuries, the downtrodden took it as their fate to be suppressed. It was in the twentieth century that the biggest movement of the time Marxism came into existence. For the first time, Karl Marx persuaded the workers and the labourers all over the world to rise in protest against the ruling class. His views, thoughts and the movement are collectively known as 'Marxism' which inspired many thinkers all over the world. Antonio Gramsci was one amongst them who took forward the ideas of Marx and tried to meditate on the reasons why the revolution predicted by Marx had not taken place.

In this process, he coined the term 'subaltern'. Although the term was already being used in military sense, for the first time it denoted those people who were deprived of their due rights. Later on, the term was associated with postcolonial studies. Gramsci stated that the working class must have its own intellectuals who could write their own history. He stated that the ruling class makes the ruled class agree to be ruled. The working class must have its own intellectuals to fight for their rights. In India, the credit for writing this 'history from below' goes to Ranajit Guha and his academic friends who wrote down ten books on subaltern studies.

Although in terminology 'subalternity' originated much later, subalterns as marginalized were very much there from the beginning of the human civilization. Their pains and sufferings have attracted the attention of many writers from the beginning of the literature itself. Many eminent Hindi writers like Mulk Raj Anand

and Prem Chand tried to give a voice to these voiceless people in their works. Mahadevi Verma at length discussed the discrimination in the name of gender. The list of Dalit writers writing in independent India is very long. Not only in India, but many sensitive writers in many languages have talked about the unequal distribution of resources amongst equal human beings. It is in this tradition that Mahasweta Devi writes about the trauma of subalterns.

Mahasweta Devi is a rare combination of writing and activism. In her opinion, literature cannot and should not be separated from the joys and sorrows of common men. She is not an armchair scholar sitting comfortably in her home and making fictitious pictures of the sufferers. She has always used her writing as a weapon to attack any exploiting agency and unveil the ugly faces of the exploiters. The plethora of short stories, novels and dramas by Devi matchlessly portray the unrecorded tragic lives of the tribals, landless farmers, labourers and oppressed women. She is definitely one of the foremost writers in India writing and also fighting for and about subalterns. The beautiful picture of our country progressing by leaps and bounds seem to be totally fake after realizing the trauma of the downtrodden depicted in her works.

Devi is counted among the most prolific writers of the world. She has written so extensively that it is not even possible in her lifetime to bring a collection of all her literary and non-literary writings. Her very first work *The Queen of Jhansi* proved her as an undaunted writer who could travel across the Bundelkhand region to gain firsthand knowledge about the Queen. Her entire life-sketch shows her as an unstoppable writer who dared to challenge the government policies, politicians and

the administrators inside and outside her works. Her very first book proved her as a writer of immense potential. She proved that oral literature can also be an authentic source of recording historical facts. In fact she re-defined history through her writings.

Although Devi claims that she does not write from a feminist perspective, her writings do revolve around many important and unforgettable women characters. She started her writing career by depicting the life and facts of a memorable woman warrior, the Queen of Jhansi. She wrote 'Draupadi' which can be safely said as one of her most widely read short stories in English. The story is also taught in the University of Delhi as it is a part of the curriculum of B.A. (Honours) in English. A Naxalite *Santhal* woman Dopadi Mejhan appears in *Bashai Tudu* also. Since Devi's works form a kind of environment of exploitation, many of her characters are not limited to one work only. Dopadi assumes larger dimensions than life, when she is not daunted even by her brutal rape by many men. She questions the very idea of rape, which in a patriarchal society is symbolic of manhood. Dopadi shatters this very idea of man's superiority over her body by refusing to clothe herself.

The story of Douloti is not only the story of one single woman, it proves Mahasweta Devi as a true subaltern writer, since it shows subalterns in their different roles and forms. Bono, an exploited labourer, Jhalo, Gohu, Somri, fellow prostitutes of Douloti, Douloti's father, Douloti herself and many more like her caged in the never-ending evil system of wageless labour, give the novella an epic form. Despite unending difficulties, Rudali shows the will to survive. The stories from *Outcast* again show the women's plight due to men's false promises to them.

