

## Mahasweta Devi : A Champion for the Enslaved

### Parappa Magadum

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Assistant Professor of English, Government First Grade College Kokatanur  
Tq. Athani, Dist Belagavi

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**How to cite this article:** Parappa Magadum (2024). Mahasweta Devi : A Champion for the Enslaved. *Library Progress International*, 44(2s), 1916-1920.

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### Abstract

This study examines Mahasweta Devi's significance as a leading literary advocate for the oppressed, particularly tribals, Dalits, and women in India. Her works, include *Draupadi* (1978), *Mother of 1084* (1974), *Rudali* (1979), and *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), highlight themes of subjection, resistance, colonialism, and feminism. The approach underscores Devi's utilization of her literature as an instrument for activism, challenging social, political, and economic structures that sustain injustice. Devi's works utilize clear language, symbolism, and reality to effectively condemn oppression, reverberating across generations and making substantial contributions to Indian literature.

**Key Words:** Oppression, Resistance, Subjection, Colonialism

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### Introduction

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was a renowned author and a committed social activist. Her writing and activism concentrated on revealing the severe conditions endured by India's most marginalized groups, including tribals, Dalits, and economically disadvantaged women. Devi collaborated intimately with these organizations, frequently traveling to rural regions to record their challenges and advocate for their rights. Her direct involvement shaped her literature, rendering it a vehicle for protest and a tribute to her dedication to social justice. This study aims to analyze how her works articulate the experiences of the marginalized and attack the cultural frameworks that sustain their oppression.

Mahasweta Devi was born into a household that prized literature, art, and political engagement. Her initial exposure to these ideas profoundly impacted her career, motivating her to utilize writing as a vehicle for social change. Upon obtaining a degree in English literature, she pursued a career in journalism, focusing on the challenges faced by underprivileged people, especially tribal populations in West Bengal and Jharkhand. Her writing frequently embodies her activism, confronting the challenges she experienced directly and conveying unity with her subjects.

### Principal Themes in Mahasweta Devi's Works

#### Subjugation and marginalization

Devi's art consistently confronts the profound and structural marginalization experienced by India's tribal and lower-caste populations. Her characters experience profound poverty, disenfranchisement, and brutality, which she depicts with unwavering reality. In *Rudali* (1979), the heroine Sanichari is a woman from a lower-caste family who endures the harsh reality of caste-based exploitation and poverty. In Sanichari's narrative, Devi examines the societal systems that ensnare individuals in cycles of adversity, utilizing her character's experience to reveal the apathy of the powerful towards the plight of the downtrodden. As scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

notes, Devi's works "unsettle the comfortable spaces occupied by the privileged" and demand that readers confront the exploitation of India's poorest citizens (Spivak, 1990).

### **Opposition and Empowerment**

Despite the harsh persecution faced by Devi's characters, they are not simply victims; they actively reject and challenge the forces that attempt to dominate them. In *Draupadi* (1978), the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen is a tribal lady who aligns with the Naxalite movement, emerging as a symbol of resistance against state persecution. Despite experiencing unfathomable violence, she remains resolute, confronting her captors unclothed as a defiance against shame and subjugation. Spivak further comments on this story, saying, "Dopdi's nakedness is her armor; she embodies a powerful refusal to accept the terms imposed by the oppressors" (Spivak, 1988).

### **Colonialism and Postcolonial Analysis**

Devi's narratives often explore the ramifications of colonialism and its enduring effects on tribal and rural populations. In *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Right to the Forest) (1977), she narrates the tale of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who spearheaded a rebellion against British colonial forces in the 19th century. Through the reclamation of Birsa Munda's heritage, Devi attacks both colonial and postcolonial frameworks that devalue indigenous populations. Scholar Sumanta Banerjee praises *Aranyer Adhikar*, stating, "Devi's exploration of Birsa's life emphasizes the historical erasure of tribal resistance and underscores the importance of reclaiming indigenous voices" (Banerjee, 1989).

### **Feminism and Gender Relations**

Numerous writings by Devi emphasize the convergence of gender and class oppression. Her female protagonists frequently encounter economic and social exploitation as well as gender-based violence. In *Mother of 1084* (1974), the protagonist Sujata represents a mother's challenges in grappling with loss and disappointment while attempting to comprehend her son's participation in the Naxalite movement. Literary critic Sujata Gidla has observed that "Devi's female characters are often caught between their roles as nurturers and their growing awareness of the forces oppressing them, reflecting a deep understanding of the intersecting pressures faced by women in patriarchal societies" (Gidla, 2002).

