

Articulating the Subaltern in the Postcolonial Context: Resistance, Resilience and Redemption in the Select Works of Mahasweta Devi

Mrs. Juhileon

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Annai Scholastica Arts and Science College for Women, Pamban

Abstract

The concept of the subaltern, as conceptualized in postcolonial discourse, emphasizes minority voices that are silenced by dominant power structures. This article investigates the articulation of subaltern identity in Mahasweta Devi's selected works, including *Draupadi* and *Rudali*. Through a critical lens informed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and subaltern studies, the study investigates how Devi reclaims agency for underprivileged women. It contends that Devi's stories go beyond victimhood, depicting subaltern individuals as agents of resistance, perseverance, and ultimately salvation. This study reveals how Devi turns the subaltern from a silent subject to a powerful voice in postcolonial discourse by examining topics of gender, caste, and class oppression.

Keywords: Subaltern, Postcolonialism, Resistance, Resilience, Redemption, Mahasweta Devi, Gender, Marginality, Agency

Introduction

The term 'Subaltern' was initially used as a critical term by Italian Communist thinker Antonio Gramsci. He used the word to refer to the non-elite or working classes. It is a British word (military phrase) for someone "of inferior rank" that combines the Latin words *sub* ("next below") and *alternus* ("everyother"). "Subalten" signifies a subordinate status in terms of class, gender, caste, race, and culture. Subaltern studies was an attempt to rewrite history from below. Essentially, it deals with the socioeconomics, socio-cultural, and historical aspects of society, encompassing all persons who are subordinate in terms of caste, class, gender, age, and any other way. Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak popularized the term "Subaltern" in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985). She maintained that all persons should

be allowed to speak for themselves. Although she represents the colonized, oppressed, working class, blacks, and women whose voices have been stifled. Subalternization is the process through which postcolonial nation-states glorify certain elements while marginalizing others.

Subalternization in the colonial period referred to the marginalization of non-white races by European colonial overlords. During the postwar period, it was discovered that the dream with which millions of people had engaged in India's independence movement had turned to ashes. Discrimination based on religion, class, gender, and caste identification persisted and took on new forms. The majority of independent Indians were unable to breathe fresh air in free India. Such processes are conceptually referred to as "postcolonial subalternization." In the postcolonial era, dominant ethnic groups, classes, and castes marginalize tribals, minorities, and special groups, frequently with the active collaboration of the newly established nation-state. It is a process that P. K. Nayar describes as "continuing colonialism." When the majority modifies the laws of minorities, or when corporate and economic authority remains with a select ethnic minority, we observe "continuing colonialism" (or subalternization) in action. In postcolonial society, subaltern communities seldom experience the blessings of independence. Mahasweta Devi, an activist, gained firsthand knowledge of the lifestyles of India's tribal communities. This allowed us a clear view and examination of them. Deeply struck by the awful pain of marginalized women, she actively participated and led them in the struggle against exploitation, abuse, and injustice. Her work shows to be a formidable tool for subverting the authority of the upper castes in society. She portrays tribal women as subalterns because they are victims of numerous subjugations and oppressions in a caste-ridden and gender-biased culture. They have been used for material gain their entire lives, and their feminine body is no exception. In the Indian setting, Mahasweta Devi emerges as a forceful voice who not only represents the subaltern but also allows them to verbalize their own experiences. Her work focuses on tribal tribes, low-caste people, and underprivileged women who face structural oppression. Devi's stories challenge prevailing discourses by highlighting voices that have previously been suppressed. This study examines how Devi's Draupadi and Rudali portray subaltern resistance, resilience, and redemption, altering the vocabulary of marginality in postcolonial studies.

Review of Literature

The concept of the subaltern has been crucial to postcolonial debate, particularly in determining how underrepresented voices are represented in literature.

The term "subaltern," first coined by Antonio Gramsci, was later expanded within postcolonial studies by scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* questions whether the oppressed can truly articulate their experiences within dominant discursive frameworks. Spivak contends that the subaltern is frequently spoken for rather than permitted to speak, sustaining epistemic violence. This theoretical framework has had a considerable impact on interpretations of literary texts that seek to recover subaltern voices. Mahasweta Devi's works have received a lot of scholarly attention in India because of their compelling representations of oppressed people, particularly tribal populations and lower-caste women. Devi, according to several critics, deliberately creates areas for resistance and agency rather than simply depicting subaltern pain. Her stories question the notion that the subaltern is inevitably voiceless, instead depicting characters who express their oppression through action, quiet, and symbolic defiance. A major corpus of criticism centers on Devi's short story *Draupadi*, which is frequently discussed from feminist and subaltern perspectives. Scholars have emphasized how *Dopdi Mehjen's* body became a center of political struggle. According to numerous scholars, *Dopdi's* refusal to dress after being sexually assaulted signifies a fundamental rejection of patriarchal domination and governmental power. Rather than representing victimhood, her body becomes a tool for disobedience, challenging prevailing power narratives. Critics claim that this conduct challenges standard depictions of female passivity and redefines agency in subaltern discourse. Furthermore, feminist critics underline Devi's works' intersectionality, which combines gender, caste, and class to shape the subaltern experience. *Dopdi's* identity as a native woman places her on numerous edges, making her resistance even more significant. Scholars argue that Devi's portrayal of such persons contradicts Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot speak, implying that the subaltern might express opposition in unconventional ways. Similarly, *Rudali* has been extensively researched for its investigation of socioeconomic injustice and survival methods among marginalized women. Critics point out that the characters *Sanichari* and *Bikhni* circumvent a rigorous caste and class hierarchy via persistence and flexibility. The profession of mourning, which has traditionally been connected with emotional weakness, is redefined as a practical means of survival. Scholars suggest that this change indicates the subaltern's ability to negotiate oppressive systems while retaining some degree of agency. The monetization of grief is a common issue in *Rudali* literary analysis. Critics argue that compensated grieving reveals the hypocrisy of upper-class society norms, in which demonstrations of grief are performative rather than sincere. Subaltern women, on the other hand, who have

experienced true sorrow, use their emotional labor to earn money. This reversal of social values emphasizes the disruptive potential of excluded communities.

