Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)
A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Impact Factor 6.8992 (ICI) http://www.rjelal.com;
Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com; ISSN:2395-2636 (P); 2321-3108(O)

Vol.13.Issue 2. 2025 (April-June)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

Postcolonial Feminism and the Marginalised Female Voice in the Works of Mahasweta Devi

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DOI: 10.33329/rjelal.13.2.36

Article info
Article Received: 14/03/2025
Article Accepted: 17/04/2025
Published online: 22/04/2025

Abstract

This study explores the intersection of postcolonial feminism and the marginalised female voice in the works of Mahasweta Devi, focusing on how her narratives amplify the struggles of subaltern women in India. The analysis examines Devi's portrayal of tribal, rural, and lower-caste women as active agents of resistance against patriarchal, capitalist, and neo-colonial oppression. Through close readings of texts such as *Draupadi*, *Breast-Giver*, and *Witch*, the study underscores Devi's critique of systemic exploitation and her effort to reclaim agency for silenced women. The analysis reveals that Devi's characters—like Dopdi Mejhen, Jashoda, and Chudali—embody resistance that challenge the intersecting forces of gendered violence, caste oppression, and state brutality. Whether through acts of bodily autonomy, silent endurance, or ecological solidarity, these characters confront and resist exploitation in ways that subvert the conventional narratives of victimhood. Furthermore, Devi's works critique the exclusionary nature of mainstream feminism and nationalist discourses, which often marginalise women from lower castes and tribal communities. The conclusion emphasises Devi's significant contribution to postcolonial feminist literature, presenting a radical framework that prioritises subaltern voices. Her fiction serves as a literary intervention and an activist call for social justice and systemic change. By centring the resilience of marginalised women, Devi redefines resistance and insists on recognising their lived realities in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism, Mahasweta Devi, subaltern women, resistance, tribal women, caste oppression, gendered violence.

Introduction

Postcolonial feminism examines the intersections of gender, race, class, and colonialism, aiming to amplify the voices of women marginalized due to their social, cultural, and economic status, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Mahasweta Devi, a renowned Bengali writer and activist, has significantly contributed to postcolonial feminist discourse. Through her narratives, Devi highlights the lives of subaltern women—those marginalized and oppressed individuals outside dominant cultural and social frameworks. Her works give voice to those who have historically been silenced: indigenous women, tribal women, and the oppressed classes, providing a potent critique of both colonial and patriarchal structures.

Indian English literature emerged during the colonial period, with early writers such as Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R. K. Narayan laying its foundation. Initially shaped by colonial influences, the genre began to reflect Indian realities regarding cultural identity and social issues. Post-independence, writers like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati Roy expanded the scope of Indian English writing, engaging with postcolonial themes of national identity, globalism, and historical trauma. In later decades, a more nuanced, intersectional approach to gender and class developed, particularly with the rise of postcolonial feminism.

Indian English literature has often been criticised for excluding marginalised voices, especially those of women and lower-caste individuals. The 1980s and 1990s saw a shift, with writers such as Mahasweta Devi, Kamala Das, and Arundhati Roy engaging with issues of gendered subalternity and reclaiming space for the voices of marginalized women in the literary canon. Devi's works, characterized by their engagement with tribal, rural, and postcolonial issues, focus primarily on the lives of subaltern women, marginalized both by colonial histories and postcolonial power structures.

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was a prolific Bengali writer and social activist, widely recognized as a leading figure in postcolonial Indian literature. Her works, translated into numerous languages, focus on the plight of marginalized communities, particularly India's tribal populations. Devi's fiction illuminates the intersectional struggles of the subaltern, especially tribal women, who face the combined weight of patriarchy, caste discrimination, colonialism, and capitalist exploitation.

Devi's most significant works, such as *Draupadi*, *The Breast-Giver*, *Dhouli*, and *Witch*, starkly portray gendered violence, economic exploitation, and social injustice. Her ability to depict the emotional and psychological landscapes of marginalized women, especially in tribal communities, sets her apart from contemporaries. Devi's characters are often resilient, rebellious, and reject conventional societal expectations, offering an alternative narrative to the victimization typically associated with marginalized women in literature.

Her works are not only critiques of the systemic oppression faced by tribal communities but also a form of literary activism. Devi uses literature as a tool for social change, highlighting the injustices indigenous women face. Her activism and writing intersect, as she was deeply involved in movements advocating for the rights of tribal people and marginalized women.

Mahasweta Devi's focus on gendered subalternity places her alongside other significant postcolonial feminist writers like Arundhati Roy and Kamala Das, though each writer's thematic focus differs.