### **Examination of Pioneering Texts**

#### ***Draupadi* (1978)**

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* (1978) serves as a potent tale that reveals the oppression experienced by vulnerable people, especially women. Amidst political upheaval in rural India, the narrative centers on Dopdi Mejhen, an indigenous Santhal lady who defies governmental control and challenges the horrors inflicted upon her by the state. In this concise yet impactful narrative, Devi employs Dopdi's character to illuminate the systemic dehumanization and exploitation faced by India's indigenous inhabitants.

The narrative explores the exploitation of Dopdi's gender and her identity as a tribal woman, establishing her as a symbol of resistance. Notwithstanding the severe violence endured, Dopdi remains resilient. Upon apprehension by the authorities, she endures torture and violation, epitomizing the harsh treatment frequently inflicted upon underprivileged communities by governmental agents. Dopdi, instead of yielding to defeat, resolutely rejects the disgrace imposed by her oppressors. In the pivotal scene, she faces her captors in her nudity, boldly affirming her identity and rejecting their imposition on the conditions of her resistance. By declining to conceal herself and standing resolutely before those intent on her destruction, she metamorphoses from a victim into an emblem of resistance and defiance.

In *Draupadi*, Devi utilizes realism and symbolism to illustrate the profundity of Dopdi's oppression and her eventual emancipation. The narrative compels the audience to confront the disquieting truth of the intersection of gender and class in the continuance of violence. Devi's work emphasizes the significance of reclaiming one's identity as a form of resistance. Dopdi's ultimate act serves as a profound monument to the resilience of individuals who remain unyielding in the face of oppression, regardless of the consequences.

Critics have analyzed *Draupadi* as a work that challenges India's governmental structures while simultaneously exploring universal themes of oppression and survival. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her analysis of the story, describes Dopdi's naked confrontation as an "act of agency," an assertion of self that forces her oppressors to recognize her humanity and strength even as they seek to strip it away (Spivak, 1988). Mahasweta Devi examines the intricacies of identity and resistance via *Draupadi*, rendering the narrative a pivotal work that compels readers to reevaluate their notions of power, control, and dignity against systemic oppression.

#### ***Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1084) (1974)**

Mahasweta Devi's *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1084, 1974) is a sad and politically charged narrative that explores the human ramifications of social and political upheaval. The narrative, set against the backdrop of the Naxalite uprising in 1970s West Bengal, revolves around Sujata Chatterjee, a middle-class mother who embarks on an unforeseen journey of self-discovery after the demise of her son, Brati. Through Sujata's awakening, Devi examines issues of alienation, loss, and the potent junction of motherhood and activism.

The tale commences with Sujata discovering the gruesome murder of her son, who has been designated merely as body number 1084, among the numerous political activists methodically exterminated by the state. The dehumanizing reduction of Brati to a mere statistic signifies the commencement of Sujata's trip into an unfamiliar realm from which she had previously been protected. Sujata grapples with the disparity between her middle-class background and the harsh realities of political violence and resistance as she finds details about Brati's time as a Naxalite.

In Sujata's narrative, Devi attacks the indifference and complicity of the urban middle class about political oppression. As Sujata comprehends her son's convictions and the motivations for his dedication to the Naxalite movement, she starts to perceive her own existence and the surrounding culture from a fresh perspective. Sujata's evolution from a mourning mother to one who comprehends and empathizes with her son's political challenges highlights the novel's examination of the emergence of social consciousness.

An impactful element of *Mother of 1084* is its portrayal of maternity as a means of defiance. In a society that frequently endeavors to suppress or marginalize women, Sujata's sorrow and her quest for truth transform into acts of resistance. Her voyage represents a reclamation of her identity, both as a mother and as a woman, contesting conventional conventions. By adopting Brati's political beliefs, Sujata symbolically embraces his fight, transforming from merely his mother into the matriarch of a movement that challenges society complacency and injustice.