The death of Jahoda reminds us of the sacrifices done by women and the rude behaviour of male society towards them. The subaltern women cannot even think of falling in love. Love is a crime which is committed by Dhoulis and she gets the punishment by becoming a prostitute. She has to leave her son and even the village. Her lover neither accepts her nor is ready to allow her to get earnings by becoming a prostitute in the village.

Although she does not like the tag of feminism, she has become an inspiration for millions of women all over the country and even also at 80 plus, she is tirelessly working and incessantly questioning the intentions of government and administration towards subalterns.

Not only the current forms of women exploitation have been viewed by her but even the past has been revisioned in her works. Women's place has been viewed in the past not from the perspective of a male writer but through the eyes of a sensitive woman writer. In the story "The Kunti and the the Nishadin", one nishadin questions the name and fame which the pandavas and their mother have gained. Devi does not hesitate in questioning the sacredness and piousness of Kunti who burn alive the six members of a tribal family for saving the lives of her own sons and is not even able to recall the crime committed by her.

From a subaltern perspective, the sacred epic has been re-read and questioned. The writer meditates on those aspects, which were untouched, till date. The story is always read as a war between the righteous and the unrighteous. But if read from a subaltern point of view, many crimes were done from the side of the righteous also. The false pretensions of lokavritta have also been mocked at. So in

all these works the world has been viewed from a woman's eyes. Devi does not only present the grim reality of this male-dominated world but through her protagonists, she also shows a way out.

Mahasweta Devi seems to be a saviour of the tribal people, directly through her writings. The plight and abject poverty of tribal people like the *Santhals*, *Lodhas* and *Sabars* make the core theme of Devi's oeuvre. Taking the help of history, she tries to re-establish the lost dignity of these tribes. She tells us about the girl Chunni Kotal who was the first woman graduate from her tribe but due to the continuous harassment by mainstream society, she had to commit suicide. She also tells about Budhhan Sabar who was killed in the police custody for no fault on his part. Thus we come to know that due to modernization, tribal people are facing the gravest problems in maintaining their existence and their rich cultural heritage. Mahasweta Devi has been successful at two levels. First, she has reminded people of the glorious past of the tribal and second, she has thrown light on the reasons of this diminishing glory. She has never been an outsider. Tribals call her 'Didi' for the reason of her unconditional love and compassion towards them.

Set in sixteenth century medieval Bengal, *The Book of the Hunter* describes the life of the *Sabars* who are the hunter tribes. She understood the need of re-establishing the honour of those tribes who had once been understood as criminals by the British India. The novel highlights the dilemma which these poor innocent tribal people are forced to face. Due to mainstream society's intrusion, tribal cannot cling to their cultural norms nor can they adopt our modern ways of living since till now they are not even accepted in the society.

*Imaginary Maps* probes into the situation of the tribal in a deeper manner. Mary Oraon in “The Hunt” teaches a lesson to an outsider who was trying to molest her. The story can be looked at from various critical approaches like feminist, postcolonial or environmental approach. In “Douloti”, tribal women have been presented as 'doubly subaltern'. The novella “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha” has been considered by Devi herself as an abstract of her entire tribal experience. She has mixed her experiences of many tribes in this work. Not only through literature, but also in her real life, she has become the voice of these voiceless people. Many unknown tribal heroes and leaders have been resurrected in many myths. Revered epics of Indian consciousness have been reviewed and even de-constructed by her acute eyes. Even the sacred epic the *Mahabharata* has been reviewed and analysed in her book *After Kurukshetra*. Devi does not hesitate in questioning the sacredness and piousness of Kunti who burnt alive six members of a tribal family for saving the lives of her own sons and is not even able to recall the crime committed by her.

