RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION:
A STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI’S
SELECT WORKS

Abstract

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Literature is a mirror that reflects cultural, social, historical, economic and political events refracted through imaginary or fictional realms. Interestingly, in such narratives, literature also reflects the imbalances/complexities that exist in social as well as individual relationships. In this role, literature becomes a commentary on inequalities in society. These social inequalities create disparity in many ways, affecting the lives of individuals.

Despite the Indian Constitution’s claims of India as a democratic and egalitarian state, social inequalities are a grim reality today. Even after sixty-six years of independence, Indian society is faced with structural inequality. This results in oppression, exploitation and suppression of individuals or groups through misuse of power, status or authority. In such a situation, the oppressed is deprived of his/her basic rights and freedom and is forced to live in a hapless state. Such a situation has given rise to various notions, beliefs and theories on the issue of inequality and oppression.

The religio-mythical beliefs, like the creation of various castes from Purush and the advance of the Varna system explain the origin of caste system. According to the socio-historical view, the caste system began with the arrival of the Aryans, who formed three groups among
themselves - the Kshatriyas, Brahmins and Vaishyas – and oppressed the native Dravidians. The Aryans divided these people into two categories, the polluted and the non-polluted groups based on their occupations. The polluted groups were called the Sudras. From the different beliefs discussed above the dominance of the upper castes over the lower castes is obvious (Ekta Singh, *Caste System in India: A Historical Perspective* 35-6). It is also evident that the oppressed group occupies the lowest position in the social strata. They are deprived of the rights which are enjoyed by the upper classes and castes. Caste system is also believed to have been formed after Manu. Incidentally, in the Manusmriti (also known as the Dharmasutras of Manava) written during the post Vedic period, there is no mention of caste but about Varna system viz. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra which advocates a system based on the qualities of a person. This means that if a Sudra possesses the qualities of a Brahmin, he could be promoted to a Brahmin’s status but if a Brahmin does not possess the qualities required, then he could be demoted to a Sudra’s status. From the above two contradictory perspectives on the origin of caste, one can understand that caste system certainly led to the oppression of the lower castes, who began their fight for their rights as time rolled on, being empowered by education, uprisings, and the movements.

Different kinds of uprisings, protests and movements at both societal and individual levels helped fight oppression with the aim to
establish a truly egalitarian society. Consequently, the issues of social inequalities, oppression and consequent struggles found expression in the writings of many literary authors, both in India and abroad. The Dalit Movement began in the year 1917. The Dalits collectively protested against their exploitation on the basis of class, caste and creed. It was an attempt to overcome the cultural and social injustice prevailing in the Indian society and attain equality in treatment and opportunity. It was a protest against the age old hierarchical divisions in the Hindu society. The Tebhaga Movement was a militant campaign of 1946. It began with the demand by the peasants to reduce the crop share of landlords from half to one third. The Naxalite Movement of 1967 took place with the armed risings of poor agricultural labourers whose lands were forcefully taken away by the landlords. These tillers of the land wanted to become the owners of the land. And they demanded the due recognition of their rights by the government. Women’s movements began in India with the dawn of the social reform movements by Indian reformers like Behramji Makbari, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Rammohan Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and Dayanand Saraswati who emphasized on women’s education and bringing about awareness in them to fight for their rights.

The various movements mentioned above and their fights for reforms constitute the theme of the works of many Indian writers. Writers like Arundhati Roy, Munshi Premchand, Rohinton Mistry, Raja
Rao and Mulk Raj Anand mirror the problems related to the underprivileged. Poets like L.S. Rokade, Vilas Rashinkar, Tryambak Sapkale and Waman Kardak brought about a new awareness and aided the uprising among the masses through literature. Gender issues, that aim to create an awareness among women, form part of the works of authors like Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan, Anita Desai, Shobha De, Bharati Mukherjee, Manju Kapoor and Taslima Nasreen and the poetesses Kamala Das, Toru Dutt and Tara Patel. These writers bring to light the social, familial, caste, class, political as well as the gender oppressions that exist in society.

Class oppression is the prime energy in Prem Chand’s novels. His most relevant novel *Godan* (1960) unravels a pathetic saga of Hori Ram, the poor farmer, who lives in utter poverty and starvation and yet hopeful of the better days to come. Mulk Raj Anand’s novels *Untouchable* (1935) and his famous trilogy *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) record a strong protest against various social injustices present in the Indian society.

inequalities persisting in societies where moneylenders, landlords and tax collectors continue to exploit the peasants and agricultural labourers. In the novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) Arundhati Roy portrays the miserable condition of the ‘paravans’ (untouchables) as victims of caste discrimination as seen in the acute suffering of characters like Kelan, Vellya Paapen and Velutha.

Contemporary women writers like Anita Desai, Gita Harihara, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Taslima Nasreen and Mahasweta Devi particularly address the issues of gender discrimination. Their works reveal how gender discrimination leads to oppression. They portray women in confrontation with the problems of social stereotyping and in quest of identity. They also reveal how these women rebel against social injustices.

Mahasweta Devi is one such contemporary woman writer who deals with all these forms of oppression in her works. What differentiates Mahasweta Devi from the other writers both male and female, is the activist zeal in her writings that represent her involvement with the problems of the underprivileged. She gives voice to the voiceless by exposing different forms of oppression inherent in the Indian society and also fights for their rights. Mahasweta Devi’s approach to oppression is unique, because, while most women writers deal with gender oppression of middle class or upper class women, Devi deals with the issue of
gender oppression enmeshed within its class and caste dichotomies. Her activist writings, existing in the form of essays, short stories, plays and novels, explore the trident forms/patterns of oppression—class, caste and gender oppression.

