Conclusion
Chapter 5

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I will have a sense of fulfilment if more and more young writers took to unbeaten tracks. My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness. A curtain that separates the mainstream society from the poor and the deprived. It is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our own true faces in the process.

- Mahasweta Devi (qtd. in Bhaswati Ghosh)

Writers are often cited as perceptive observers of the prevailing human condition. Some of the greatest writers have used the power of their written word to bring across the struggles and sufferings of the exploited before a wider audience. There exists a small section of writers, however, which feels compelled to act as more than mere spectators and reporters of the human condition. They throw themselves into the fight, as it were, of deprived people. For those who believe that writing should serve a social purpose, Mahasweta Devi is like a beacon in an era where the catch-phrase appears to be absolute self-centredness. Mahasweta Devi has herself argued forcefully:

Literature cannot and should not be judged in terms of language, art, or technique alone (though it must be said that she lacks none of these) and asserted that it should be properly judged in its historical and social contexts, in the context of its representational intentions (qtd. in Chaudhuri 29).
For a writer like Mahasweta Devi whose writing is itself a form of social activism, while being linked indissolubly to her own political and social activism, these statements are necessary and important statements which direct us to read her works rightly. An appreciation of Mahasweta Devi's achievement as a writer demands a sympathetic understanding and identification with the cause of suffering humanity.

Mahasweta Devi's novels, short stories and plays have been translated regularly into English by good translators like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Samik Bandopadhya, Anjum Katyal, Maitreya Ghatak, Ipsita Chanda, Paramita Banerjee, Rimi B. Chatterjee, Sagaree Sengupta, Sarmistha Dutta and others. She has become very famous among the readers both in India and abroad only after Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translated her stories and build theoretical assumptions around them in her works In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics, and Imaginary Maps: Three Stories. Sujit Mukherjee acknowledges Gayatri Spivak as the 'Dwarapalika' of Mahasweta Devi in the West.

While trying to fix Mahasweta Devi in the post-independent era of Indian literature in English, the introductory chapter of this research work has underscored the social relevance of literature. It is observed that writers should evince keen interest in the eradication of social evils and their literary products must be nothing but artistic attempts to arouse the slumbering conscience of the readers and activate them to remove these evils.

This chapter has mentioned that among the writers with a great social consciousness and among the long line of women writers who have contributed to the development of Indian literature in English in the post-independent era, Mahasweta Devi's role is unique. It has analysed how Mahasweta Devi has launched a social
crusade against the politico-socio-economic exploitations and oppressions by the dominant sections of the society.

By providing a bird's eye view of Mahasweta Devi's major literary works, the chapter has proved clearly that Mahasweta Devi, who always sings of simple common people, born to blush unseen, is a champion of the underprivileged. It is made apparent that by giving allegiance to the downtrodden and the disadvantageous sections of the society, who are despised and abandoned, Mahasweta Devi takes up cudgels against this insensitive society in defence of the weaklings.

It is also mentioned that Mahasweta Devi's handling of social themes is different from that of others because she weaves the victims' own voices, their songs, stories and speeches into facts that she has meticulously researched through personal contact with them. Among the many awards she has received, many have been for her literary contribution and an equal number have been for her fearless campaigning for some of the poorest and the most neglected people in our society.

A very significant feature of the first chapter is that it highlights the observation that throughout Mahasweta Devi's varied literary works, women's subjugation and suffering has been portrayed as an integral part of the oppressions of caste, class and patriarchal hegemony. So Mahasweta Devi's personalised and idealised concept of feministic principles as revealed in the select works has also been discussed. While doing so, it has been argued that Mahasweta Devi as a feminist belongs to the 'feminist and female phases' as mentioned by Elaine Showalter, since she strongly revolts against the sexual exploitation and the injustice meted out to them being women and also at the same time she never fails to propagate their invincible inner strength, determination and potential to live.
Mention has also been made on the critical approaches—sociological, feminist and psychological—which are adopted by the researcher to analyse the cartographies of the struggling bodies and minds and their resistance against the multilayered oppressive forces operating at various levels in Mahasweta Devi’s select works: “Douloti the Bountiful”, Rudali, “Mother of 1084”, “Aajir”, Bayen”, “Water”, “Dhouli”, “Draupadi”, “Breast-Giver” and “Behind the Bodice”. This chapter has been concluded with a brief account of the process of analysis.