In her acclaimed novel The God of Small Things (1997), Arundhati Roy addresses issues of caste, gender, and the effects of colonial legacies on Indian society. While Roy focuses on

complex relationships within the Syrian Christian community in Kerala, her novel also explores how caste and gender shape the lives of her female characters. However, Roy focuses primarily on the privileged subaltern in a postcolonial setting, whereas Devi focuses on tribal women at the very bottom of the social and economic hierarchy. As Lynn Turner observes, Devi's representation of women is more directly connected to indigenous struggles and caste-based violence. Roy's narrative deals with the cultural and historical conflicts in a modernizing India (Turner, 2012).

Kamala Das, another contemporary, centres on gender, sexuality, and women's independence, focusing on personal identity. In her poem "An Introduction," she boldly critiques societal expectations of women, particularly in marriage and motherhood. While Das's work is focused on the emotional and personal lives of women, Devi's approach is more political, highlighting the systemic oppression of marginalised communities and using female characters as symbols of resistance. Sharmila Rege notes that while Das's feminism emphasises individual liberation and sexual autonomy, Devi's feminism is collective and socially engaged, focusing on women as symbols of community resistance against colonial and capitalist exploitation (Rege, 2006).

Postcolonial feminism examines the intersection of colonialism, gender, and class, focusing on how women from formerly colonised nations experience oppression differently from Western women. Mahasweta Devi, a prominent Bengali writer and activist, centres her works on marginalised women—tribal, rural, and subaltern—whose voices are often erased in mainstream feminist and nationalist discourses. Her fiction critiques patriarchal, capitalist, and neo-colonial structures while reclaiming agency for oppressed women.

Marginalised voices often find powerful expression in the writings of authors who seek to challenge dominant narratives and give voice to the silenced. Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Indira Goswami's *The Game of Bhairavi* are texts that confront the systemic oppression of women and marginalized communities within different socio-political and cultural contexts. While Mahasweta Devi's work centres on tribal insurgency and state violence, Goswami's novel navigates the rigidity of religious orthodoxy and gender norms. This comparative study explores how both texts highlight the struggles, resistance, and resilience of marginalized figures, with a particular focus on gender, caste, class, and institutional violence.

Mahasweta Devi and Indira Goswami, through *Draupadi* and *The Game of Bhairavi*, articulate the multifaceted oppression experienced by women at the intersections of caste, class, religion, and state power. Where Devi's Draupadi becomes a rallying figure of political rebellion, Goswami's Saudamini embodies the silent endurance of spiritual struggle. Yet, in both cases, the protagonists find a way to assert their identities and reclaim agency. These narratives underscore the necessity of acknowledging and amplifying marginalised voices—be they loud or silent, violent or spiritual-as essential to the discourse on resistance and liberation.

Mahasweta Devi's literary universe is inhabited by characters on the margins of society—tribals, lower-castes, and impoverished women—whose lives are shaped by violence, exploitation, and exclusion. Among them, her female protagonists emerge as victims and symbols of resistance, navigating and challenging both gendered oppression and systemic exploitation. Through *Draupadi*, *Breast-Giver*, and *Dhouli*, Devi explores how women's bodies become sites of oppression and defiance. Each character represents a different form of subaltern resistance, grounded in lived realities and marked by complex responses to their social conditions.

Research on Postcolonial Feminism and the Marginalised Female Voice in the Works of Mahasweta Devi is vital for understanding the intersections of gender, caste, class, and colonialism in postcolonial contexts. Devi's works, particularly those highlighting the struggles of indigenous and tribal women, bring attention to the silenced voices of the marginalized. This research emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, exploring how the overlapping layers of oppression shape the experiences of subaltern women. Devi critiques both colonial and postcolonial systems, highlighting how colonial legacies persist in post-independence India, particularly in the exploitation and dispossession of tribal communities. The research also contributes to the development of postcolonial feminism by offering a nuanced perspective on the gendered subaltern experience, enriching feminist discourse by incorporating issues of caste and class. Devi's portrayal of subaltern women as resilient, rebellious figures who resist victimhood challenges dominant narratives of victimization and provides an alternative feminist framework. Furthermore, the research engages with subaltern studies, expanding our understanding of how marginalized women navigate oppressive structures. Through her literary activism, Devi raises awareness about the need for social change and justice, making literature an essential tool for advocacy. This research not only furthers academic discourse but also highlights the role of literature in social activism, emphasizing the significance of empowering marginalized voices and demanding systemic reform in both literary and real-world contexts.

Review of Literature:

The study of postcolonial feminism in the works of Mahasweta Devi has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly with regard to its intersectional focus on gender, caste, class, and colonial legacies. A wealth of scholarly work has analyzed how Devi's writing gives voice to marginalized women, often situated in tribal and rural communities, who navigate systemic oppression. Scholars such as Gayatri Spivak (1988), who introduced the concept of the subaltern in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, have been foundational in shaping the discourse on subaltern studies, particularly in relation to postcolonial feminist theories. Spivak's work is especially relevant when studying Devi, as both scholars emphasize the silencing of marginalized voices in historical and literary contexts.