Mahasweta Devi’s works discussed below clearly reflect the author’s concern for the underprivileged who are deprived of their basic rights by the dominant upper classes. Devi’s works do not present a glorified picture of the downtrodden but they certainly present their lives amidst adversity and exhibit their spirit and strength to resist any form of social oppressions. To understand Mahasweta Devi’s discourse on class, caste and gender oppression and her depiction of the spirit of the oppressed, the researcher here quotes from Gail Omvedt’s *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, where the spirit of the oppressed is effectively pictured: “Things began to change ‘when someone brought him news of Naxalbari’ and awakened the spirit of rebellion creating a power of thought to fight for his rights” (11). Such a change indicated above can be seen in Mahasweta Devi’s writings too. Hence, the author’s discourse of class, caste and gender oppression reveals a unique narrative of the downtrodden, his / her oppression and finally his / her resistance to oppression. Such a discourse on class, caste and gender oppressions in Mahasweta Devi’s works forms the basic grounds of argument of the thesis. In Omvedt’s book, the awareness of the oppressed on his predicament is likened to the
situation of a dead man’s resurrection and of his act of chopping off the branches of feudalism. The oppressed is humiliated, whipped, slain and denied the status of a human being. And his wife is treated like a prostitute. But later the oppressed rises in rebellion (11). Such a spirit of rebellion described by Omvedt is also brought out by Mahasweta Devi in her narratives of the oppressed, in her fictionalized accounts of social and political protest movements and also through her portrayal of greed and violence of the upper class.

Mahasweta Devi, born on 14th January, 1926 at Dhaka, Bangladesh, comes from a culturally distinguished upper class background. Though her family members are in the field of literature, film-making and journalism, Mahasweta Devi is unique in her approach to writings and has chosen a chiseled path for herself, viz literary activism. Similar to the manner in which the writer denies the influence of family literary heritage in her writings, she also denies the influence of any writers on her writings. However Mahasweta Devi is a well-read writer with her penchant for the writings of Leo Tolstoy, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, Satinath Bhaduri, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay and many others.

Her commitment to the socially marginalized has brought three facets to her literary and political writings- social activism, social criticism and aesthetics of the oppressed. In these three facets is revealed her distress for the underprivileged and her contempt for ruling
class who, by ignoring the oppressed, have directly or indirectly taken part in the process of their exploitation. They also reveal her infinite admiration for the marginalized and their zeal to withstand and resist oppression through centuries. With the marginalized as the subject of her writings, she creates the aesthetics of the oppressed.

What has been discussed above is reflected in the issues that Mahasweta Devi chooses to give literary space. The bigotry of the upper class, exploitation of the underprivileged sections, the Machiavellian tactics of the landed gentry to deprive the lower sections of their rights, and the caste system— all find expression in her works. Devi uses the tools of irony, sarcasm, criticism as well as colloquialisms to express her discontentment against society in her works as she highlights the evils and hypocrisy present in society.

What is integral to Mahasweta Devi’s literary as well as activist works is how she links the idea of oppression to history, particularly the people’s movements against corruption and oppression. Historical events like the Partition and political movements like the Quit India Movement, Dalit and Naxalite Movement, Women’s Movement and the Tebhaga Peasant Movement are deeply embedded in her writings.

Mahasweta Devi’s prime concern is with the underprivileged castes and tribes of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa. The Kheria Sabars, Santhals, Ganjus and Mundas, the low castes
people living in the above regions are the most marginalized. Particularly the Sabars were the worst sufferers of social stigma and ostracism during the colonial rule. Devi’s close activist associations with the downtrodden made her realize that even after independence, people are still deprived of the basic necessities like food, water and land. This deprivation compelled them to become bonded labourers and slaves. For Mahasweta Devi, literary activism is not a task of pedagogy or enlightenment but only a catalytic process. As an activist, Mahasweta Devi spends her time for the tribal welfare activities for the Santhals, Purulia and Palamou tribes in villages around Bundelkhand, Midnapore, Bankura, Purulia and Palamou and makes demands to the government departments ‘telling them where a village needs a well, where a few young fruit-trees and eight or ten goats or chickens might mean a new life for a group of people condemned to eternal penury’ (Sandip Bandyopadhyaya, “About this Collection” N.pag). Mahasweta Devi has been actively involved with a number of social and tribal welfare organizations such as Paschim Banga Oraon Tribal Kalyan Samiti.

As a writer, Devi has understood the failure of the politicians to address the problem of the most backward classes of the Indian society. Her writings are unique because her activist experiences are impressively translated in her written word, unravelling the real life experiences of the unlettered, the bonded labourers, the downtrodden
masses and the tribals. This does not mean that Mahasweta Devi is pedagogic about activism. Rather she remarks- “Go to the temple, to learn from them, not to teach. In the forties, as Communists we believed that Revolution was lurking behind the lamp post, and we only had to usher it in. I know that we have to work for transportation to occur- and work within the system” (*The Wordsmiths* 163).

Mahasweta Devi’s writings cover a wide range of issues- the deprivation amongst and discrimination against the rural poor, police atrocities, official crimes, struggles of the poor and underprivileged for survival, identity and dignity. The need for literacy, education and social welfare of workers in various unorganized sectors, problems of environment and ecology and the need for more effective monitoring of government programmes were some issues discussed in her activist writings.

Mahasweta Devi’s productive writing career has spread across almost five decades, and has culminated in a rich repertoire that ranges from innumerable short-stories, novels, plays, stories for children as well as several prose-writings written originally in Bengali. Her resourcefulness and popularity is implicit from the number of theatre and film adaptations of her works that are available to us today.

