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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Subaltern Talks Back: The Resistance of the '*Other*' in the Works of Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's oeuvre stands as a powerful articulation of subaltern resistance against hegemonic structures of power, patriarchy, and colonial legacy. This paper, "The Subaltern Talks Back: The Resistance of the 'Other' in the Works of Mahasweta Devi," explores how Devi gives voice to the silenced and marginalized, allowing the subalterns to "talk back" through acts of defiance, survival, and self-definition. Drawing upon her deep engagement with India's tribal, rural, and dispossessed communities, she transforms fiction into a site of political discourse where the "other" – whether defined by gender, caste or class – claims agency through narrative and action.

Through close readings of seminal texts such as "*Draupadi*," "Breast-Giver," and "The Hunt," the paper investigates how Devi's protagonists resist systemic oppression and articulate alternative modes of existence that challenge dominant cultural narratives. Her portrayal of characters, like Dopdi Mejhen, Jashoda and Mary Oraon, exemplifies a radical subaltern consciousness that disrupts the binaries of victimhood and powerlessness. These figures, though oppressed, resist through bodily assertion, silence, and speech – acts that reclaim the right to representation and rewrite history from below. The paper employs postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks, especially Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern and Homi Bhabha's idea of resistance and hybridity, to analyse how Devi's works enact a dialogic confrontation with authority. By merging oral traditions, realism, and myth, Devi constructs a counter-discourse that undermines both patriarchal and colonial epistemologies.

Ultimately, this study argues that Mahasweta Devi's fiction transforms the subaltern from an object of representation into an active subject who speaks, resists, redefines power. Her writing is not merely a record of oppression but an instrument of empowerment – where storytelling itself becomes an act of rebellion and the marginalized assert their right to be heard.

Keywords: Subaltern resistance, postcolonial feminism, hybridity, voice and silence, body politics, narrative subversion, counter-discourse, marginalized identities

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) occupies a singular space in postcolonial Indian literature not only as a writer but also as an activist whose life and work are inseparable from her deep commitment to tribal and marginalized communities. Her fiction repeatedly interrogates the political, sexual, and economic structures that silence those positioned at society's peripheries. The "subaltern," as conceptualized by thinkers in the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Subaltern Studies Collective, refers to those denied access to institutional power, social mobility, and historical representation. Devi's women – tribal insurgents, wet nurses, bonded labourers – embody the quintessential subaltern figure whose voice is subsumed under hegemonic narratives of nationalism, development, and patriarchy. The stories "*Draupadi*," "Breast-Giver," and "The Hunt," expose the fractures within Indian democracy by foregrounding women whose bodies become sites of exploitation, yet also of defiance.

In rewriting myths, exposing bodily exploitation, and dramatizing violent confrontations, Devi constructs alternative epistemologies in which the act of resistance becomes central to identity. This paper examines three seminal stories – "*Draupadi*," "Breast-Giver," and "The Hunt" – to explore how Devi transforms the female body into a site of political protest. The theoretical scaffolding of this paper draws on the Subaltern Studies Collective, particularly Gayatri Spivak's question in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" – whether the subaltern woman can ever articulate her agency within hegemonic discourse. Using textual analysis supported by postcolonial feminist frameworks, the study demonstrates that the subaltern woman not only speaks but speaks back, challenging the structures that attempt to render her invisible. Devi's subalterns speak through gesture, silence, and embodied revolt. Her protagonists do not seek sympathy; they enact confrontation. As Spivak observes in her introduction to *Imaginary Maps*, Devi "represents subalternity as resistance, not passivity" (x).

Devi's engagement with political realism and mythic resonance allows her to dismantle colonial and patriarchal binaries. In "*Draupadi*," the tribal revolutionary Dopdi Mejhen, stripped and tortured by the police, refuses to cover her body, declaring, "You can strip me, but how can clothe your shame?" (Devi 34). Her nakedness becomes a weapon – an inversion of epic Draupadi's disrobing. In "Breast-Giver," Jashoda's breasts once celebrated as nurturing symbols, become emblems of economic exploitation. And in "The Hunt," Mary Oraon's assertion of sexual autonomy disrupts both tribal patriarchy and colonial remnants of racial domination. Analysing these narratives in the light of postcolonial feminist resistance, the paper argues that Devi rewrites the politics of representation by replacing victimhood with agency and silence with articulation, transforming the female body into a text that "talks back".