Numerous studies have explored Devi's central theme of subalternity, highlighting how her female characters refuse to be reduced to mere victims of patriarchy and colonialism. One such example is Devi's *Draupadi*, where Dopdi Mejhen's act of resistance, confronting her rapists naked, challenges both patriarchal and colonial power structures. Scholars like Lynn Turner (2012) have argued that Devi's works force readers to rethink the relationship between violence, gender, and resistance in postcolonial societies. Turner's analysis suggests that Devi's women are not passive victims but active participants in resisting oppression through their bodily autonomy and agency.

In contrast to mainstream feminist writers like Kamala Das and Arundhati Roy, who focus on personal and intimate forms of resistance, Devi's feminist approach is marked by collective resistance to systemic oppression. Sharmila Rege (2006) points out that while Kamala Das's works center on sexual autonomy and personal freedom, Devi's narratives focus on women's roles in resisting systemic exploitation through solidarity and collective struggle. Furthermore, Rege emphasizes that Devi's works are less concerned with individual liberation and more with social activism aimed at the upliftment of marginalized communities.

Critics such as Ritu Menon (1993) have highlighted how Devi's exploration of caste and gender complicates the traditional notions of postcolonial feminism, which often prioritize issues of gender over the intersections with caste

and class. In works like *The Breast-Giver*, where Jashoda's labor as a wet nurse is commodified, Menon's critique points to how caste-based exploitation of women's bodies is a central feature in Devi's feminist framework, a point which has been frequently overlooked in mainstream postcolonial studies.

Moreover, the socio-political implications of Devi's writing have been discussed by scholars like John Beverley (1999), who emphasizes that Devi's works advocate for the dignity and rights of tribal and marginalized groups, making her a significant figure in postcolonial activism as well as literary critique. Through her fiction, Devi not only critiques postcolonial government policies but also challenges capitalist structures that perpetuate exploitation. Beverley argues that Devi's literary activism is a call to address the ongoing neocolonial oppression faced by indigenous women.

The literature on Mahasweta Devi's works, thus, offers valuable insight into postcolonial feminist discourse, especially with regard to the representation of marginalized women. The body of work on Devi underscores her position as a crucial figure in postcolonial literature, whose narratives challenge traditional feminist frameworks by highlighting the intersectionality of gender, caste, and colonialism in shaping the experiences of the subaltern woman.

Discussion

In Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, Dopdi Mejhen—a Santhal tribal woman and Naxalite insurgent—embodies radical resistance through her defiance in the face of brutal state violence. Captured and gang-raped by army officers, Dopdi is ordered to present herself before the officer Senanayak. Instead of submitting, she arrives naked and unashamed, confronting her oppressors with a body marked by violence but unbowed. Devi writes,

> "Draupadi stood before Senanayak, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts. Used. Yet resilient. Eyes unblinking" (Devi, 1995, p. 40)[1].

This scene marks a radical reimagining of the Mahabharata's Draupadi: where the epic heroine is saved by divine intervention, Devi's Dopdi reclaims agency by refusing to be shamed. Her nudity is not a sign of victimhood but a weaponized form of resistance, as she declares, "*What more can they do? They can't make me ashamed*" (Devi, 1995, p. 40). Her body, rendered a site of systemic violence, becomes a living indictment of state brutality and patriarchal power. Targeted not only for her political affiliations but also for her identity as a tribal woman, Dopdi's final act of standing tall and exposed becomes a powerful symbol of subaltern resistance—a refusal to be silenced, objectified, or stripped of dignity.

In Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver*, Jashoda, a Brahmin woman turned professional wet-nurse, represents a nuanced portrayal of maternal labor, exploitation, and silent resistance. Forced by poverty to sustain her family, Jashoda breastfeeds dozens of upper-class children, turning her body into an instrument of care and survival. Over time, her health deteriorates, and she is ultimately diagnosed with breast cancer—an ailment symbolically tied to the very body part that sustained others. Devi poignantly observes,

> "She is the great mother, the universal mother, the milk-giving machine—and when she is no longer of use, she is discarded" (Devi, 1997, p. 224)[2].

Through this biting irony, Devi critiques how patriarchy and caste-based

[1] Devi, M. (1995). *Draupadi*. In Spivak, G. C. (Trans.), *Imaginary Maps* (pp. 22–40). Calcutta: Thema.