Mahasweta Devi’s works focus on the lives of working class people and their exploitation in the hands of landlords, money-lenders
and their zamindars. Hence, these works are known for her authentic portrayals of characters like that of the prostitute Moti in the play *Urvashi and Johnny*.

The works relevant to Mahasweta Devi’s representation of oppression are discussed here. The short stories “The Hunt” and “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pritha” sketches the state of working class people who make a hard living by guarding cattle and selling custard apples. They expose the government’s negligence and deprivation of marginalized people of remote areas. What prefigures in her narration of the working class seems to be the author’s dissatisfaction and anger their exploitation and the complacent hypocrisy and cruelty of the upper class landlords.

Her sympathetic portrayal is visible in her viewing the malnourished turning into thieves, as seen in the story “Shishu” (“Little Ones”), the landlord’s exploitation of the peasant (the story “Seeds”) and their deprivation of fair wages, the village children’s deprivation of education culminate culminates in the rise of rebels. Class oppression deepens in the play *Urvashi and Johnny* that traces the woes of the poor orphan Johnny, his escape from the orphanage to seek fortunes as a ventriloquist, his obsession with his marionette Urvashi, his failure to find success due to throat cancer and his struggle to survive amidst all these obstacles.
Other than class oppression as seen in the above works, Mahasweta Devi also deals with caste oppression that is predominant in the following works - *Aajir, Bayen, Water* and *Rudali*. These works reflect various concerns of individuals who suffer from the oppressive situations like the dehumanizing system of slavery, the negligence of old people belonging to lower castes and the conservative lifestyle and superstitious beliefs of the rural masses. Among the works listed above, *Rudali* is a relevant novel to understand Mahasweta Devi’s approach to caste oppression. The play *Aajir* deals with social realism, exposing the effects of dehumanizing system of slavery. *Rudali* revolves around the lower caste Ganju tribal woman’s tale of exploitation, survival and struggle. On the foundation of Sanichari’s tale of exploitation, Mahasweta Devi builds up the history of repression of the Ganjus and the Dushads by the Rajputs. Mahasweta Devi, through the story of Sanichari is able to give both the microcosmic as well as the macrocosmic view of caste oppression.

In many of her works she divulges the oppression of women. In some of her works, Mahasweta Devi deals with the following women’s issues- loneliness, separation and old age; women’s struggle for survival amidst general suffering; exploitative situations like rape, marital violence, death and its loss, motherhood, negligence of the diseased female, prostitution and female slavery. Branding a woman as a witch is yet another form of bad gender oppression that figures in *Bayen.*
Mahasweta Devi traces the history of prostitution and female bondage in the story of “Douloti the Bountiful” and articulates a strong protest against gender oppression i.e, gang-rape in police custody. When Dopdi (“Draupadi”), a tribal woman working as an underground activist is arrested and gang-raped by the police, she refuses to put on her clothes and thereby stages a loud protest against the gender injustice and male violation on the female body, staging a discourse of the female subaltern resistance to the triadic form of oppression on the female body. Critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak view Mahasweta Devi’s works as rich sites of feminist discourse. Whether she is a feminist is yet again a subject which demands discussion at a relevant context.

Above all, the researcher is of the opinion that Mahasweta Devi’s works are predominantly an attempt at historicizing, depicting and dramatizing the triadic oppressions (caste, class and gender) that exist in the Indian society, which has neglected the underprivileged individual even after sixty-six years of independence. Hence, Mahasweta Devi’s works can be considered as aesthetic case histories that document the undocumented political, social and cultural oppressions.

The thesis entitled “Resistance to Oppression: A Study of Mahasweta Devi’s Select Works” aims to study Devi’s select novels, short stories and plays for their representations of class, caste and gender oppression. For this purpose, the study analyses the writer’s portrayal of
the marginalized/ underprivileged and various ways through which they resist oppression. The researcher has made use of published primary and secondary sources like text books, articles, journals, critical essays, novels, plays, short stories, interviews and web- pages in order to arrive at a better understanding of the above mentioned dimensions in the works of Mahasweta Devi. These works will also be studied in relation to Mahasweta Devi’s non-fictional writings and film adaptations of her select works.

Feminist critical works of Susanne Clark, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Betty Friedan and Gail Omvedt have also been examined to help in the comprehension of Mahasweta Devi’s approach to the diverse problems of the oppressed/ marginalized/ downtrodden in her works. The thesis consists of five chapters organized in the following manner:

Chapter I: Introduction
Chapter II: Representation of Class and Caste Oppression in Mahasweta Devi’s Works
Chapter III: Gender Oppression in Devi’s Works
Chapter IV: Resistance and Rebellion in Devi’s Protagonists
Chapter V: Conclusion

The research began with the objective to study and discuss the following contents in each chapter. The introductory chapter
“Introduction” attempts to discuss the conceptual framework through an understanding of the following: origin of caste system, different notions/theories/beliefs of oppression like the religious, socio-historical and physical; the struggle against oppression seen in various uprisings/protests/movements; the familial, social, political, economic, class, caste and gender exploitations seen in many Indian English writers’ works and oppression in Mahasweta Devi’s works. The chapter examines Mahasweta Devi as a writer, placing her works in the context of her life, career and literary achievements. It further studies the triadic pattern of oppression namely caste, class and gender seen in her works and also in her reflection of historical, social and political events in her writing.