Sujata's interactions with her other children and her estranged husband underscore the isolation she experiences within her family, who mostly exhibit indifference towards Brati's death and the principles he championed. Her family's disengagement exemplifies society's overarching apathy towards political matters that do not directly affect them. Sujata's growing engagement with individuals connected to Brati illustrates her dedication to comprehending the "other" India, the India that lies outside the security and affluence of the middle class.

*Mother of 1084* examines the socio-political frameworks that sustain injustice and violence, particularly against individuals who contest the established order. The novel reveals the harsh tactics employed by the state to quell dissent, portraying Brati and his associates not as misguided youngsters, but as persons prepared to risk their lives for a noble cause. Devi's depiction of the Naxalite movement is intricate, recognizing both its idealistic zeal and the sad repercussions of its violent clash with the state.

Literary critic Susie Tharu notes that Devi's depiction of Sujata transforms the stereotype of the mother from a caring figure into a voice of defiance, highlighting that Sujata's journey constitutes a significant indictment of a culture that prioritizes conformity over moral integrity (Tharu, 1993). Sujata's narrative highlights the conflict between private grief and communal obligation, indicating that the enlightenment of one person can foster greater community consciousness.

*Mother of 1084* has received acclaim for its unyielding scrutiny of political violence and its impact on everyday individuals. The novel interrogates the essence of identity and belonging, especially with family and community. By contextualizing the Naxalite movement via Sujata's personal bereavement, Devi enables readers to comprehend the human toll of political opposition, elevating Brati's murder from a mere statistic to a profoundly experienced tragedy.

The story examines the role of women in political and social movements, portraying Sujata as an unexpected revolutionary and a representation of quiet resilience. In an article regarding the novel, Aparna Dharwadker points out that "Devi's work challenges the reader to recognize the intersection of gender, class, and politics, suggesting that social transformation requires not only ideological commitment but also personal sacrifice" (Dharwadker, 1991).

In *Mother of 1084*, Mahasweta Devi commemorates the lives lost in political conflicts while urging readers to reflect on the significance of empathy and action in instigating change. The novel is a major contribution to Indian literature, examining the emotional and political aspects of grief, love, and resistance, and illustrating how individuals can discover purpose and agency amid loss. Sujata's transition from grief to comprehension

exemplifies the transformational influence of awareness, a concept that remains relevant to readers in modern India and beyond.

### ***Rudali (1979)***

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* (1979) is a poignant novel that examines the convergence of poverty, caste oppression, and gender exploitation in rural India. The novella chronicles the life of Sanichari, a low-caste lady who faces numerous adversities, including the loss of her family members and the persistent poverty that afflicts her life.

*Rudali* illuminates the degrading consequences of caste hierarchy and economic destitution, while examining issues of survival, agency, and the commercialization of mourning. The narrative unfolds in a village where upper-caste landlords exploit and subjugate the lower-caste inhabitants. Sanichari, an impoverished widow, endeavors to subsist under this restrictive societal framework. Following a lifetime of anguish, she is compelled to assume the position of a “rudali” — a professional mourner engaged to lament at the funerals of affluent folks. Within the village's inflexible caste system, mourning is commodified and regulated by the upper class, with the rudali's function enhancing the social standing of the deceased. The irony is significant: the higher class benefits from the labor and suffering of the lower caste during life and persists in exploiting them posthumously. Devi employs Sanichari's character to examine the socioeconomic frameworks that constrain individuals to their social duties.

By converting grief into a source of revenue, Sanichari regains a degree of control over her pain, transmuting an oppressive obligation into a means of survival. Sanichari's choice to accept her position as a rudali is both a pragmatic decision and a nuanced act of resistance against a system that appraises individuals solely based on their utility. *Rudali* provides a trenchant critique of the hypocrisy and exploitation inherent in the caste system. The affluent landowners who employ Sanichari to lament at their funerals stand in sharp contrast to her own impoverished life. By emphasizing this gap, Devi accentuates the indifference of a society that idealizes death while neglecting the anguish of the living. Furthermore, the novella reveals how women, especially those from lower castes, are frequently compelled to maneuver through positions that exploit their emotions, bodies, and labor.

Literary critic Sumanta Banerjee describes *Rudali* as “a stark portrayal of survival within a system that devalues the very lives it depends upon,” noting that Devi's work “challenges readers to confront the dehumanizing effects of caste and poverty” (Banerjee, 1989). Through *Rudali*, Mahasweta Devi reveals the resilience and agency of marginalized women, showing how they adapt to and resist the oppressive systems that seek to define their existence.