The Second chapter “Repression” has documented the struggles and resistance of the repressed who are socially stigmatised, economically marginalised and culturally subalternised. The works selected for the discussion in this chapter are two plays and a novella—“Water”, “Aajir” and Rudali, respectively. This chapter has projected how in these works Mahasweta Devi has given an artistic expression to the perennial problems and sufferings of the dispossessed at the hands of the privileged. The fringe dwellers, particularly the untouchables have been the main focus of this chapter. So naturally the beginning of the second chapter has discussed in a detailed manner how casteism, an obnoxious system in India, violates the inalienable rights and the inherent dignity of the Scheduled Castes and tribes.

This chapter has revealed how in “Water” the untouchable dome caste people are denied the basic and essential right to water by the upper caste feudal lords. Since almost all works of Mahasweta Devi are attempts to empower the suppressed in their struggle for fundamental human rights, “Water” also charts the metamorphosis of the central character Maghai Dome from a repressed water-diviner to a leader of his marginalised people boldly resisting and defying social inequalities. The rampant corruption among the bureaucrats who serve hand and glove with the upper caste feudal lords to aggravate the sense of fear and insecurity among the have-nots has also
been brought out in this chapter. But Mahasweta Devi who always believes in the gospel of united work against repression furnishes a memorable climax to the play by making the domes getting united and trying to solve their problems by building a dam across the river. Though the dam is broken and Maghai is killed in the police firing, the play concludes with a positive note that resistance coupled with organised action will certainly pave the way for liberating the depressed class from indignity and wretchedness.

"Aajir", the next play discussed in the second chapter has realistically portrayed the turbulence and turmoil in the heart of a bonded slave who is held so by being a descendant of a family of slaves. The chapter has argued that this savage practice of bonded labour is also originated from the despicable social evil casteism. "Aajir" brings out how Paatan a representative from the oppressed lower caste is treated as a slave and denied human dignity in the name of a mere bond that had already turned to dust. Though Paatan’s ancestors willingly accepted perpetual slavery for a meager amount of three rupees, Paatan’s only dream in life is to live a human life as a free man. His servile condition mirrors the predicament of the repressed humanity which has been exploited and marginalised from time immemorial. The chapter has projected how Paatan is caught in the conflict between a world which despises and degrades him and a will that rebels against it to keep his identity as a human being. Strong resistance to oppression drives him to the extent of murdering his mistress. But in spite of the fact that the play ends with Paatan’s marching towards the police station as a murderer, he is filled with the pride that after all he too is a free human being and no more a bonded slave. As Mahasweta Devi’s mission as a writer is to bring out the intense struggles of those who moan under the unshruggable load of the ‘Chaturvarna Pyramid’ and their resistance against it, in the
course of the chapter she is compared with Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy who too share the similar vision with Mahasweta Devi.

In Rudali, the last story discussed in the second chapter, the main focus is on the economically deprived class and its incessant struggle against naked poverty due to the shameless exploitative and repressive socio-economic and religious system. The chapter has discussed how this novella is a powerful indictment on the absolute power of the malik-mahajans. Through its protagonist, Sanichari, the story brings out the painful struggle of the poverty-stricken human beings against the overpowering hunger. The chapter has reiterated that Mahasweta Devi’s Sanichari, a compelling figure, is poles apart from the prototypical woman-as-victim syndrome. Unlike the upper class wives of the malik-mahajans, she is free to define the boundaries of her existence.

The chapter has delved deep into Mahasweta Devi’s handling of the brilliant irony which forces the reader to look anew at the social construction of something as natural as crying: the death of her husband and son and later abandonment by her daughter-in-law and grandson—all against the backdrop of a relentless struggle for survival—have made Sanichari unable to cry. And yet, in the latter half of the story, she makes her living by ‘crying’ on behalf of those for whom ostentatious mourning is an essential part of ritual status. By taking on this ersatz role for the very people she despises, Sanichari participates in a system which commodifies the dominant symbol of suffering: the poor have no time to cry and as the rich—who are neither short of time nor of money—are unable to do so in appropriate measure, they pay handsomely for this service. Sanichari collaborates with whores to create a socially desirable feminine role and the readers can see the seeds of the Sanichari-as-leader as she encourages her troupe to wail louder. As Sanichari and the whores-as-rudalis
now can decide how much they are to be paid for their specialised services, the beleaguered male world of the malik-mahajans retreats into re-negotiating traditional equations.