[2] Devi, M. (1997). *Breast-Giver*. In Spivak, G. C. (Trans.), *Breast Stories* (pp. 222–245). Calcutta: Seagull Books.

systems commodify female bodies, valuing them only when they are productive. Jashoda's resistance is not expressed through rebellion, but through endurance and ironic embodiment of the nurturing "mother" figure. While she fulfills this role to the extreme, she also exposes its exploitative core, making her a living metaphor for the invisibilized labor of women, particularly those who serve silently within domestic and social hierarchies. Her tragic end—dying unattended and forgotten—underscores the harsh reality that women like her are revered only in utility, and discarded in decay. In this way, Jashoda becomes a symbol of gendered systemic violence and the quiet, ironic resistance of women whose bodies are both sanctified and exploited.

In Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver*, the critique of both nationalist and feminist discourses becomes deeply embedded in the story of Jashoda, a Brahmin woman who becomes a professional wet-nurse. Devi dismantles the idealized notions of motherhood and female sacrifice that are often celebrated in nationalist rhetoric, exposing how these ideals serve upper-caste, upper-class interests while invisibilizing the labor and suffering of marginalized women. Jashoda breastfeeds over fifty children in the family she serves, becoming a symbolic "mother" of the nation—but this status brings neither respect nor security. Instead, she is consumed and discarded when she is no longer physically able to serve. This imagery critiques the nationalist glorification of maternal sacrifice, which romanticizes women's roles without addressing the systemic structures that exploit them. Jashoda is not protected by her caste status when she becomes economically dependent; nor is she empowered by her role as a "mother" figure when her utility ends. This aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's observation that Devi "writes against the grain of both traditional patriarchy and bourgeois feminism", by foregrounding the voices and bodies of subaltern women who are ignored by both (Spivak, 1997, Introduction to *Breast Stories*)[3].

Moreover, Jashoda's exploitation underscores how mainstream feminist discourse often centers urban, upper-class women, sidelining women like her who endure intersections of caste, class, and gendered oppression. Jashoda's suffering—sanctioned by familial duty, caste ideology, and economic dependence—highlights the failure of both the nation-state and mainstream feminism to account for the lived realities of subaltern women, whose reproductive and emotional labor is taken for granted. Thus, Devi's narrative becomes a scathing critique of ideologies that praise women's service while refusing them autonomy, visibility, or justice.

Mahasweta Devi's fiction frequently reclaims female agency by reinterpreting myth through the lens of lived reality, challenging both traditional gender roles and dominant cultural narratives. A powerful example is found in her short story *Draupadi*, where the protagonist, Dopdi Mejhen—a tribal woman and Naxalite rebel—becomes a contemporary reimagining of the mythological Draupadi from the *Mahabharata*. However, while the epic Draupadi is saved by divine intervention during her disrobing, Devi's Dopdi refuses the role of the passive victim, asserting agency in the face of sexual violence and state brutality.

After being captured, tortured, and raped by military officers, Dopdi is summoned by Senanayak, the officer in charge. Instead of covering her naked, bloodied body, she confronts him without shame:

Draupadi stood before Senanayak, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry

[3] Spivak, G. C. (1997). *Introduction*. In Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* (pp. ix–xxxii). Calcutta: Seagull Books.

blood. Two breasts. Used. Yet resilient. Eyes unblinking" (Devi, 1995, p. 40)[4].

This act of naked defiance transforms her violated body into a weapon, a site of resistance rather than submission. When she says, "*What more can they do? They can't make me ashamed,*" Dopdi reclaims control over her body and narrative, directly subverting traditional notions of honor, purity, and feminine modesty (Devi, 1995, p. 40).

Through such reworkings of myth, Devi unsettles patriarchal and nationalist ideals that often glorify women's suffering while denying them autonomy. Her characters challenge cultural scripts that define women solely in terms of chastity, duty, or motherhood. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains in her introduction to *Imaginary Maps*, Devi's protagonists are women who "reinscribe the body as a site of political resistance," particularly within the intersectional frameworks of caste, class, and gender (Spivak, 1995, p. xxiii)[5].

In this way, Devi creates a dialogue between myth and contemporary reality, using myth not as a nostalgic ideal but as a narrative space to challenge hegemonic structures. Her stories position subaltern women not as silent sufferers but as agents of disruption, whose defiance—whether physical, emotional, or symbolic—reclaims ownership over their stories, bodies, and futures.

In Mahasweta Devi's *Dhouli*, the eponymous protagonist—a lower-caste tribal woman—is seduced and abandoned by a Brahmin man, an act that results in her pregnancy and subsequent social expulsion. Ostracized and brutalized by her own community, Dhouli becomes the target of caste-based and patriarchal violence, not for committing a crime, but for transgressing rigid social boundaries. Yet, rather than internalize this imposed shame, she asserts her agency by choosing to leave her village and become a sex worker. Her declaration, "*I'll go to the town. I'll live on my own terms, not under your rules*" (Devi, 1997, p. 28)[6], marks a pivotal moment of self-determination. In a society that seeks to control women through moral policing and caste discipline, Dhouli's decision to reclaim control over her body and livelihood is a radical act of survival. Unlike overt rebellion, her resistance is quiet but transformative, rooted in a refusal to conform to the role of the shamed, fallen woman. Devi constructs Dhouli's resistance not as an idealized heroism but as a political act of self-assertion—a rejection of the systems that criminalize female desire and autonomy. Her survival becomes a potent critique of the intersecting oppressions faced by subaltern women, illustrating that even minimal agency in such contexts becomes deeply subversive.

Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* and *The Hunt* offer scathing critiques of neo-colonial exploitation and the systemic oppression of tribal communities, highlighting how the intersection of capitalism, patriarchy, and state power devastates indigenous lives and particularly burdens tribal women. These narratives reveal how postcolonial India continues to function under structures that mimic colonial rule, perpetuating economic displacement, cultural erasure, and gendered violence.

In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Devi tells the story of the titular tribal hero whose skill with the bow symbolizes indigenous resistance. However, the narrative transcends individual heroism to focus on how capitalist development, through dam construction, forest clearance, and land acquisition, destroys tribal ways of life. The tribal community is coerced into selling its labor under exploitative

[4] Devi, M. (1995). *Draupadi*. In Spivak, G. C. (Trans.), *Imaginary Maps* (pp. 22–40). Calcutta: Thema.
[5] Spivak, G. C. (1995). *Introduction*. In Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps* (pp. i–xxvii). Calcutta: Thema.
[6] Devi, M. (1997). *Dhouli*. In Spivak, G. C. (Trans.), *Breast Stories* (pp. 1–29). Calcutta: Seagull Books.

conditions, its traditions commodified or dismissed as primitive. As Devi writes, "*Chotti could feel that the forest and the hills no longer spoke the old language*" (Devi, 2002, p. 144)[7], indicating the cultural alienation that accompanies economic displacement.

The Hunt centers on Mary Oraon, a tribal woman who subverts gendered expectations through her independence and boldness. When a contractor named Tehsildar threatens her autonomy and safety, Mary kills him during a tribal ritual, the very moment symbolic of renewal and power. Her act of violence is not portrayed as criminal but as a righteous assertion of agency in a context where women are preyed upon by both outsiders and insiders. Devi writes, "*Mary was the hunter now, not the hunted*" (Devi, 1995, p. 86)[8], flipping the gendered power dynamics and reclaiming space for tribal women in the narrative of resistance.

Both stories expose how landlords, contractors, and state agents exploit tribal labor and violate tribal women, who suffer the double burden of being marginalized by both external systems of capital and internal patriarchal customs. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes that Devi "shows the subaltern not merely as a victim, but as a subject capable of resistance," particularly in how tribal women confront layered oppressions (Spivak, 1995, Introduction to *Imaginary Maps*)[9].

Devi's work underscores that neo-colonialism is not merely economic but cultural and gendered, stripping tribal people of land, language, and identity. Yet, through characters like Chotti and Mary, she affirms that resistance persists—in memory, ritual, and embodied defiance—challenging the myth that the marginalized are voiceless or powerless in the face of systemic erasure.

Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives in Devi's Works

Mahasweta Devi's literary corpus powerfully engages with postcolonial feminist perspectives, foregrounding the lived realities of subaltern women who are doubly or triply marginalised by gender, caste, class, and colonial legacies. Her narratives resist both elitist feminism and nationalist historiography, offering instead a grounded, intersectional approach that exposes how oppression functions across multiple axes.

At the core of Devi's feminism is a deep awareness of intersectionality. Her characters—such as Dopdi in *Draupadi*, Mary in *The Hunt*, and Jashoda in *Breast-Giver*—are not merely women suffering under patriarchy; they are tribal, lower-caste, rural, or economically disenfranchised, making their experiences distinct from urban, upper-class feminist narratives. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes this point, writing that Devi's work "*gives the subaltern woman the power to be heard, not by romanticizing her, but by showing her embedded in a web of contradictions*" (Spivak, 1995, p. xxiv). For example, Dopdi is not just violated as a woman; she is also targeted as a tribal insurgent—a political threat to the state and an ideological outcast.

Devi also critiques the silencing of subaltern voices in dominant historical narratives. In stories like *Draupadi*, the very act of naming a tribal woman after a mythological figure function as a political intervention. While the Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* is protected by divine forces, Devi's Dopdi is left exposed to state-sanctioned violence. Yet, her silence becomes resistance: "*Dopdi Mejhen is not afraid. She is not ashamed. She stands naked and still, making the forest officer look away*" (Devi, 1995, p. 40). Here, silence is not submission—it is a

[7] Devi, M. (2002). *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
[8] Devi, M. (1995). *The Hunt*. In Spivak, G. C. (Trans.), *Imaginary Maps* (pp. 59–87). Calcutta: Thema.
[9] Spivak, G. C. (1995). *Introduction*. In Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps* (pp. i–xxvii). Calcutta: Thema.

refusal to play the expected role of the victim, turning the gaze back onto the oppressor.

