

# Study of the Postcolonial Condition of Women in the Public Sphere

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**Abstract:** The position of women in the public sphere remains one of the key issues in the fields of postcolonialism and feminism. Women from oppressed communities endure social discrimination, economic exploitation, patriarchal violence, cultural invisibility and political marginalization. The identity of these women is formed from the convergence of patriarchy, class structure, caste oppression, colonial subjugation and state repression. These women are often denied dignity, recognition, autonomy and participation in the society. Mahasweta Devi, the renowned Bengali author, gives expression to the silenced women through her literature. She depicts the pain, misery, endurance and protest of socially excluded women in her writings. Through her literature, she exposes exploitation of tribal women, poor women, widows, laborers, mothers, and other deprived female characters.

The researcher discusses few texts of Mahasweta Devi like Breast Giver, Draupadi, Dhoul, Shanichari, Chinta, Giribala, Mother of 1084, and Sindhubala with an aim to focus on the theme of women's suffering, identity construction, agency and protest in the postcolonial world. This study highlights the significance of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in translating and disseminating the works of Mahasweta Devi. It concludes that the writings of Mahasweta Devi gives voice to the downtrodden women and represents how women can still protest under oppressive regimes. Her literature works as a tool for social consciousness, feminist activism and political criticism.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Marginalization, Women's Identity, Resistance, Patriarchy, Subaltern Studies, Mahasweta Devi, Feminism

## INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial studies is a critical discipline emerged in the later twentieth century, largely responding to the psychological, cultural, social and political aftermath of colonialism. Researchers and writers of former colonies started scrutinizing how the imperial regime shaped the cultural representation, literature, systems of knowledge, language and identities of the subaltern. Though postcolonialism was gaining academic recognition in Western countries in the 1980s and 1990s, its roots had already been planted by the major thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who contested the ideas of colonialism.

Edward Said's influential book *Orientalism* deals with the Western way of representing East in an inferior position in his work, which he calls the imperial gaze. As per Said, the creation of a dichotomy between West and East — the former enlightened and the latter barbaric — became a reason for western domination over the latter. Homi K. Bhabha presents ideas like mimicry and hybridity in postcolonial studies which talks about cultural interaction between the coloniser and the colonized. He believes that colonial interactions did not produce binary difference but hybrid cultures. Colonial state never imposed absolute control over the colonized subject as power was contested and negotiations always happened.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity questioned the existence of the subaltern subject and raised a crucial question — Can the subaltern speak? According to her, subaltern woman suffered doubly at the hand of the imperial powers and her own community's patriarchy. Mahasweta Devi is a famous Bengali writer, in whose literary works, condition of the oppressed women of tribal and marginalized groups like landless poor people, laborers, wives, mothers and daughters of society is depicted strongly. Unlike elite literary works that are always busy in projecting the heroic male protagonist and often ignores the plight of poor women of society, Mahasweta Devi confronted various socio-political issues like economic exploitation, political persecution, state violence, gender discrimination and so on. She is very sensitive towards women, in particular those on the margins of society. In the literary field she not only depicted the victimhood of women but at the same time highlights the endurance of oppressed female beings. Through the portrayal of fictional female characters, she has raised feminist awareness and political dissent.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main aims of this research are:

- To analyze the condition of women in postcolonial society.
- To examine the representation of marginalized women in the writings of Mahasweta Devi.
- To focus on the relationship between patriarchy, class, caste and colonial oppression.
- To show the role of resistance and agency in the women characters.
- To trace the contribution of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to translating and interpreting Mahasweta Devi's works to the Western readers.

- To emphasize on the importance of subaltern discourse in the field of women's literature.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research is primarily based on descriptive and analytical method. It primarily draws on secondary sources such as literary works of Mahasweta Devi, translation of her selected works, critical essays, books and journals, related to postcolonial studies, feminist studies and subaltern studies.