Not only through fiction, but Devi has raised the same issues through her plays also. She herself says that the cause which she is fighting for, should reach the maximum number of people from any medium. In her book the *Five Plays* she tells about Sujata who is not poor but still marginalized in her own family. In “Bayen” we feel like crying to see the plight of a suckling mother who has been branded as bayen, the witch. We cannot blame Devi of being away from the ground reality since even today we hear on the news channels about the burning of women for being ‘daini.’ The evil system of bonded-labour has been raised through her play “Aajir”. A ventriloquist is in love with his speaking doll and loses his voice to throat cancer.

A traditional water-diviner rises to a different role and becomes a threat to the administration. All these plays are a rare combination of folk myths as well as contemporary reality. And the writer's purpose of reaching the larger audience is accomplished through them.

All the stories of the *Bitter Soil* have been considered by the writer herself as her most important works. The four stories of this collection show the different layers of exploitation. From the Rajput landlord of the story "Seeds" to the corrupt Brahmin priest of "Witch", Devi has shown the real picture of exploitation. The bania of the story "Salt" refuses to sell the cheapest commodity of India to poor low-caste people who have to lose their lives in order to gain it. She herself states that she has not written these stories to please her readers. She will get her reward if the readers can see the real face of India. Poor people over there don't even know that we are independent now and the wageless labour has been banned by the government. How the government machinery proves to be helpless in the hands of the rich landlords, has been well satirized by the writer.

Through her historical narratives, Devi has made us able to wander in the unknown passages of history. She has sung the glory of forgotten heroes of our past. In *The Queen of Jhansi*, she has made the young Queen alive fighting in front of us to save her Jhansi. The cruelties inflicted upon Indians at that time, who were subalterns in their own country make us think of our independence as invaluable. We come to know that many unsung heroes like Titu Mir have also contributed in attaining the freedom which we are enjoying today. After Independence also, many revolutionaries like Bashai Tudu are struggling to gain their rights. They resurrect



themselves like the bird phoenix in order to help others in crisis. In her peculiar style, Devi every time creates the socio-economic environment of the concerned era and makes us see the exploitation of the subalterns in every period.

Many linguistic and stylistic devices have been used by Devi in such a manner that the narrated story takes concrete form in front of our eyes. Characters do not only speak, their inner thoughts and desires are also conveyed to us very clearly. They seem to live their lives in front of us. We are bound to feel their laughter, their sorrows and also their exploitation. A frown on their forehead, a gleam in their eyes, a wound on their body are all experienced by the readers. Satire is an integral part of her writings to expose the failure of government machinery.

The language used by Mahasweta Devi assumes many dimensions in her work. On the one hand, it helps to make the semantics explicit, on the other hand, it brings up the cultural uniqueness of the particular area she has been talking of. The treasure of knowledge possessed by her lies in historical narratives, folk songs, folk literature, direct contact with people, rich literary tradition in her own home and minute pondering over the contemporary movements and happenings. She herself asserts that she has read more books than she has eaten food. All this results in rich and powerful language fully empowered to convey the meaning to the readers. This is the charisma of language that in *The Queen of Jhansi* we reach the era of the first freedom struggle, in “Draupadi” and *Bashai Tudu*, we reach the forests of Bihar and West Bengal. In *Bitter Soil* we reach the poor areas of Palamu. In “The Mother of 1084” we are able to see the hypocrisy of middle class families of 1960s and 1970s.

Not only new lexis, but many unknown terms also find place in her memory and also in her works. In many of her interviews, she recalls many peculiar words used by many ethnic groups. Many strange practices followed in different areas of India have been explored by her. The so-called civilized and modern society may consider them queer but they signify the immense cultural variety of our country.

Writing and activism go hand in hand for Devi. Very early, she started writing for the dailies about the problems of common people. Major movements of her time like Naxalbari movement, Nandigram and Singur events find creative expression in her works. The conventional idea of literature expands and gains newer and bigger dimensions in the form of the collaboration of journalism, documentary presentation, anthropological concerns and fictional narration. Her texts are not only read by the masses but they are performed and have been transformed into movies.