In addition to thematic analysis, researchers have looked into Devi's narrative methods. Her use of stark realism, regional locales, and vernacular language has been lauded for accurately capturing subaltern life. Critics believe that Devi's work avoids romanticism and instead depicts the brutal reality of exploitation and marginalization. This artistic approach is consistent with the goals of subaltern studies, which aim to highlight the lived experiences of underprivileged populations. Furthermore, various studies underline Devi's works' political significance, notably in terms of state brutality and structural oppression. Draupadi, for example, is frequently linked to the Naxalite movement, with scholars reading the story as a critique of official power and its harsh suppression of dissent. This political reading emphasizes the broader implications of Devi's narratives, situating them within a framework of resistance to institutional power. Despite the significant literature on Mahasweta Devi, some critics contend that there is still a contradiction between depiction and appropriation. While Devi offers voice to oppressed populations, issues arise about an author's ability to accurately depict subaltern experiences. This issue echoes broader postcolonial concerns about authorship and the ethics of representation. Nonetheless, the bulk of critical perspectives agree that Devi's works provide an important contribution to the articulation of subaltern identities. Her characters are not passive victims of injustice, but active actors in their own stories. Through acts of resistance, resilience, and survival, they challenge prevailing structures and redefine agency. The extant body of literature shows that Mahasweta Devi's writings play an important role in postcolonial and subaltern studies. Scholars have repeatedly emphasized her ability to transform disadvantaged voices into potent agents of resistance. Devi not only portrays the subaltern, but also reimagines their role in literary and sociopolitical debate by addressing subjects such as gender, caste, and class. This examination of literature thus provides a critical framework for assessing resistance, resilience, and redemption in her chosen works.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Resistance: Reclaiming Agency in *Draupadi*

In *Draupadi*, Devi depicts Dopdi Mehjen, a tribal lady participating in the Naxalite uprising. Dopdi, who has faced horrific state abuse, including sexual assault, refuses to be a victim. Her final act—confronting power in her violated body—represents ultimate resistance. Rather of being silent, she uses her body as a forceful means of protest. This shift in power contradicts patriarchal and colonial narratives.

Dopdi's defiance shows that subaltern resistance can emerge even amid extreme marginalization.

2. Resilience: Survival and Subversion in *Rudali*

In *Rudali*, Mahasweta Devi eloquently depicts the fortitude of subaltern women through the character of Sanichari, whose life is molded by tremendous poverty, caste persecution, and ongoing personal tragedy. Despite these challenges, Sanichari refuses to give up. Instead, she adjusts to her situation by becoming a professional mourner, or "rudali," hired to grieve at the wealthy's funerals. This transition demonstrates her ability to turn misery into survival. Historically, grief has been associated with emotional weakness and vulnerability. Devi, on the other hand, challenges this concept by framing it as a type of economic action and quiet resistance. Sanichari, who is unable to mourn for her own losses due to the severity of her life, learns to use grief as a means of survival. She exposes the hypocrisy of upper-class society by demonstrating how expressions of sorrow are frequently false and socially created. Devi's redefining of mourning demonstrates how subaltern women navigate repressive societal frameworks with resourcefulness and tenacity. Sanichari's resilience is based not just on her survival, but also on her capacity to regain agency within a system that marginalizes her. As a result, *Rudali* becomes a remarkable story of strength, adaptation, and subtle subversion.

3. Redemption: Beyond Victimhood

Mahasweta Devi's stories go beyond the stereotypical depiction of subalterns as passive victims, instead portraying them as persons capable of reform and empowerment. In her works, redemption is portrayed not as a spiritual or moral cleaning, but as a sociopolitical process in which oppressed persons restore their identity, dignity, and agency under repressive structures. Characters like as Dopdi in *Draupadi* and Sanichari in *Rudali* represent this type of salvation. Dopdi's audacious defiance of authority, even after terrible brutality, calls into question power systems and shifts her position from victim to resistance. Similarly, Sanichari's capacity to survive and sustain herself while in professional grief demonstrates her strength and adaptability. Both characters, in their different ways, refuse to be limited to the roles assigned by society. Devi's portrayals suggest that atonement is achieved through resistance and persistence. It is accomplished not by escaping oppression, but rather by confronting and opposing it. In this view, empowerment is the act of reclaiming one's voice and identity, changing marginalization into a source of strength and self-assertion.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's writings represent a significant rearticulation of the subaltern in postcolonial literature. She deconstructs the concept of subaltern silence through the characters Draupadi and Rudali, portraying marginalized people as active agents of resistance and survival. Her narratives demonstrate that the subaltern not only talks, but speaks with force, opposing oppressive systems and reinventing identity. Devi makes an important contribution to postcolonial discourse by highlighting underprivileged women's daily experiences. Finally, her works demonstrate that resistance, perseverance, and redemption are inherent in the subaltern experience, transforming marginality into a source of empowerment.

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