In the present study, the researcher intends to focus on Mahasweta Devi's works such as *Breast Giver*, *Draupadi*, *Dhouli*, *Shanichari*, *Chinta*, *Giribala*, *Mother of 1084* and *Sindhubala*. The research will utilize critical ideas given by the feminist and postcolonial thinkers like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, bell hooks and so on. The study uses textual analysis to explore the condition of marginalized women as represented in the literary universe of Mahasweta Devi.

## FEMALE IDENTITY AND SUBJECT FORMATION

The construction of female identity has been one of the crucial elements of feminist critical thought. Generally, women were considered the domestic subjects; intellectual, creative, and political pursuits were almost non-existent for them. Their identities were predominantly formed around social roles like daughter, mother, wife and widow within patriarchy; individuality and creativity were discouraged to be developed. The women writers employed writing as a way of contesting domination, and through literature they gave voices to the experiences that were previously silenced or marginalized.

Mahasweta Devi's literary works have effectively reflected this notion of women's identity formation in a deeply stratified and patriarchal society. Her characters have been struggling hard to regain their dignity and subjectivity. Though trapped in the suffocating environment, they have shown strong agency and protest. In *Draupadi*, her protagonist challenges the hegemony of state power and patriarchy by her defiance. The character of Mother in *Breast Giver* represents the oppression that takes place within the structure of an exploitative capitalist system. The condition of female character in *Dhouli* where caste and gender oppression converged to drive her into extreme exclusion, illustrates the intersectionality of identities. Through the portrayal of women's life experience — her suffering, endurance and struggle for

survival and identity — Mahasweta Devi has presented not the oppressed women but rebellious characters against the prevailing social norms and systems of subjugation.

## POSTCOLONIAL TRANSLATION

The translation of regional literatures into a globally acceptable form helps marginalized authors access a larger audience; it promotes cultural discourse and dissemination of neglected subjects to both national and international sphere. The translated version of Mahasweta Devi's work by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak gives prominence to her concerned issues like condition of the tribal and poor women. Postcolonial translation is not merely a literary transference, but it becomes a mode of translating political discourse as well. Spivak argued that it requires an intensive interrogation of political implications of writing and the writer's position. Her translation of Mahasweta Devi's works gives awareness to her international readers regarding the issues of class and caste discrimination, sexual exploitation, state atrocity, poverty and patriarchal domination in the lives of the oppressed Indian women.

## POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION OF WOMEN

Women in postcolonial societies often experience multiple forms of oppression. They may face discrimination based on gender, caste, class, ethnicity, religion, language, region, or economic status. Colonial histories intensified many existing inequalities by creating systems of political, cultural, and economic domination.

In many societies, women's labor is undervalued while their bodies become sites of exploitation and control. Marginalized women frequently lack access to education, healthcare, property rights, employment, legal protection, and political participation.

Mahasweta Devi's stories reveal these realities with remarkable honesty and intensity. Her female characters endure poverty, sexual exploitation, social exclusion, caste oppression, and institutional violence. However, they also display resilience, courage, and determination. For example, *Dhouli* portrays a woman forced into prostitution due to caste oppression and economic hardship. *Shanichari* explores the suffering of a poor woman struggling against social injustice and personal loss. *Draupadi* presents the female body as a site of both violence and resistance. These narratives illustrate how social systems push women toward marginalization while denying them dignity and opportunities.

The postcolonial condition of women therefore cannot be understood only through gender analysis. It must also consider class relations, caste hierarchies, political structures, colonial histories, and economic inequalities.

### **LITERARY TRANSLATION AND SOCIAL REALITY**

The circulation of ideas between languages and cultures is promoted by literary translation, which allows people from various societies to engage with histories, identities and life styles completely different from their own. Translation has indeed been a significant element in bringing the regional literatures of India together, due to the multilingual nature of the nation; as this allows a dialogue between different cultures and traditions to occur.

Works like Mahasweta Devi's were internationalized because of the power of translation. Her writings transcend national readership and gained worldwide attention. Discussions on the politics of feminist criticism, postcolonial theories, human rights and subaltern discourse, and all those concerning human dignity, have widely incorporated texts written by Devi. Translation is also an ethical dilemma since the translator has to be attentive of the socio-cultural realities of a translated text. A translated text is not about translating words but also emotions, struggles, histories, political contexts.