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Mahasweta Devi's work spans multiple disciplines – feminism, anthropology, political theory, and cultural studies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's path breaking reading of "*Draupadi*" remains foundational. Spivak argues that Dopdi's refusal to clothe herself after rape "reverses the male gaze and exposes the anatomy of state oppression" (Spivak 186). In her introduction to *Imaginary Maps*, Spivak emphasizes that Devi's heroines do not seek validation through speech; instead, their "mute yet eloquent bodies" perform resistance (xxi).

Jasodhara Bagchi interprets Devi's oeuvre as a sustained attempt to represent "the political unconscious of Indian modernity," particularly the invisibility of tribal women within nationalist discourse (112). Meenakshi Mukherjee similarly notes that Devi creates "a counter-history of the marginalized," compelling readers to confront uncomfortable truths about systemic oppression (78).

Critics like Nandini Bhattacharya observe that Devi's heroines "translate pain into protest," using their bodies as instruments of resistance (45).

Criticism on "Breast-Giver" highlights Devi's incisive critique of the commodification of maternal labour. Malashri Lal argues that Jashoda "embodies the contradictions of motherhood in a patriarchal economy that glorifies but simultaneously exploits the mother figure" (56). Ranjita Basu emphasizes that

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Jashoda's service "becomes an industry in itself," revealing the intersection of gender, class, and capitalism (63).

Studies on "The Hunt" by scholars such as Gayatri Gopinath interpret Mary Oran as a hybrid figure embodying "multiple marginalities – tribal, female, and racialized" (119). Mary's act of killing her aggressor becomes a radical reclaiming of bodily autonomy and indigenous justice.

Collectively, these interpretations reveal Devi's unique ability to merge ethnographic observation with political insight. Her fiction resists sentimentality, instead exposing the economic and sexual mechanisms that perpetuate marginalization. Scholars increasingly recognize Devi's writing as a precursor to contemporary feminist and Dalit discourses, offering a distinctly Indian articulation of intersectionality.

Thematic Analysis

1. Draupadi: The Naked Body as Political Weapon

In Draupadi (Dopdi), Devi reimagines the mythic Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* as Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal woman, landless labourer, and Naxalite insurgent. Through this radical reimagining, Devi relocates resistance from the realm of mythic spectacle to the everyday brutality of state violence. Arrested and gang-raped by state forces, Dopdi performs a radical act of defiance: she refuses to clothe herself. The text describes the moment vividly: "Dopdi, naked, stands before them, fearless. She is not ashamed, not afraid" (Devi 37).

Her nakedness destabilizes the power dynamic. The soldiers who violated her cannot bear her gaze. Their violence intended to silence her, but Dopdi transforms the violated body into a site of revolt. Spivak famously interprets this scene as "the moment when the subaltern speaks through an act beyond language" (190).

This defiance overturns the patriarchal myth of Draupadi's dishonour. While the epic Draupadi was rescued by divine intervention, Devi's Dopdi exists in a world where no god intervenes – only the military, the police, and a postcolonial state that treats tribal women's bodies expendable. Dopdi rescues herself through fearless autonomy. This shift marks a decisive political commentary: the subaltern woman survives not because she is protected, but because she creates her own mode of resistance. Spivak observes, "Dopdi's refusal to be clothed redefines resistance as the refusal to be defined" (190). Her laughter unsettles her oppressors, rendering their violence impotent.

Devi's portrayal of Dopdi exemplifies how the subaltern "talks back" through embodied protest. Dopdi's nakedness, paradoxically, clothes her in moral authority. The story exposes the complicity of the state, the army, and the patriarchy in violating tribal women's bodies, while simultaneously asserting the indestructibility of female agency.

By reimagining the epic Draupadi within a modern political context, Devi not only reclaims myth but also inverts it. The act of laughter at the moment of subjection becomes revolutionary – a symbolic moment in which silence becomes speech.