The second chapter “Representation of Class and Caste Oppression in Mahasweta Devi’s Works” explores the roots/origin, characteristics, classification, forms and causes of oppression in order to enrich comprehension and analysis of caste and class and suggests the following characteristics in Mahasweta’s works: representation of caste and class exploitation in her writings in particular and in relation to the works of Indian writers and her characters as victims of class and caste exploitation. The third chapter “Gender Oppression in Devi’s Works” views Mahasweta Devi’s representation of gender oppression in the following background: its definition, history, its representation in society, films and Indian literature; Devi’s literary representation of gender
The fourth chapter “Resistance and Rebellion in Devi’s Protagonists” examines these issues: various forms of resistance and rebellion, its causes and consequence, and various levels of resistance—familial, social and political— with respect to Devi’s characters. The final chapter “Conclusion” aims to discuss the following details: summing up of thesis contents; examining the outcome of the study of Mahasweta Devi’s works and drawing certain critical conclusions.

Devi’s works find its roots in history and provide vivid portrayals of the rural underclass, particularly in areas like Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh. One could sum up the content of her writings in a nutshell, with Devi’s words that describe her philosophy as a writer: “I have always believed that the real history is made by the ordinary people. I constantly come across the reappearance, in various forms of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people across generations. The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat. For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble, suffering human beings. Why should I look for my raw materials elsewhere, once I have started knowing them? Sometimes it seems to me that my writing is really their doing” (Sandip Bandyopadhyaya, “About this Collection” N.pag).
Mahasweta Devi’s works have helped the emergence of crucial issues like oppression and exploitation of the underprivileged into public view. The writer’s work with tribal and marginalized groups towards their empowerment is path-breaking particularly in her fight for their right to resources, culture, environment and self-governance. Rightly so is her documentation of their struggle in her critically acclaimed works of fiction, plays and non-fiction.

It is the various levels of exploitation occurring in the name of caste, class and gender in Mahasweta Devi’s works that form the subject of this thesis. To reiterate the arguments of the five chapters, one could proceed in the following manner: The introductory chapter proposes the general introduction, the contents of which form the subject of the beginnings of the present research abstract. The above contents introduce the concept of oppression, aiming to understand oppression in the context of different notions, theories and beliefs on the issue of inequality and oppression. Then it examines the reflections of oppression in literature, particularly the Indian. It briefly studies the social and political movements against oppression and then highlights the ways in which Mahasweta Devi’s treatment of the subject was different from that of other writers and argues that her perspective was unique. Then the chapter briefly underlines details of Mahasweta Devi’s life, career, activism, literary and activist works, her critics and translators and her use of drama as a tool to
reach out to people, also offering a critical introduction to her seminal works. It briefly discusses the chapter organization, the layout for the thesis and also the research objectives. These have already been summarized in the beginning of the research abstract.

The second chapter ‘Representation of Class and Caste Oppression in Mahasweta Devi’s works’ attempts to study the history of class and caste oppression, the roots of caste and its characteristics, and tried to view oppression in general through its representations in Indian literature and specifically in Mahasweta Devi’s writings. Particularly of interest is the researcher’s attempt to view Mahasweta Devi’s ideas of oppression through the lens of Iris Young’s notions of oppression. The origin of caste was traced to the Indian traditional system of hierarchy and stratified classes, and the characteristics of caste were seen in the following – restrictions on food habits and the segmental division of society based on the individual’s birth and the unequal distribution of privileges. Further, the chapter attempts to study newer dimensions of caste and class oppression as represented by Mahasweta Devi. This can be seen in her portrayal of slavery and bonded labour, in her depiction of the ignorance of people, supremacy of landlords, etc. Devi’s use of irony and symbolism also depicts an interesting manner of highlighting oppression. All these grosser issues formed the basis of the second chapter.
The first form of oppression that Iris Young explains is ‘exploitation’, which means the continuous labour extracted from an individual or a social group to benefit the exploitative group. It is an act of using people’s labours to produce profit while not compensating them fairly. Although these people are paid for their efforts and toils, they are not paid a fair wage. Such exploitation appears in Devi’s play *Water* where the Dalit dome (untouchable), Maghai is forced to dig village wells by the upper caste master for minimum wages and sometimes with no wages. Ironically exploitation here is not only in the line of caste but also in the line of class since these village wells also belong to lower castes although they are prohibited to use them. In the novel *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*, Lachhima’s service is paid off with a small piece of land in return for her lifelong service in the master’s household. Ironically her exploitation is due to her ignorance.

Other than ‘exploitation’, ‘marginalization’ is an important subject of oppression in Mahasweta Devi’s works. ‘Marginalization’ according to Young is an act of exclusion, of relegating or confining an individual or a group of people to a lower social standing or the edge of society. Mahasweta Devi reveals that marginalization is worse than exploitation with Maghai’s example. Mahasweta Devi’s downtrodden characters reveal how they are denied participation in any social, political and religious activities and subjected to total deprivation.
Marginalization deprives an individual of his or her economic, social and political rights thereby ostracizing the individual from society. For example as the cities grew in Australia, the aboriginal communities of Australia were excluded from society and pushed farther and farther away from their homelands. Similarly, in India the lower castes/classes are mostly the marginalized class because of their low status, nature of work and the caste to which they belong. Mulk Raj Anand’s well-known story Untouchable also represents similar form of oppression where the protagonist Bakha shows distaste for the life he leads because of the oppression of the upper castes who deny him the right to live like others and enjoy the opportunities and privileges which are rightfully meant for all sections of society. Oppression of this group occurs because of their occupation and caste.