### **SUBALTERN DISCOURSE**

"Subaltern" is the social category which has been deprived of both power and representation by the dominant social structures. The subaltern studies were initiated with the aim of rescuing the history and experience of oppressed people. Spivak has extended the theory of subaltern by focusing the "subaltern women". According to her, marginalized women have been denied any mode of selfrepresentation within the existing social and political systems because their identity is interpreted and represented by dominant institutions.

Mahasweta Devi's writing attempts to voice the subaltern women by portraying tribal women, poor women, widow, oppressed mothers, neglected social groups, who struggle to survive in a male oppressive social setup. By bringing these categories of women in the foreground, Devi has critically questioned elitist assumptions and presented realities about these silenced women who exist outside the periphery of the mainstream society. Her writing challenges the claims that the subaltern women are 'voiceless' and attempts to render voice and visibility to their existence.

## **THE INDIAN CONTEXT**

The identity of a woman is negotiated through a complexity of issues such as caste, class, gender, religion, language and regional affiliations. Their experiences are determined not only by their gender, but also by their social location, caste, class, community, education and economic status. It is because women of marginal groups face discrimination and oppression based on both gender and social class, that they are victimized more, although there is an equality guaranteed to all under the constitution. Indian literature plays a part in unveiling these oppressions, by addressing issues like caste, class, state, economy, gender-specific violence, and so forth. Mahasweta Devi used her writing to achieve social and political awareness. She broadened the scope of Indian literature, bringing the category of women writers from the realm of Indian middle class writers to the forum of global critics by projecting tribal women, poor mothers, poor women, labor, etc. to centers of discussion.

## **LITERARY ORIENTATION OF MAHASWETA DEVI**

Mahasweta Devi had never been writing as an artist; she has always identified herself as an activist. Her writings, infused with a high degree of social concern and realism, address the realities of exploitation, state violence, tribals, bonded labor, class, caste, and gender. She had lived closely with tribals and other marginalized people of India. Her deep understanding and lived experience had enabled her to convey the reality and struggle with authenticity. Mahasweta Devi is an important feminist writer as her female characters are never passive but active beings fighting to survive, resist, assert themselves and regain power in a dehumanizing social structure. Her literature is therefore political not in an overtly propagandistic sense, but in a critical awareness of social justice and women empowerment.

## **THREE WORLDS THEORY AND POSTCOLONIAL MARGINALITY**

The term "Third World" has become more common through twentieth-century texts which denote post-colonized countries. In the realm of postcolonial theory it has been argued that colonialism has only transformed into neo-colonial structures of economic domination without giving much liberty to the newly-independent nations. Postcolonial Literature is now widely understood as a literary tradition that deals with themes like resistance, identity, nationalism, the colonial discourse and exploitation by the ruling elite and so forth.

In the light of these concepts, Mahasweta Devi can be considered as a leading postcolonial writer as her literature focuses upon a society in post-colonial India, wherein women of marginalized groups are still battling oppression. She not only reveals how social structures of oppression — caste, class, gender and economic oppression — continue to exist, but also shows how their condition persists.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has critically evaluated how the Indian women are portrayed in postcolonial society as revealed through the writings of Mahasweta Devi. Her literature unfolds how Indian women face immense suffering through state violence, poverty, class-caste oppression and social marginality. The female characters that she creates do not remain passive or static individuals but act as resilient subjects who fight to survive, resist, regain power and assert themselves. They become sites of protest and self-assertion and simultaneously represent women as embodiment of strength and vitality in a patriarchal order.

This study has also highlighted the role played by the translations and analysis of her work, conducted by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in popularizing the idea of giving voice to the subaltern

women. In conclusion it can be stated that Mahasweta Devi's literature, by all accounts, serves as a powerfully engaging medium of critique against social injustice and oppression, a staunch advocate for the marginalized voices and is considered as influential literature of postcolonial India in all regards.

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