The chapter has made it clear that Mahasweta Devi’s spokesman in *Rudali* is Dulan who invariably contributes to Sanichari’s growing empowerment. Through Dulan, Mahasweta Devi strongly criticises, accuses and condemns the moral corruption, greed and hypocrisy of the wealthy upper class. Sanichari’s rapport with Dulan, Bikhni and other members of her community strongly stresses the value and necessity of community, partnership, fraternity and sisterhood as essential survival aids for the poor and repressed.

It has been argued how particularly in these three works Mahasweta Devi voices forth her deep concern and commitment towards these underprivileged castes and classes who are denied a dignified living as human beings and wages a valiant war against the Hindu religious concept of ‘Varnashram Dharma’ which condemns more than twenty-five per cent of Indian population to become untouchables, the oppressed and broken victims of our caste-ridden society. So the three works analysed in the second chapter have not only narrated the struggles of the marginalised but also have showcased their indomitable determination to wield collective and collaborative resistance.

The third chapter, as its title “Injury” indicates has thrown open a dismal world of unimaginable sexual atrocities levelled against women, just because they are women. Portraying the travails of women in this patriarchal society, all the stories discussed in this chapter have female protagonists who are invariably sacrificed on the altar of male interests. Particularly the world of “Douloti the Bountiful”, the first story discussed in this chapter, is full of predators hunting for women’s bodies. Along
with socio-religious issues related to caste-ridden discriminations, the main focus of this story is on gender-based human rights violation.

The story illustrates how Douloti’s destitute and disabled father is tricked into selling her into bonded prostitution, duped by the ‘fairy tale’ that a brahmin wants to marry her. Against his hopes that his entire family will be freed from its slavery through this marriage, Douloti is exiled to a brothel house for fourteen years of prostitution. The chapter has elaborated Douloti’s life in the brothel house where she is thrown as a sexual quarry before the lustful male animals. Her ploughed up body along complemented with venereal disease and tuberculosis at last sets her free from the merciless exploitation. The story ends up with the totally exhausted Douloti collapsing upon a liquid chalk map of India prepared for the Independence day.

The chapter has pointed out that Douloti’s dead body on the map of India denounces exploitation and destroys the myth of a free India for all, suggesting that real independence is impossible as long as there is gender, social and economic inequality which enables one group to abuse another. So the whole story revolves around ‘fate’—what is written down in law books, in bond master’s faked ledgers of accounts, in contracts, even in studies of bonded labour which obscures the fact that landlessness is the primary cause of indebtedness. Through this portrayal Mahasweta Devi has demonstrated the urgent need for social and political change and condemns the blind faith in textuality that justifies human suffering.

The heroine of the next story discussed in the third chapter “Dhouli”, is also a victim of sexual offence being cheated by the promise of marriage once again from a rich brahmin and ends up in prostitution. It has been observed in this chapter that the mainstream people and the political parties across the ideological spectrum have treated these helpless women as less than human and in this highly communalised
society crimes against the lower castes often go unnoticed. Three more stories have been discussed in the third chapter to demonstrate that the male chauvinistic and hegemonistic tendencies rooted and shaped by economic structures are manifested in the sexual offence on women irrespective of time and space. All these three stories from the collection Breast Stories, have breast as the dominant icon.

The chapter has emphasised that while in “Draupadi” the aborigin Dopdi challenges the State with the untamed trope of female sexuality, mangled, well-used breasts from which its defenders flinch, in “Behind the Bodice”, Gangor who made everyone ‘sin against God’ because of her sensuous beauty loses her ‘assets’ in a series of gang rapes. So her breasts have become two raging volcanic craters spewing ‘liquid lava’. In the third story “Breast Giver”, Jashoda, the archetypal wet nurse in whose milk almost fifty kids have been suckled, lies discarded dying of breast cancer. She has been ruthlessly exploited by all—her own children, her milk-children, her husband and her masters. Only finally she makes a crushing discovery that there is nothing glorious about her mother image and it is only an effective ploy to exploit her.