The mission of her life sets her apart from her contemporaries. Repeatedly in her interviews, she stresses on considering her as an activist. Emerging from the ground reality, her works seem to raise a battle against the centuries old division of society into two major segments, the exploiter and the exploited. In fact, activism and literary activity overlap everywhere in her works. She candidly expresses her views over the major happenings of the country. She does not even hesitate in approving or disapproving any politician's good or bad tasks. She does not even hesitate in admitting the mistakes committed by her. She herself admits that the sense of duty is obsession with her. Her simplicity and bluntness impress everyone.

On the one hand, she is so compassionate that tribal call her 'Ma', but on the other hand she is brutal in her satires on the exploiters.

Thus the study tries to fathom the depth of the major works of Mahasweta Devi in a comprehensive manner and also proves her a true subaltern writer. Her chief works including *Bitter Soil*, *Imaginary Maps*, *The Book of the Hunter*, *Breast Stories*, *Bashai Tudu*, *Titu Mir*, *Rudali*,; *From Fiction to Performance*, *The Queen of Jhansi*, *After Kurukshetra*, *Five Plays and Outcast* are sufficient to raise different issues of subalternity. Her other works like *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*, *Till Death do us Part*, *Old women* and *Romotha*, are also helpful in developing an understanding of the writer's thought process. Numerous interviews given by her to different acknowledged people like Gayatri, C. Spivak, Naveen Kishore, Nandini Sen and Gabrielle Collu give a penetrating insight into her scholarliness. Various speeches uttered by her at various award functions and literary fairs are really quotable and undoubtedly prove her as a remarkable speaker. Her non-literary articles, her comments and her letters to different ministers prove her as a rare mixture of literary and journalistic genius. Devi herself concludes her writings by stating in the preface to *Bashai Tudu*:

It will not avail to look for any definite politics in my writing. Sensitive persons committed to the cause of the exploited and the persecuted stand at the centre of my works. In my story 'Jawl' the teacher is an honest, conscientious Congressite. In 'MW banam Lakhinda', the agitation of the agricultural labourers is led by the CPI. In 'Operation?-Bashai Tudu', Kali Santra belongs to CPI(M) and Bashai Tudu stands somewhere even beyond the Naxalites. In

‘Draupadi’ the heroine is an *adivasi* Naxalite activist. Mentally, they share a common ground, a fact that does not appear contradictory to me. Life is not arithmetic, and man is not made for the game of politics. I believe that it should be the object of every kind of politics to fulfill man’s craving to live with all his rights intact. I do not believe that any politics confined to promoting a part’s interests can replace the present social system. Forty-one years after Independence I see my countrymen without food, water and land, and reeling under debts and bonded labour. An anger, luminous and burning like the sun, directed against a system that cannot free my people from these inhuman constraints is the only source of inspiration for all my writing. All parties, those to the Left and to the Right alike, have failed to keep their promises to the common people. There is little prospect of any significant change in these things, at least in my lifetime. Hence I have to go on writing to the best of my ability in defence of the dispossessed and the disinherited, so that I may never have reason to feel ashamed to face myself. For all writers are accountable to their own generation and have to answer for themselves.

The Most important observation which comes out of all of these literary and non-literary writings is her passion to try to do something for the sake of the subalterns. At many places she remarks that she has dedicated her life to the tribals and wants to live many more years for them. In a country of One hundred and twenty billion people, one single woman cannot change the whole scenario. It would

be really impractical to think that the ages old form of exploitation could be stopped by the efforts of this single old lady. She is definitely doing her role and trying her best to bring justice to many voiceless people. But one remarkable thing which she has accomplished is setting an example in front of all of us and inspire millions of people to do something for the subalterns. She is truly an indefatigable writer fighting for the cause of the downtrodden. She has brought to light the many hidden and ignored agencies of exploitation. She has made them naked in front of the eyes of the society. Now it is up to us whether we close our eyes in shame or face the brutal reality. How many of us follow or try to follow her path is a matter of question but apart from awards and honours, she really deserves something – a salute from the true hearts of all Indians.