From an anti-state and anti-capitalist standpoint, Devi's fiction indicts postcolonial regimes that perpetuate colonial systems of exploitation. In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, development projects displace tribal populations in the name of progress, echoing the dispossession of colonial land grabs. The state and capitalist agents—contractors, landlords, and police—become enforcers of neo-colonial violence, especially toward women. As Chotti reflects, "*Our land is not ours anymore. The forests don't speak to us. They've gone silent*" (Devi, 2002, p. 198), Devi signals the spiritual and material loss that accompanies systemic oppression.

By positioning indigenous and rural women as agents of resistance, Devi refuses to reduce them to passive subjects. Her fiction asks: who gets to speak, who gets remembered, and who remains invisible in the grand narratives of the nation? In doing so, Mahasweta Devi carves out a postcolonial feminist space that is both radically political and deeply human, demanding that we listen to the silences and scars of the women most often ignored.

Postcolonial Feminism and the Gendered Subaltern in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

In *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi engages deeply with postcolonial feminism by focusing on the figure of the gendered subaltern, challenging traditional portrayals of women in both Indian mythology and postcolonial discourse. Dopdi Mejhen, the protagonist of the story, is a tribal woman and Naxalite rebel, whose experience of systemic violence is not only shaped by her gender but also by her caste, class, and political identity. Devi's portrayal of Dopdi thus becomes a powerful commentary on the intersecting forms of oppression faced by subaltern women in postcolonial societies.

Dopdi's gendered subalternity is not solely defined by her status as a woman but is also intricately tied to her tribal identity and anti-state activism. As a Naxalite, Dopdi is caught between the traditional gender roles imposed on her as a woman and the radical political struggle she is engaged in. Her subalternity, then, is multidimensional—she is a woman, an insurgent, and a member of a marginalized tribe. Her resistance to the forces of patriarchy and the state is embodied in her decision to reclaim agency in the face of extreme violence.

The story becomes a reworking of the myth of Draupadi from the Mahabharata, but with a subversive twist. While the Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* is saved by divine intervention when she is humiliated in the Kuru court, Dopdi refuses to passively submit to her violation. When she is captured and sexually assaulted by the police, Devi gives her the ultimate act of defiance: Dopdi refuses to cover her naked body. She stands before her captors, naked but unbroken, confronting them with her indomitable will. As the text describes, "*Draupadi stood before Senanayak, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts. Used. Yet resilient. Eyes unblinking*" (Devi, 1995, p. 40). This moment is not just about physical exposure; it is an assertion of power and autonomy in the face of systemic violence.

This act of resistance is both a gendered and political statement. Dopdi's refusal to be shamed by her captors reflects the intersectionality at the heart of Devi's postcolonial feminist approach. Dopdi is not merely resisting male domination or sexual violence; she is also confronting the power structures that govern her life—the state, the military, and patriarchal society. In this way, Devi's portrayal of Dopdi exemplifies postcolonial feminism's critique of the ways in which colonial legacies continue to shape the oppression of marginalized women, particularly those who exist on the margins of both gender and national identity.

Dopdi's silence—her refusal to speak during her assault—is another important aspect of Devi's feminist critique. While many feminist narratives demand that women speak out, Devi's text uses silence as a form of resistance. In a society where subaltern women's voices are often silenced by both patriarchy and the state, Dopdi's silence becomes a refusal to conform to the expectations of the oppressors. As she herself states in the story, "*What more can they do? They can't make me ashamed*" (Devi, 1995, p. 40). Here, silence becomes a shield and a weapon, asserting her resilience and dignity in the face of complete degradation.

Ultimately, *Draupadi* becomes a postcolonial feminist text that foregrounds the subaltern voice, offering a reclamation of agency for the most marginalized women. Devi's reworking of the myth not only critiques the traditional representations of women in epic narratives but also exposes the ongoing exploitation of tribal women in postcolonial India. Dopdi's defiance, in her nakedness and silence, challenges readers to reconsider how gender, caste, and political identity intersect to form the multifaceted oppression experienced by the gendered subaltern.

Padmapriya as an Epitome of Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's Work

Padmapriya, a central character in Mahasweta Devi's writings, serves as an epitome of resistance against the multiple layers of oppression faced by subaltern women. Her life and actions encapsulate Devi's critique of the societal structures that marginalize women, particularly those who belong to oppressed castes and tribes. Padmapriya embodies the refusal to be silenced and subjugated, navigating the complexities of caste, class, and gender with a resilience that transforms her into a symbol of defiance.