### ***Aranyer Adhikar (The Right to the Forest) (1977)***

Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar (The Right to the Forest, 1977)* is a profound examination of the challenges encountered by indigenous people in India, especially the Santhal tribe, in their quest for land, identity, and dignity. The novella covers the historical context of tribal relocation, the repercussions of colonial policy, and the ongoing marginalization of tribal populations in post-colonial India. Devi portrays the character of Dulari, a young Santhal woman, to highlight the deep bond between indigenous peoples and their land, emphasizing the significance of forest rights as essential to their existence and cultural identity.

*Aranyer Adhikar* chronicles the experiences of Dulari and her community as they confront the adversities imposed by other entities attempting to plunder their ancestral territories. The narrative commences with the government's intrusion into tribal forests, resulting in the depletion of resources vital for the survival of the Santhal people. Dulari confronts the effects of deforestation, land appropriation, and the commercialization of nature, while the novella underscores the profound challenges faced by indigenous groups in their resistance to state-sanctioned exploitation.

Devi depicts Dulari's relationship with her surroundings as one of veneration and reliance. The forest serves not only as a setting but also as a character, encapsulating the spiritual and cultural essence of the Santhal people. Dulari's voyage epitomizes the overarching struggle for rights to land and resources, representing the unified resistance of indigenous communities against authoritarian entities.

A primary theme of *Aranyer Adhikar* is the inherent relationship between land and identity. The forest signifies both sustenance and cultural legacy for the Santhal community, embodying their collective memories.

Devi asserts that the right to the forest is intrinsically connected to the right to existence; without access to their land, the Santhals confront cultural obliteration and identity dissolution.

The novella also explores the linkages between gender and environmental exploitation. Dulari, as a female protagonist, exemplifies the endurance and fortitude of tribal women, who frequently endure the consequences of socio-economic transformations. Devi demonstrates the crucial tasks women in indigenous communities fulfill in maintaining cultural traditions and environmental conservation. Their agency in safeguarding their land and resources is essential for the survival of their communities.

Critics have observed that Devi's work functions as a rallying cry against the systemic inequalities encountered by indigenous communities. Literary historian Ranjana Khanna asserts, "Devi's narratives remind us that the struggle for rights transcends political dimensions, intertwining profoundly with the essence of identity and culture" (Khanna, 2000). In *Aranyer Adhikar*, Devi urges readers to confront the realities of land dispossession and the persistent marginalization of indigenous groups.

### **Mahasweta Devi's Style and Literary Techniques**

#### **Language and Diction**

Devi's unambiguous language and incorporation of regional languages add realism to her characters and locations. Scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asserts, "Devi's employment of dialect provides readers insight into the marginalized communities she depicts, establishing a linguistic bond that enhances our comprehension" (Spivak, 1988). Her diction enhances the emotional resonance of her narratives and anchors them in the actual realities of India's underprivileged communities.

#### **Symbolism and Metaphor**

Symbolism is crucial in Devi's oeuvre, enabling her to express intricate concepts through evocative imagery. Dopa's nudity in *Draupadi* epitomizes both vulnerability and defiance, whilst the forest in *Aranyer Adhikar* signifies tribal sovereignty and identity. These symbols enhance Devi's storytelling, introducing complexities that prompt readers to contemplate the wider social and political ramifications of her tales.

#### **Realism and Brutality**

Devi's resolute depictions of violence and adversity are fundamental to her narrative. Devi's realistic descriptions reveal the terrible reality of neglected populations, prompting readers to recognize the enduring inequalities in society. Scholar Dharwadker states, "Devi's blunt realism serves to jar the reader, breaking through complacency and forcing a confrontation with the suffering of the marginalized" (Dharwadker, 1991).

#### **Conclusion**

Mahasweta Devi's work serves as a profound witness to the challenges and resilience of India's underprivileged populations. Her writings compel readers to contemplate the enduring mechanisms of injustice inside society. By chronicling the experiences of the oppressed, she underscores the transforming capacity of empathy, comprehension, and defiance. Devi's dedication to social justice has profoundly influenced Indian literature, illustrating the lasting impact of narrative in effecting social change.

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