



The Discourse of Marginalization and Resistance: Analyzing Women Characters in the Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi

Malabika Sinha

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ananda Chandra College of Commerce,
Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, India

Email: malabikasinha.12@gmail.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.2.453](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.2.453)



Article info

Article Received: 26/05/2026
Article Accepted: 22/06/2026
Published online: 28/06/2026

Abstract

Mahasweta Devi belongs to a group of writers who stands apart among the contemporary writers, depicting grim realities of present society. Being a socially committed writer, she is always aware of social injustice inflicted upon people based on discrimination in terms of race, class, caste, gender. The representation of marginalized sections and the necessity of collective consciousness regarding exploitations, subjugations are always found a notable place in her creative world. In *Mother of 1084*, radical activism against the authority and the lives of the people associated with the movement and the effects on them are delineated in detail. This paper tries to throw light on the character of Nandini as a political rebel, her ideals and beliefs and how she becomes a symbol of resistance against the physical violence and atrocity inflicted on her and the character of Dopdi in the short story, *Draupadi*, as well as poignantly manifests the position of a tribal woman in patriarchal society and how her sufferings, exploitations, the circumstances she faces, fervently express double colonization of women in the postcolonial world and how she redefines her role, stands against all odds, representing a mode of resistance.

Keywords: postcolonialism, gender discrimination, marginalization, symbol of resistance, socio-political awareness.

INTRODUCTION

Literature for Devi, is a medium for social mobilization and she as a writer, is always aware of the responsibility towards society. Her aesthetics are deeply ingrained in her activism and this social activism plays a pivotal role in

her literary activities. Her literary compositions delineate the situations of the subaltern communities and mark their protests against exploitations, as well as the tribals and women who are exploited through the exploitative chain of political-social and economic ways over

the ages. As Maitreya Ghatak mentions the multidimensional aspects of her writing:

Whether it is a struggle for political power or more immediate problems like demands for land, a higher share of the crop, minimum wages, roads, schools, drinking water or for sheer human dignity, these remain the hallmark of her fiction – especially the little known, little lauded struggles which are part of everyday life and don't necessarily find a place in history books or the mainstream media. (x)

Contemporary realities are reflected in her creations. Her voice and pen are committed to social discrimination in terms of class, caste, race, gender as well as injustice inflicted on the marginalized sections of the society. Being a writer, she is aware of her responsibility towards society and collective consciousness is also part of her creative writing:

To her, creative activity, like social activism, is solely a product of purposeful planning, resolve and effort. She emphasizes the interconnectedness of literary and political activity. To respond to her works is to acknowledge, among other things, the counter thrusts of the people who are crushed under the system. Her activism as well as writing has assisted the calibration of the subaltern politics in the country. Her writings have been a source of inspiration for all who stand for the cause of the oppressed. Though the writer is no more in the corporeal sense, her words, her thoughts, and the lives of those she touched infused subaltern writing with a tangible value and will ensure she continues to live on in our midst. (*Hirpara* 166)

The story of *Mother of 1084* is related with the Naxalite movement and focuses on the socio-political milieu of West Bengal in the 1960s and 70s. Through the characters of *Mother of*

1084, Devi reveals the indifference of the larger community towards the massacre of the Naxalites and their lack of reactions towards them and their activities:

In *Mother of 1084* even while Mahasweta evokes and re-creates the killings of the Naxalites, she concentrates on the later reactions –and lack of reaction – of a cross section of the survivors, both those who bear the scars and wounds – both literally and figuratively –of those horrible days and those who had lived through the days of violence in simulated insularity. The adoration of godmen, the euphoria over the Bangladesh war, the fashionable pretences of literary radicalism, and scandals, commercial and amorous, constituted for the latter a lifestyle that guaranteed their security. What stands out in Mahasweta's elaborate exposure of the Chatterjee family and its art of survival is their systematic denial of Brati and his defiance of the family –beginning with Dibyanath's active concern to keep the news of the manner of Brati's killing 'from the people who knew him' (*Bandyopadhyay xiv-xv*)