The Context of Padmapriya's Struggles

Padmapriya's resistance is not an isolated act but a continuous battle against the oppressive systems that limit her freedom and autonomy. Whether it is the exploitation by patriarchal structures, the caste-based discrimination, or the societal expectations imposed upon her as a woman, Padmapriya's character challenges the narratives that define women within traditional and restrictive boundaries. Devi presents her as a figure whose actions and choices disrupt normative gender roles, offering a counter-narrative to mainstream perceptions of femininity and passivity.

Resistance Through Agency and Autonomy

Padmapriya's resistance is most visible in her assertion of agency. In contrast to the stereotypical portrayal of women as passive or victimized, Padmapriya refuses to accept her subjugated position within the social order. For example, her ability to carve out a space for herself, even when faced with societal rejection or familial obligations, represents a powerful defiance of patriarchal expectations. By exercising control over her life and choices, Padmapriya refuses to be confined by the roles assigned to her as a woman and a member of an oppressed community.

Challenging Caste and Class Boundaries

One of the key elements of Padmapriya's resistance is her rejection of caste-based oppression. In a society where caste remains a major determinant of social mobility and access to resources, Padmapriya's life becomes a profound critique of the entrenched caste system. By asserting her humanity and dignity, Padmapriya actively resists the traditional caste-based hierarchies that dictate the lives of millions of women like her. Through her actions, Devi critiques not only gendered violence but also the intersectional oppression that arises from the intersection of caste, class, and gender.

Subverting Gender Norms

Padmapriya's resistance is also expressed through her defiance of the traditional norms of femininity. In a society

where women's value is often reduced to their roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers, Padmapriya transcends these limitations. Her resistance lies in asserting her identity on her own terms, confronting not only patriarchal authorities but also societal expectations of what it means to be a woman. She does not seek validation through external norms; instead, she validates herself through her own actions and decisions. Her journey is a refusal to be defined by others, embodying a feminist act of self-assertion in a deeply oppressive world.

Resistance as Survival and Empowerment:

Padmapriya's resistance is not just a political statement; it is also an act of survival. In a world that systematically seeks to crush the spirit of marginalized individuals, her perseverance in the face of adversity becomes a symbol of empowerment. By asserting control over her own narrative and rejecting the roles imposed on her, Padmapriya's resistance represents a profound act of empowerment, reclaiming autonomy in an environment that continually seeks to deny her personhood.

In Mahasweta Devi's works, Padmapriya is more than just a character; she is a symbol of subaltern resistance—a testament to the power of defiance in the face of overwhelming oppression. Her rejection of patriarchal, casteist, and classist norms challenges the narratives that attempt to silence women like her. Through Padmapriya's story, Devi invites readers to reconsider the relationship between gender, caste, and resistance, urging them to acknowledge the agency and power of those who have been historically marginalized.

Dispossession and Extractivism in the Life of the Marginalized: An Ecofeminist Reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Witch*

Mahasweta Devi's *Witch* (originally *Chudali*)[10] provides a poignant narrative that critiques the exploitation of marginalized communities, particularly tribal women, within the context of extractivism and dispossession. Through the character of Chudali, a tribal woman falsely accused of witchcraft, Devi portrays the intertwined relationship between gender, nature, and class oppression, which is central to eco-feminist theory. The story critiques the extraction of resources from indigenous lands, while also addressing the ways in which the dispossession of tribal people is gendered, with women suffering disproportionately from the impacts of capitalist development, patriarchy, and social discrimination.

From an ecofeminist standpoint, *Witch* highlights the synergies between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature. Chudali's life is emblematic of the way tribal women's bodies become battlegrounds for patriarchal and capitalist forces that view both nature and women as resources to be controlled and exploited. The very act of accusing Chudali of witchcraft is, in essence, a method of social control, aligning with the ecofeminist critique of the way women are associated with the land in many indigenous cultures. In this context, women's roles as caretakers of the land and their ability to access and manage natural resources are seen as a form of power. By labelling Chudali as a witch, the community and the ruling forces attempt to strip her of this power, turning her into a scapegoat to conceal the larger, systemic exploitation happening around her.

The extractivist system in *Witch* is deeply tied to the dispossession of tribal lands.

[10] Devi, M. (2002). *Witch* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). In *Feminist Narratives from the Subaltern* (pp. 150–175). Calcutta: Thema.