2. Breast-Giver: The Exploited Mother and the Political Economy of Care

"Breast-Giver" (*Stanadayini*) exposes the commodification of maternal love. Jashoda becomes a professional wet nurse, nourishing dozens of elite children while her own family depends on her labour. Devi notes, "She fed many, but none fed her when her own body collapsed" (92). In "*Stanadayini*," Devi transforms the archetype of the nurturing Indian Mother into a critique of class exploitation. Jashoda's labour, bound to her body, becomes a site of relentless consumption. When her breasts are depleted and cancerous, the same households that revered her discard her. Devi's narrative thereby exposes how capitalist and patriarchal economies commodify female nurturing.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her introduction to *Imaginary Maps*, calls Jashoda's story "the allegory of India as mother – exhausted, overused, and abandoned" (xv). The breast, a symbol of fertility and sacrifice, becomes a metaphor for the exploitation of women's labour – both reproductive and emotional. Ranjita Basu argues that "Jashoda's body becomes a field of production, her motherhood transformed into a service industry" (63).

Devi's ironic tone dismantles the myth of motherhood as divine vocation. Jashoda is not a goddess but a labourer, her milk exchanged for survival. "She gave her milk to many, but when her own life died up, no one gave her a drop of water" (92). This tragic line crystallizes the story's subversive power: the very act sanctified by society becomes an instrument of oppression.

By turning motherhood into political commentary, Devi indicts the structures that transform the feminine ideal into mechanism of control. Jashoda's breast is both symbol and symptom – a site where patriarchy, religion, and capitalism intersect to drain the subaltern female body of dignity. Her silence at the end is not passivity but exhaustion – an indictment of a world that consumes women's bodies without recognizing their humanity.

3. The Hunt: Sexual Autonomy and Tribal Justice

In "The Hunt," Mary Oraon resists oppression not through endurance but through action. As a half-Oraon, half-Anglo-Indian woman, she navigates multiple identities and vulnerabilities. She stands at the intersection of race, gender, and class oppression. Set in the forested tribal community, the story dramatizes Mary's defiance of both patriarchal and colonial structures. When the lecherous Tehsildar, a powerful contractor, attempts to rape her, Mary kills him during the traditional spring hunt. Devi writes, "She lifted her bow and struck him clean through the neck" (48). Her act of violence is both literal and symbolic: a reclaiming of her body and her right to self-determination.

Critic Gayatri Gopinath reads Mary as "a hybrid figure whose body disrupts the boundaries of both tribe and colonizer" (119). Mary's sexuality is not portrayed as shameful but as a form of power. Unlike Jashoda or Dopdi, who resist through endurance, Mary acts pre-emptively – her resistance is assertive and bodily, yet self-authored. As Nivedita Menon notes, "Mary's agency is not defined by suffering but by the audacity to act outside patriarchal codes" (74).

Devi's narrative also reclaims the forest as a space of indigenous sovereignty. The hunt, traditionally a ritual of renewal, becomes a metaphor for female vengeance and collective justice. When Mary tells her friends afterwards, "I killed him as I would a wild boar," she collapses the categories of predator and prey (Devi 51). The story ends not with punishment but with solidarity – the community's silent acknowledgement that her act was necessary.

Through Mary, Devi imagines a new kind of subaltern resistance – one that transcends victimhood as the capacity to strike back. Her story challenges both colonial stereotypes of the "tribal savage" and nationalist idealizations of feminine virtue.

Conclusion

Across "*Draupadi*," "Breast-Giver," and "The Hunt," Mahasweta Devi dismantles the myth of the mute subaltern. Her women speak through defiance, endurance, and action, transforming their bodies into sites of political testimony. Whether naked, nursing, or armed, they articulate resistance beyond language – what Spivak calls in her introduction to the *Imaginary Maps*, "the insurgent articulation of the Other" (xix).

Devi's work rewrites the grammar of resistance by exposing how gender oppression intersects with castes, class, and colonial legacies. Dopdi's naked defiance, Jadhoda's overworked and commodified maternal body – traditionally a site of patriarchal control – can be transformed into a locus of political expression. In each

story, the female protagonist converts vulnerability into agency, silence into speech. Dopdi Mejhen's laughter, Jashoda's decay, and Mary Oraon's vengeance all point to different modalities of revolt – embodied silence, embodied sacrifice, and embodied justice – that collectively assert the humanity (subjectivity) of the "Other." In Devi's fiction, resistance is not always loud or canonical; rather, it emerges through the lived materiality of these women's bodies, which endure exploitation yet insist on meaning.

Thus, Mahasweta Devi's fiction transcends literature – it becomes political intervention. Her narratives ask not whether the subaltern can speak, but whether society can listen. As long as her characters continue to challenge domination, Devi's pen ensures that the subaltern will not only speak but will speak back; she redefines the terms on which speech, agency, and resistance are understood.

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