Devi’s play Bayen highlights this marginalization vividly where the central character works as a grave digger. The bayen, Chandidasi's life is a moving portrayal of gendered subalternity that is depicted through her transformation from a working class woman to a social pariah. Grave digging is a kind of work exclusively meant to be performed by certain lower sections of people. Chandidasi inherits the vocation from her father and as a grave digger; she lives with her family on the outskirts, distanced from the upper class people. In the later part of her life, she is tagged as a ‘bayen’ (meaning witch), banished outside the
village and also deprived of work, food, clothes and shelter. The villagers are superstitious about a 'bayen', so they constrain her within the construct of her lower caste and vocation. Similarly the "rudalis" in Devi’s novella *Rudali* are another category of people isolated from society since they touch the dead bodies and mourn for the dead. Such a marginalization forms the subject of argument here:

Still crying, she washed off the sindoor from her head in the shallow Kuruda river, broke her bangles, and returned to the village.

The panda of the Shiva temple at Tohri demanded that she made ritual offerings there before returning to her village, since her husband had died there. On his insistence she spent a precious rupee and a quarter on a Spartan offering of sand and sattu which Budhua offered as panda (*Rudali* 56-7).

Young’s third concept of ‘powerlessness’ which argues that some people ‘have’ power and some ‘have not’, has a close link with Marx’s theory of socialism. Individuals without power are dominated by those with power, i.e., ruling class and are made to take orders every time without questioning their masters. Some of the fundamental injustices associated with powerlessness are lack of decision-making power, inhibition to develop one’s abilities, and exposure to disrespectful
treatment because of their lowered status. Thus, power is continuously exercised over them. Mahasweta Devi’s fictionalized characters namely Dulan (of the short story “Seeds”) and Lacchima and Haroa, the bonded labourers of the landlord, Medini Singh (of Devi’s novel *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*) are victims of ‘powerlessness’. While Dulan is made to bury dead men in a barren land to conceal his master’s crime, Lachhima and Haroa are subject to physical abuse. Lachhima’s plea to the landlord for her liberation and freedom is discarded while Haroa works like an animal for his master with no voice of his own. Such a situation of ‘powerlessness’ is depicted in the above novel, when Lachhima’s plea to the master to be freed of bonded slavery goes unheeded, as seen in the following dialogue:

Medini Singh pulled his feet back, kicked out at Lachhima, Shoving her aside, and sat up. Said, ‘Take the low castes to bed, and they forget their place. Who are you talking about? They’re my *dharmapatnis*, my wedded wives. You’ve eaten my salt and now you’re biting the hand that fed you? Haven’t I written off land in your name?’ (*The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* 24-5).

Mahasweta Devi’s approach to oppression can further be understood from Young’s concept of ‘cultural imperialism’, which involves imposing the culture of those in power and establishing it as a norm, by which dominant groups control beliefs, mannerisms and methods.
of communication of the oppressed. Mahasweta Devi’s works reveal how cultural imperialism in India led to further oppression of the marginalized. *Mother of 1084* reveals the strong impact of imperial influence in the aristocratic lifestyle of the Chatterji family to which Sujata and her younger son Brati belong. The novel exposes the hypocrisy of the family members in their anxiety to ‘preserve’ their reputation, in the artificial socio-cultural gatherings, celebrations, fake values and patterns of behaviour that overshadow their human qualities. Sujata's association with the commoners makes her a victim of loneliness in her own household after the death of her son. Sujata’s oppression also occurs because she is a woman, dominated by her husband and her family members.

Another form of oppression is violence, which Young considers as the most obvious and visible form of oppression. In Devi’s works also the most obvious and visible form of oppression is violence. Young considers violent situation as something where individuals or members of a particular group are humiliated and destroyed with no motive or cause for it. Physical violence on women in the form of rape and sexual harassment is found in Devi’s works like “Draupadi” and *Mother of 1084*. In her innumerable works she describes the humiliation, intimidation and encounters inflicted by the police in the form of beatings and physical abuse, which led to loss of innocent lives and also familial loss and deprivations. In “Draupadi”, the military official, Senanayak’s senseless
orgy of murders, assaults, counter-assaults and sadistic tortures on the tribal activists reaches a point where ‘If anyone is captured ...their eyeballs, intestines, stomachs, hearts, genitals and so on become the food of fox, vulture, hyena, wild cat, ant and worm, and the untouchables go off happily to sell their bare skeletons” (“Draupadi” 95).

Mahasweta Devi’s general commentary on oppression is an interesting passage to be quoted here. In Agnigarbha, she writes “In these thirty-one years after Independence, I have not seen our people attaining true independence in anything— in food, water, land, loan or bonded labour. A pure white and sun like rage against the system that has made this independence impossible is the inspiration behind all my works. I believe that all parties, right or left, have failed to keep their promises to the common people. I have no hopes of this conviction being shaken during my lifetime. Thus I have written only about humanity to the best of my ability so that I do not have to feel ashamed to free myself. I find my people still groaning under hunger; landlessness, indebtedness, and bonded labour” (Introduction xiii). Here Mahasweta Devi makes a link between the history of oppression and the history of caste and class politics and also resurrects older periods of history where the innumerable social evils are brought to light.

A preponderance of women’s issues is stronger in her novels and short stories reflecting/focusing on Mahasweta Devi’s portrayal
of problems of women at various levels- familial, social, cultural, economic and political levels. Mahasweta Devi’s representation of women was viewed as belonging to three categories - strong women who emerge unpetrified even at the face of hard and severe oppression but rather choose to fight; women who are silent and stoic during moments of untold miseries but choose not to fight; and women as victims who succumb to gender, caste and class oppression.