It has been argued in this chapter how this story is a critique of Indian womanhood that has so completely identified itself with patriarchal notions. The chapter has been concluded by arguing that all these sexually exploited victims of the socio-economic patriarchal system confront the hegemonic male world with the wordless language which challenges the conventional modes of dialogue. They can reverse the conventional notions of how the oppressor views subjugation and the victories inherent therein.

The fourth chapter “Insight” has brought out the emotional struggles of two mothers who bear the brunt of social and political oppression but heroically endure and resist it with indomitable will. “Mother of 1084” and “Bayen”, the two plays
analysed in this chapter portray not only the agony and pain of a mother being
snatched away from her child but also the traumatic experiences of being a wife to
an insensitive man who heartlessly betrays her at the most agonising moment of her
life. As the title of this chapter indicates these two mothers through their excruciating
painful experiences related to motherhood gain a deeper insight into the social
injustices which they ought to resist.

The play “Mother of 1084” has been thoroughly analysed in the fourth chapter
to show that finally the protagonist Sujata emerges as a universal mother who can see
her son Brati in all the suppressed youths and this makes her stand apart as a model
for humanity. At last she can discover answers to several questions that have been
troubling her after the brutal killing of her sensitive, brilliant son Brati in an
‘encounter’. She understands precisely two years after Brati’s death, why he had lost
faith in the system and opted for a dangerous life when his future looked so secure.

The chapter has pointed out that Sujata realises this by looking at several
contradictory ‘Indias’ around her. These include victims whose plight has become all
the more grim being the blood relations of a butchered Naxalite youth; Brati’s activist
girl friend, Nandini, who has been released by the police only after their dazzling
interrogations have damaged her eyes; and Sujata’s members of the family who have
simply and completely erased all signs of the embarrassment that was Brati, before he
became the unacknowledged 1084th corpse. Sujata cannot cope with the stink that
overpowers her and when she finally speaks at the party for her younger daughter’s
engagement, the catharsis ends with her body writhing in pain.

The chapter has interpreted that the play “Mother of 1084” can be read at
multiple levels. Mahasweta Devi’s particular genius tells the audience about the
Naxalite movement, the idealism of its actors, their strategies, and concomitant police
brutality. This is also a story of many women: the activist Nandini, and the two mothers, Somu’s and Brati’s, as well as Brati’s sisters speak of many things and narrate many events. The Naxalite movement brings together women who may never have met, and when they do, personal grief interweaves subtly with the public world of violence and death.

"Bayen", the play which has been discussed after “Mother of 1084” in the fourth chapter, set against the barbaric practice of witch-hunting, is once again an intensely moving play of the quest for mother-son bonding. The play reveals that Chandidasi, the central character in this play, a professional grave digger, like Sujata is placed against the powerful patriarchal institution. Though endowed with the moral courage of a true rebel, Chandidasi has to surrender to monstrous exploitative mechanism because of her insensitive husband. Branded as a Bayen, she is condemned to lead a solitary life separated from her son. Though she is reduced to the animal status by the society, she is not devoid of human compassion. She becomes a martyr in her confrontation with the antisocial forces. Thus the chapter has argued that in both these plays motherhood is made to function as a way of addressing larger social issues. Just like Sujata, Chandidasi also being propelled by the insight she has gained out of her struggles can transcend from the level of an ordinary mother to that of a universal mother through her martyrdom.

As it is illustrated by these select works, it is difficult to demarcate Mahasweta Devi’s fiction from fact because of the raw strength of her language and the power of her narrative. It is like reading a daily newspaper report. Presentation of reality in all its stark nakedness is the strong forte of Mahasweta Devi. She makes it a principle not to romanticise or gloss over this harsh reality. But beneath the superficiality of this report is the throbbing of life. For example, the rudalils of a poor unknown village are
not extinct. Even now there are women crying at the house of the rich for one square
meal. They appear again and again in other lands and other times. The untouchables,
the bonded labourers and the police lock-up rape victims have not been relegated to
history. So Mahasweta Devi directs her works against society’s amnesia ensuring that
they become an uncomfortable reminder of lives which the privileged prefer to forget.
Despite the fact that she chooses as her protagonists tribals, or those who subsist on
the fringes of society, her texts are actually targeted at the complacent, middle class
reader.