In the narrative, Chudali's community faces increasing pressure from landowners, the state, and capitalist entities who seek to exploit the resources of the tribal land, often through violent means. The tribal people's relationship with their land is rooted in sustainable practices and spiritual connection, yet they are dispossessed of their land, with women like Chudali becoming the victims of violence and marginalization in the process. Ecofeminist thinkers like Vandana Shiva argue that the dispossession of land from indigenous communities is directly connected to the colonial and capitalist systems that view both women and nature as resources to be exploited for profit. Chudali's suffering reflects this dynamic, where the land that nourishes her community is systematically extracted for the benefit of external powers, leaving her community vulnerable and impoverished.

The accusation of witchcraft in *Witch* becomes a metaphor for the gendered violence that women, particularly tribal women, face in these exploitative systems. Chudali's identification as a witch is not just an isolated case but a symbol of the broader pattern in which women's roles are marginalized and their identities are distorted in the service of maintaining social and economic hierarchies. Witchcraft accusations have historically been used to control women's power and silence their resistance to patriarchy and colonial systems. In this case, Chudali's supposed association with witchcraft represents her rejection of dominant gender roles and her agency as a provider, healer, and protector of her community. The imposition of witchcraft accusations on her reflects the larger social and cultural efforts to strip marginalized women of their autonomy—an action that both the state and patriarchal structures use to maintain control over both women and natural resources.

In the ecofeminist reading of *Witch*, land becomes a central symbol of resistance and reclaiming power. Chudali's struggles symbolize a larger movement in which marginalized women and indigenous communities begin to reclaim control over their land, and in turn, reclaim their bodies, identities, and histories. The ecofeminist critique of extractivism and dispossession calls for a return to sustainable practices, where indigenous knowledge of the land and its resources can be preserved and protected. For Chudali, her ultimate resistance comes from challenging the status quo, refusing to accept the labels imposed upon her, and asserting her right to exist as a woman, as a tribal member, and as a custodian of the land.

In *Witch*, nature is not merely a backdrop to the plot but an active participant in the lives of the characters. The tribal community's deep connection to nature and its rituals reflect an understanding of the ecological balance that is undermined by the encroachment of capitalist interests. Women, like Chudali, who are directly connected to the land, embody this link between human survival and environmental health. Ecofeminism argues that women's liberation is intricately tied to the liberation of the earth, and Chudali's efforts to protect her community are part of a larger struggle to reclaim both human and ecological dignity. In this sense, women's resistance in *Witch* is also a call for ecological justice, advocating for a world where marginalized communities can live in harmony with nature rather than be exploited by extractivist forces.

Mahasweta Devi's *Witch* offers a profound exploration of the relationship between dispossession, extractivism, and gendered oppression, seen through the lens of ecofeminism. The narrative highlights how tribal women like Chudali are victimized not only by patriarchal violence but by larger capitalist and colonial systems that seek to control both their bodies and the land they live on. Through Chudali's resistance, Devi reveals that eco-feminist struggles are deeply intertwined with the fight for autonomy, dignity, and the preservation of indigenous ways of life. In the end, *Witch* is not just a tale of

injustice; it is also a story of resilience and empowerment—a reminder of the power of land and women to resist and reclaim what has been taken from them.

Mahasweta Devi's works significantly contribute to postcolonial feminist literature, particularly through her portrayal of subaltern women subjected to colonial and postcolonial exploitation. Her intersectional focus on gender, caste, and class distinguishes her from other feminist writers like Arundhati Roy and Kamala Das, reflecting her deep engagement with the struggles of marginalised communities. Through characters like Dopdi Mejhen and Jashoda, Devi critiques the gendered subjugation of women while highlighting the socio-political systems that perpetuate exploitation. By offering an alternative voice to the marginalized, Devi creates a space for the silenced stories of women in postcolonial India.

Conclusions

Mahasweta Devi's literary works serve as a profound testament to the resilience and resistance of marginalized women in postcolonial India. Through her unflinching portrayal of subaltern figures—tribal rebels like Dopdi Mejhen, exploited wet-nurses like Jashoda, and scapegoated women like Chudali—Devi exposes the intersecting oppressions of gender, caste, class, and state violence. Her narratives dismantle the romanticized myths of femininity and nationalism, revealing how patriarchal, capitalist, and neo-colonial systems perpetuate exploitation.

Devi's fiction transcends mere representation; it is an act of literary activism. By centering silenced voices, she challenges dominant feminist and historical discourses that overlook the struggles of indigenous and lower-caste women. The defiance exhibited by her characters—whether through naked confrontation, silent endurance, or ecological resistance—redefines agency, proving that even in the face of extreme oppression, subaltern women can reclaim power.

Ultimately, Devi's work calls for reimagining postcolonial feminism—one deeply rooted in intersectionality and collective struggle. Her stories are critiques of systemic injustices and urgent calls for justice, urging readers to confront and challenge entrenched inequities. In doing so, Mahasweta Devi solidifies her legacy as a visionary writer who bridges the gap between literature and social change, leaving an indelible mark on feminist and postcolonial thought.

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