The third chapter ‘Gender Oppression in Devi’s Works’ attempts a critical insight into the notions of gender and gender oppression in general and in the writer’s works in particular through the following: a feminist view of the concept of gender; viewing gender in relation to ‘sex’; origin and roots of gender oppression in various religions and significant representations of gender oppression as seen in films and literature. Further, the chapter discussed Mahasweta Devi’s non-committed approach to feminism as seen in her portrayal of gender oppression.

The arguments on gender oppression put forth by the activist author in her various works ironically manifest women’s exploitation in the land of Sita, Savitri, Sarada Devi, Parvati and Durga. A reading of Mahasweta Devi’s works reveal that gender oppression takes place at two levels namely familial and social/cultural levels. Within the familial and socio-cultural environs, female oppression takes place in various ways. In the novel The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh, the landlords’
wives are inflicted to mental and physical torture particularly when they are unable to give birth to a male heir. Child marriage is yet another form of gender oppression which Mahasweta Devi widely discusses in her works. The novel, *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* deals with the theme of child marriage as seen in the early marriage of Ganesha’s daughters. Devi deals with gender issues shrouding child-marriage as well as witch-hunting. She particularly deals with witch-hunting as one of the worst forms of gender oppression. *Bayen* reflects such a situation. The following conversation between Malingar and his ex-wife, Chandidasi who is believed to have an ‘evil eye’ and regarded as a witch reflects the solitary life led by a witch, the superstitions and the manner in which she is treated by society:

MALINGAR: (ferocious in his fear) Stop it you bitch! Turn your face away. (The Bayen dutifully turns away) You want to kill me? Is that why you’re here? Eh? Then why did you have to become a Bayen? Go away, go away, at once. Otherwise I’ll strike you. (He picks up clods from the ground and hurls them viciously at the Bayen)

BAYEN: Please, dear, don’t hit me, dear. (Raises the pitcher to her head, and starts moving) (*Bayen* 76-7).

Besides witch-hunting, widowhood is another form of female ostracization instigated by false religious beliefs, customs, greed
and jealousy. Devi’s protagonist, Dhouli is not allowed to wear shellac bangles and metal anklets; she cannot sport a sindoor dot on her forehead; and she is to stay away from weddings and other auspicious occasions (“Dhouli” 7). She is forbidden to remarry, and compelled to wear plain and dull clothes, have plain, simple food and move around bare foot.

The three previous chapters discusses the diversified forms of oppression while the fourth chapter ‘Resistance and Rebelllion in Devi’s Works’ attempts to discuss the consequences of oppression as seen in the resistance and rebellion staged by the oppressed. It offers various perceptions on the general notions of resistance and rebellion seen in the history of oppression from colonial times, along with the discussion of relevant social and political protest movements namely, the Naxalite Movement depicted by Mahasweta Devi as the consequence of continuous oppression inflicted on the underprivileged. The chapter also looks at the various representations of resistance in literature with emphasis on Mahasweta Devi. She constructs a discourse on resistance and rebellion through her characters and her vision that is not exotic but historical and contemporaneous. In her novella *Rudali* for instance, a low caste character called Dulan narrates the history of oppression which people like Bikhni and Sanichari encounter today, where their oppression began when the Rajputs infiltrated the remote tribal lands and gradually took possession as masters of the land.
Devi’s rebel characters both male and female are seen to rise into consciousness and participate in a ‘revolutionary movement’ for a transformation in their condition as well as in society’s. A noteworthy parallel to the above situation is what Simone de Beauvoir calls ‘a new and transformed possibility- the movement from passivity into freedom’ (Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World* 28).

A similar transformation from disparity to freedom is experienced in the school teacher’s character Jiten in the play *Water*. Jiten rouses the villagers with the necessity of education and construction of dams. Hence his entry into the village effects awareness, inspiration and transformation among the deprived and catalyzes them to protest against the cruelly and corruption of the landlord Santosh Pujari.

Through her rebel characters she is able to capture the transition of the marginalized from the pathetically abused state to angry rebels. Such a transition is not problematized by Mahasweta Devi but seen as a natural end result of continued injustice and torment by the upper class.

The guard pushes the water forward. Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth…Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail
behind…Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds.’ She comes closer and pushes ‘Senanayak with her two mangled breasts (“Draupadi” 103-4).

Her challenge is thrown to all to behold the atrocity committed by them:

What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? ...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? Come on, counter me?-? (“Draupadi” 104).

The concluding chapter makes an attempt to recapitulate the contents of the thesis highlighting Mahasweta Devi’s views on class, caste and gender and her outlook on the patterns of oppression that occur in different ways. It reiterates the arguments and discusses conclusions of this research. Finally it views the potential areas of research on Mahasweta Devi that do not lie in the purview of this research topic.

The research arrives at several interesting conclusions. To begin with one could state that there arise four perspectives of Mahasweta Devi’s works. Firstly, her literary works become socially significant when related to her activist writings. Secondly, Devi’s writings hold the entire upper strata of society directly responsible for the
unspeakable conditions of the oppressed. Thirdly, they express a belief that unless people unite in groups, assess their own situation or bring pressure on the authorities in a united manner, no meaningful social change would be possible. Finally, her works refute a biased critical perception on her part. For she is not only a creative writer, but also a social activist, reporter, teacher, editor and organizer of people’s groups at the grass root level.

Then, Mahasweta Devi’s works highlight two major aspects of the writer’s social criticism - her total distrust of the privileged classes that neglect the poor and also her deep respect for the oppressed that struggle against centuries of oppression and their spirit of resistance and rebellion.