Relevant comments regarding the technical aspects of these select works are
inserted when they have been analysed individually. All the stories discussed in the
main chapters whether they are short stories or novellas they have exemplified
Mahasweta Devi’s mastery over the story-teller’s art. Consistently, each of them aims
at producing one single vivid effect. Since Mahasweta Devi has firmly asserted that
the living language of the common people is a must for that kind of literature which
she writes, special mentioning is made regarding her use of oral tradition such as folk
songs, beliefs, myths and social laws of the tribal and the non-tribal people, for these
form a rich source of Indian culture. As Gayatri Spivak has observed that Mahasweta
Devi’s prose is a collage of literary Bengali, street Bengali, bureaucratic Bengali,
tribal Bengali and the languages of the tribal, Mahasweta Devi’s language in the
authorised translations of the select works is simple, direct, entirely devoid of
sentimentality.

While analysing the essential dramatic strategies adopted by Mahasweta Devi
in her plays it has been pointed out that her theatre employs realistic technique
effectively. Mahasweta Devi, as a playwright, resorts to suggestive portrayal of the
different situations on the stage, and so the stage is most of the time free of superfluous theatrical properties.

The present chapter, which is the fifth and concluding chapter, has recapitulated the main arguments analysed in the preceding chapters in a nutshell.

The detailed analysis of Mahasweta Devi’s select works prove that the flair for an authentic documentation of the spirit and passions of the time, without any touch of sentimental romanticism, forms the core of all these works. They are all simple tales of day-to-day adventure and in the hands of a writer like Mahasweta Devi who is incisive and committed to the poetics of resistance, they dredge out their own historicity—past, present and future. Experience and factual detail is the ground on which all these works are inscribed, Themes taken from contemporary life have been transformed into creative works of artistic excellence.

Generally a subaltern subject does not make his resistance obvious, as he lacks the consciousness to revolt and is left without an organised group or articulate language. Incidentally a subaltern woman is twice marginalised because she is first a victim of the imperialist project and secondly she is at the periphery of a patriarchal order. So tracing a subaltern voice in general involves a subtler strategy and tracing the subaltern female voice involves an even more subtle strategy. A probe into Mahasweta Devi’s select works clearly has revealed that she strongly believes that organised group action by the people left out of the development process is the only way for these colossal underclass to get what is due to them as citizens of this country. In tune with her progressive idealism, Mahasweta Devi makes all her characters, both men and women raise the voice of revolt to realise their much cherished ideal of freedom - a freedom from all kinds of suppression.
It is noteworthy that Mahasweta Devi’s portrayal of the society’s underbelly in these works, is different from the usual depiction by most writers. Mahasweta Devi’s activist role has overlapped the writer and has helped her to portray real life characters in her works. Her clear eyed gaze uncovers the politics of gender. She eschews myth for the essential truth and chronicles the political awakening of women both from the severely deprived class as well as the relatively better off.

Her women are survivors against heavy odds and they remain dignified even in their poverty. Apart from being victims of an oppressive socio-economic order, they have to live in a world of ‘flesh-hunters’. Even in this supersonic age, women’s lot in India is still a matter of tears. But one cannot weep everyday. All can cry but only a few can fight like Mahasweta Devi’s creations. So Mahasweta Devi makes women, unfortunate victims of callous male domination and sexual exploitation fight it out with fire and fervour and propagate the idea of resistance, collective or individual. Hence her women question the structure of their relationship and the role that they play and always try to uncover the signifying self latent in them.

They are the ‘emergent’ women who are fully conscious of the politico-socio-economical, physical and psychological oppression which their sex has been subjected to, women who have long broken the shackles of conventions which expect them to suffer as dumb mules, and women who are capable of creating new options for themselves.

In an interview given in 1984, Mahasweta Devi said:

I was twenty-one in 1947. With many others, I tried to believe that India’s independence would not totally fail the poor of the country.