Mahasweta Devi as a writer, stands out in stark contrast with contemporary writers, depicting grim realities of present society. She finds herself as a socially committed writer who is always aware of social injustice inflicted upon people based on discrimination in terms of race, class, caste, gender. The representation of marginalized sections and the necessity of collective consciousness for their exploitations are always found a notable place in her creative world. She is always aware of the socio-political and economic situations and contemporary realities are reflected in her writings:

She is not an ivory tower thinker who is indifferent to passions other than those of the mind and the intellect. Literature, for her, is not fantasy, nor is it a pastoral romance. It is firmly rooted in the ground

reality. Detailed documentation goes into the making of the narrative. What redeems her ideological biases is this anchoring in facts, empirical and material truths of life. She does not take a tangential view of reality for as a hard-core realist, she believes literature must stem from actual, historical facts. That's why literature and politics, art and activism make invariably crossroads in her creative oeuvre. (Sarkar and Debnath 7)

Nandini and her indomitable will in *Mother of 1084*

In *Mother of 1084*, radical activism of the Naxalite movement against the violence and atrocity and the lives of the people associated with the movement are delineated in detail. Nandini, one of the significant characters, is closely involved with this movement and there is an emotional bonding between Nandini and Brati. As a socially conscious and politically active person, her life has drastically changed due to her involvement with the movement. Being a woman, she is humiliated and physically assaulted in the prison. This paper tries to throw light on the character of Nandini as a political rebel, her ideals, and how she becomes a symbol of resistance against the violence inflicted on her by the authority.

The name 'Nandini' comes from the word, 'Nand' meaning 'delight'. In Hindu mythology, Nandini is the wish granting cow owned by sage Vashishtha. It is another name of the Goddess Durga who kills demon Mahishashura. Even in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Red Oleander*, a character called Nandini appears in an ambience of Yaksha Puri. Here, in *Mother of 1084*, through the character of Nandini, the truth violence to suppress any kind of resistance in relation to the Naxalite movement is revealed. Her traumatized psyche after the prison days reflects the cruelty inflicted on her.

Nandini has been depicted as a young activist of Naxalite movement who is ready to

go against rigid social norms, the values that create social divisions and inequality in the society. She is the sole survivor of her radical group and becomes an easy prey due to her gender, a victim of physical violence. Devi portrays women characters who are strong enough to challenge the patriarchal society, the age-old traditions that confine women and exploit them because of their weaker sex. Nandini's character suffers a lot as she has gone through inhumane torture in the police custody. She is emotionally pressurized in the name of interrogation so that she discloses every detail of their group and gradually, she is physically and sexually assaulted but she never gives up her will power and mental strength. She is the epitome of courage, strength and determinism with indomitable will. She refers to the betrayal that ended lives of Brati and others:

A programme of betrayal, of course.

Nandini spoke in a calm, cold and almost indifferent voice. Sujata realized that the fleeting surprise in her eyes when she had named Anindya was not so much at Anindya's betrayal as at themselves. They had developed a burning faith in the faithlessness of everything that spelt Establishment, and yet had never thought that there could be people who could pose as friends, write about them in the Press and take part in a deliberate programme to betray them.

Now everything seems to have been a part of the betrayal.

Nandini spoke again. On her thin, dark and weary face Sujata could see a permanent shadow under her eyes. Just as shadows linger on the slopes of hills or the foothills. Some unknown land of eternal shadows in the foothills. (Bandyopadhyay 75)

Nandini plays an important role in contrast to Sujata. It is her ideological belief as well as political standpoint that enable Sujata to

confront socio-political situations around her, the world that she never meets. Nandini is not only co-worker of Brati but there is a love relationship between them. Sujata tries to know the real self of Brati through Nandini, his ideologies, activities, sacrifices and the causes of his death as she is in darkness about the political activities of her son. Nandini throws light on the mother-son relationship. It is through the strong personality of Nandini, her determinism makes Sujata realize how she is dominated even within her family, cornered by her own family members:

In a narrative style that allows simultaneously for an evocation of the illegitimacy rampant at all these levels as more than a setting and a focusing on an individual's independent realization, Mahasweta begins with the exposure of the morality of a family, takes Sujata out of its confines to let her meet and interact with others lying beyond, only to bring her back to the family at the end, and then let her make a last, desperate effort to accept its norms and adjust to it, before she collapses. The end is ambiguous, but becomes significant, thanks to the thin line of a clue that Mahasweta keeps running from the beginning - the pain of appendicitis and the painkiller tablets. (*Bandyopadhyay viii*)

Dopdi and her voice of protest in Draupadi

In the short story, *Draupadi*, Devi gives focus on the plight, miserable conditions of the subaltern people. Draupadi or Dopdi Mejhén along with her husband, is a rebellious leader who opposes exploitations, social injustice done towards the marginalized people. She is gang raped in the police custody. Being a woman, she is targeted and physically assaulted by the patriarchal society. But they fail to destroy her indomitable spirit. There is divine deity to save the honour of Draupadi, the iconic figure of the *Mahabharata* but here, there is none to save the honour of Dopdi. But she overcomes her

disgrace and redefines her role representing a symbol of resistance against subjugation of female body:

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation. What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? (*Devi 161-162*)

Dopdi is a rebellious leader who all through her life, protests all oppressions and injustices which are inflicted upon marginalized sections, specially on women who are victimized and suffer all kinds of discriminations all throughout their lives. As Spivak asserts:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence.' It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow [...] (28)

The term 'subaltern' refers to the exploitation in terms of gender, class, caste, culture. At the end, she emerges as a symbol of resistance, gains her inner strength to protest not

only the unjust treatment of the patriarchal society, but also against her marginalized identity. Here, Shweta Chowdhury's remarks are noteworthy:

Dopdi fails to enjoy divine status and escalation of prestige as epic Draupadi earned, but somehow, she has registered her presence by her utmost suffering and sacrifice that will remain, echoing in the annals of tribals and the crime charts of authorities, and traditionally dominant male societies, as a reminder of their cruelty and the befitting reaction of the woman. (Chowdhury 277)

CONCLUSION

Devi is an explorer of individual and collective psyche and her women characters are the spokespersons of her who focus on the trials and tribulations as well as how the politics of gender is intertwined with the socio-political violence and interpretation. When feminists place gender and politics together, writing becomes a gendered activity. It refers to the need for woman to write by herself and they obviously will return to the body. In the face of violent torture, Nandini also stands against all odds with her will power and becomes a symbol of resistance. She becomes 'other', objectified and reduces to mere body without any emotions. Devi's narrative aims at exposing the hypocrisy of upper-class sections as well as it refers to the resistance against the institutionalized atrocities done in the name of justice. Devi's women characters have mental strength, determination and courage to stand all negative aspects in the society. Dopdi and Nandini both are subjected to worst tortures in the hands of authority but they never lose their voices of protest and indomitable will and stand as symbols of resistance against all kinds of exploitations.

REFERENCES

- Chowdhury, S. (2016). Unarmed mutiny in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*. *Language in India*, 16(1), 271-279.
- Devi, M. (2010). *Breast stories* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Seagull Books.
- Devi, M. (2019). *Mother of 1084* (S. Bandyopadhyay, Trans.). Seagull Books.
- Ghatak, M. (2000). Introduction. In M. Ghatak (Ed.), *Dust on the road: The activist writings of Mahasweta Devi* (pp. x-xi). Seagull Books.
- Hirpara, J. D. (2016). *Mahasweta Devi: A voice of the subaltern*. Anu Books.
- Sarkar, J., & Debnath, S. (2013). Embodying commitment: Introducing Mahasweta Devi's poetic/politics with special reference to *Mother of 1084*. In J. Sarkar & S. Debnath (Eds.), *Mahasweta Devi's Mother of 1084: Critical readings and rereadings* (pp. 1-44). Books Way.
- Spivak, G. C. (1995). Can the subaltern speak? In B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, & H. Tiffin (Eds.), *The post-colonial studies reader* (pp. 24-28). Routledge.