The research on Mahasweta Devi intends to view caste and class as inseparable, since her texts very often treat the situations of caste and class as inevitably linked with each other. However, there are occasions when the author views the complexity of caste and class and the problematic in clubbing caste and class together. For instance, the short story “Breast Giver”, no more views the marginalization of the lower caste and lower class individual but rather explores the marginalization of an upper caste poor Brahmin. From such an alternative viewing of caste and class, it can be concluded that Mahasweta Devi’s treatment and exploration of caste, class and gender oppression reveals a situation unique to Indian subcontinent.
Besides these the research addresses the issue of whether an upper class and upper caste writer like Devi is eligible to represent the oppression of the marginalized. Here the researcher is of the opinion that to write about the marginalized if one should belong to the marginalized group, writers like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand and Rabindranath Tagore would not have emerged. Similarly, the researcher is of the opinion that one cannot discredit the genuine concern of activist writers like Mahasweta Devi since her writings emerged from the following: involvement with the marginalized; her wide travel by foot to reach out to the marginalized; her witnessing the savage impact of absentee landlordism, despoiled environment, debt bondage, Indian freedom movement, Naxalite movement, Bengal famine and state neglect of the indigenous people.

Devi’s writings subvert the authority of the phallagocentric, caste and class-ridden society. Her activist aesthetics further dismantles the mainstream and the anti-feminist. Her texts break thematic taboos and expand the conformist, confrontationist gender concerns in order to put forth a holistic perspective where the issue of gender co-extends with the larger ideopolitical issues of postcoloniality, nationality and history.

The researcher is also of the opinion that Mahasweta’s unique aesthetics requires alternative reading paradigms for a
comprehensive and cohesive appreciation of her works. For her radical aesthetics displaces gender-biased critical stance of male writer through her invention of idiom and technique that forces the current theoretical assumptions and critical perceptions to undergo a revision and re-definition.

Next, what emerges as the most interesting question out of this research, is the subject of the writer and her social vision. Mahasweta Devi’s aesthetics is a combination of interesting pluralities that blend the vision of a student of history, an activist, crusader, journalist, teacher and writer. Hence, what emerges as her aesthetic/social vision is an art form that attempts a realistic approach to caste, class and gender oppressions. Such a vision leads to the emergence of an authorial voice that strives to liberate the marginalized from the orthodox beliefs of caste, class and gender, which it considers to be the root cause of all social evils and oppressions.

Then, such an approach reveals further that the writer sketches her oppressed characters not only in a Marxian landscape, but also in a post Marxian landscape whereby she reveals the history of their oppression and their reduction to subaltern individuals. With the idea of subaltern, one understands how Mahasweta Devi’s approach to caste and class oppression attains a multitudinous vision.
Can Mahasweta Devi be called a feminist? The research observes here that Mahasweta Devi’s prime focus is more on the exploited classes, marginalized and the underprivileged castes and tribes rather than the feminist exclusion of women’s oppression. Therefore the researcher infers that oppression as portrayed in Mahasweta Devi’s works is seen not just as a feminist’s woe, but as something that goes beyond feminist view of oppression towards historicizing oppression in general. It is a fact that leading scholars consider Mahasweta Devi’s powerful tales of exploitation and struggle as rich sites of feminist discourse. However she does not write for women alone. She takes a general stand for all the people who are marginalized, exploited and oppressed, whether men or women, privileged class or deprived class, upper caste or lower caste. She looks at all people as one category- the oppressed. Hence the researcher considers Mahasweta Devi’s writings as afeminist rather than feminist.

Mahasweta Devi’s works are grounded on literary and aesthetics and reveal a very interesting blend of activism and aesthetics. Unlike the common critical belief that a writer with a propaganda and political aim compromises with aesthetics, Mahasweta’s work defers such a belief. In fact the literary and artistic dimensions in her works dominate over the propagandist zeal of the writer. In other words, her activist experiences only help to catalyze and crystallize her aesthetic experiences. This can be identified in Mahasweta Devi’s play *Mother of 1084*, where
the aesthetic emphasis falls on Sujata’s understanding of Naxalite Movement through her son Brati and not really exclusively on the movement itself. Therefore this is Sujata’s story rather than the story of Brati the Naxalite.

Mahasweta Devi’s aesthetics is also a relevant point for discussion and could be explored from the following: her narrative management, literary style, use of irony, myths, history, legends and folklores. Devi does not individualize or glorify oppression but rather gives a globalized, universal vision through a recurrent use of third person narrations. The third person narration facilitates an objective vision of oppression that provides a universalized rather than particularized approach to oppression. Such a macrocosmic rather than a microcosmic view of oppression also renders a message, which conveys the idea that the situation of the oppressed can be changed only when the oppressed are prepared for the struggle against oppression.

Next, Mahasweta Devi’s use of dramatic devices like role transformation also reveals her narrative management. In the play Aajir, Paatan the bonded slave and his master Golak Kura are played by actors who always play the roles of their ancestors. Such a device helps Mahasweta Devi to reveal the endless repetition of the master-slave lives through history. A similar deft handling of the use of colloquialisms and unconventional diction in her works reveals her crude, simple and abrasive
language. It is seen in words like ‘bastard’, ‘Government’s son- in- law’, and ‘motherfucker’ as well as tribal terms like *ulgulan* (meaning revolution in Mundari language), *ghato* (grass rice), *haramasul* (God, Creator), *hul* (meaning revolution in Santhali), *Ma-ho* (a battle cry of the Santal tribes of Maldah) and tribal names like Dopdi and Dulna Mejhen as well as their ululating song *Samaray hijulennako mar gookepe, and Hende rambra keche keche Pundi rambra keche keche* (translation not known). Such a localization of language reflects the writer’s closeness and association with the underclass, her emotional attachment towards and her wide knowledge of the underprivileged. Such a use of local idioms also serves as an effective tool to reach out to the marginalized caste/ class. This unique style of Mahasweta Devi indicates also her concern for the marginalized. Hence, one could conclude that her plain, ordinary, colloquial style as well as the use of gestures, mimes, songs, humour and simple structures in her works is revolutionary and a deliberate attempt to accommodate the marginalized’s interests.