In 1984, I can say that for the poor of India, national independence, with its many plans, programmes, projects and Acts in Parliament,
have come to nothing. The question is, have we not reached a point of no return, or is there any hope? (qtd. in Jaidev 7)

Nothing since 1984 has happened to alleviate her gloom. If anything, it has become even worse. Still, she has not surrendered to despair. This is very much evident in these select works. So the findings of this study are that behind her hope that India can still mature and be civilised lies her conviction that the poor, for all their illiteracy and degradation, are neither uncivilised nor stupid. Once treated as humans and as Indians, and allowed a chance to organise themselves and their habitat they will move forward and move fast. Hence all these works underscore the central message of survival through struggle.

These select works substantiate that literature to Mahasweta Devi is artistically controlled deconstructed myth, the spring or source of which lies in her love for her fellow human beings. She has embraced this love in order to arouse cathartic pity in the hearts of her readers. Life, as Mahasweta Devi has come to know through her life-long close contact with the dispossessed and subalternised, is hard, cruel and merciless. It is to the expression of this life, and to the exposure of a social system that makes this life a reality, Mahasweta Devi dedicated her artistic gifts.

It is not known yet what final vision awaits her at the end of her journey through fire. But as her vision crystallises, she appears to be more and more convinced of the invincibility of the human spirit. Even though the baits of civilised comfort have lured the upper classes away from basic human values, those values live eternally in the hearts of the common village people. The contribution of the present study is that ultimately Mahasweta Devi’s writing is a celebration of the innate dignity and nobility of man triumphing over organised repression.
Since literature is looked upon both as a social document and a social monument, Mahasweta Devi's select works are documents in the sense that they reflect social reality in terms of social practices and conventions, problems and probable solutions. They conclude with a note of promise, since they never preach fatalism, passivity, non-resistance to evil, suffering and so on. They inspire, especially the underprivileged to strive against their plight and improve their social conditions.

Mahasweta Devi’s works offer plausible remedies to the chronic and cardinal issues of the society and invariably sensitize the readers against social inequality, oppression and injustice. They are a militant kick back which challenges the oppressors who have enslaved and disempowered the less privileged and reiterate the need for a new society with ideals such as justice, equality and love.

The entire literary output of Mahasweta Devi seems to be an inexhaustible treasure trove. The present researcher is of the view that however rewarding this research work may be, there still remains a vast scope for further research studies, in the following areas:

At the comparative level, Mahasweta Devi’s commitment towards the untouchables can be studied along with the novels of Tamil Dalit writer Bama whose mission is also to sensitize the Dalits against social discrimination and with the plays of Tamil playwright Indira Parthasarathy which invariably expose, with Marxian overtones, the existentialist dilemma of modern man. Particularly his Legend of Nandan which can be interpreted as a saga of the sufferings of the suppressed people everywhere has a close kinship with many of the writings of Mahasweta Devi.

Novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy who challenge the constructs of womanhood in dominant discourses through the voices of the women in their novels can be studied along with the female protagonists of
Mahasweta Devi. There is a vast scope for thematic explorations of Mahasweta Devi's works along with eminent novelists like Mulk Raj Anand and Kamala Markandaya, reputed Tamil writer Rajam Krishnan, and famous Indian playwright Asif Currimbhoy. As a playwright, Mahasweta Devi's contribution to the world of theatre can be specially compared with that of Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sirkar.

Extending the canvas of Mahasweta Devi beyond the Himalayas, one can undertake transcontinental study by comparing her works with that of major women writers like Toni Morrison, Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Bapsi Sidhwa and Buchi Emecheta—major women writers across countries and cultures on the line of feminism, womanism and humanism.

As the readers emerge out of the spell of these select works of Mahasweta Devi, they know that they can never really emerge. Mahasweta Devi has got under their skin by asking them to interrogate the cannon as well as the notions of exploitation, victimisation, female sexuality and resistance. So what stays in the reader's mind at the end are the brutally scarred yet resilient sensibilities of her creations, the fragility of their selves and the poignancy of the response to those situations they find themselves in. These select works of Mahasweta Devi have become the harbinger of an awakening and a promoter of the freedom of the marginalised to question, rebel and reinterpret the established cannons of authority.