Besides historicizing, discussing and creating a discourse on oppression, Mahasweta Devi also interestingly aestheticizes the issue by employing objective correlatives of poverty and oppression. Objects like the ‘chakki’, marionette and also acts of grave-digging and cremation of the dead become symbolic representations of the poor and the oppressed. The grinding of the stone mill (chakki) represents the harsh life
of villagers labouring in grinding poverty. In *Mother of 1084*, the number 1084 symbolizes two things; firstly, Brati’s identity as a corpse and secondly as a contradictory symbol of honour and pride for the mother and shame and embarrassment for the father. Acts like grave-digging and burning of the dead in Devi’s *Bayen* indicate [the] lives of the poor as dull, dead and no better than a graveyard. Mahasweta Devi’s penchant for symbolism goes hand in hand with her sense of irony, seen in the title “Shishu” (“Young Ones”), since the individuals represented in the story are not young children but stunted malnourished individuals whose physical and mental growth is retarded due to utter poverty and food deprivation.

Mahasweta Devi’s style can be summed up in characteristics like the visionary, utopian, or myth-creating impulse that acts as a counter-balance to her dystopian, ‘forensic’, critical perspective on the contemporary world (Chakravarty 69). Her use of myths, epics, legends and also tradition-bound characters should not mislead one into thinking that Devi’s characters are bestowed with the legacy of tradition. Her texts present a reading of the mythical discourse blended with irony. For example, in the stories *Breast Giver* and “Draupadi”, Devi rewrites the spirit of the epics with the creation of characters like Jashoda and Dopdi who, unlike the mythical, legendary upper class women, are subject to exploitation because of their subaltern origin.
Then what is the author’s contribution to the Indian literary world, particularly in her exploration of oppression? Mahasweta Devi’s literary canvas encompasses her efforts to remap the lives, cultures and traditions of the margins and thereby subverts the cultural hierarchies that existed between the centre and the margins. Devi’s tribal canvas from pre-independence to post-independence India represents their rich history and culture that so far remained obscure to the mainstream society. The canvas thus presented reveals tribal lives to be much richer than those of Brahminical or class-driven societies. For instance, in most tribal societies in India, women’s position is relatively considered better than in Hindu caste society. Rape, torture and forced prostitution have never been the ways of the tribals. It is important to note that for most tribals, pre-marital sex and remarriage are socially acceptable. Women also enjoy a share of the family property and to a certain extent, have a voice of their own. Mahasweta Devi’s efforts have been to bring forth their history to the mainstream society by re-mapping the margins, revising the mainstream history and foregrounding the ‘un-historical’. Her use of Purulia or Santhal tribal legends also reveal how tribal clans in general defy the Brahminical hierarchy of gods by adopting the Asur- Lohasur, Koilasur and Agaiyasur (who are established as evil powers in the elite mythology) as their gods. This inversion of the dominant narrative is an important strategy employed by Mahasweta Devi to deconstruct the mainstream cultural history.
Mahasweta Devi reveals that the entire tribal world is a great continent that has been handed over to the humanity. Their rich culture, sophistication, social norms and social codes observed in social practices like acceptance of divorce, non recognition of dowry, widow remarriages and choice of live-in partners are cultural practices that serve as interesting points of discussion against those of male chauvinistic, caste-dominated Indian societies.

Next, Mahasweta Devi’s role as the spokesperson of the marginalized and the oppressed is noteworthy. She can be called as ‘the Champion of the Downtrodden’, a ‘crusader’ and ‘torch bearer’ of the oppressed whose works deal with the socio-economic analysis of the rural Indian society and also with an examination of the lives and problems of the marginalized. Her anger and protest on behalf of the dispossessed and her derision directed against the complacent materialism of the Bourgeois feature in her works. Hence, the researcher considers Devi as a rebel at heart. Her spirit of rebellion is evident from the various tools with which she equips her characters and the manner in which they use them. The modes of resistance and rebellion used by characters like Dopdi and Douloti show the rebellious spirit engraved in the writer.

The discussions and conclusions above lead the researcher to identify a few valid but unexplored areas of study on Mahasweta Devi. Though these issues do not fall into the purview of this
thesis are however worth mentioning. At the outset, the researcher would like to mention the subaltern perspective that is dominant in Mahasweta Devi’s works. Mahasweta Devi is distinctly a subaltern writer, who has succeeded in drawing both political as well as critical attention. The sense of the subaltern is seen in her commitment to the cause of the subaltern, in her portrayal of the subaltern lives, in her act of inversion of hierarchies between the subaltern and the dominant classes etc. Most of the characters created by Devi are subaltern men and women subject to various forms of oppression because of the dominance of the hegemonic structures of society.

The second crucial issue addresses this question thus, is Mahasweta Devi a postcolonial writer? The main objective of postcolonialism is to resist and deconstruct the imperialist ideology of the British. It is both a historical and an epistemological category. It is interesting to note that Mahasweta Devi traces the roots of oppression not only from the ancient, pre-independence period but which continued and culminated during the imperial rule and continues even after India’s independence.

Thirdly, the researcher identifies a cyclic pattern which provides a wider scope for archetypal approach. This can be seen from her abundant use of myths that provide both an alternative and a subaltern vision of the woman’s situation. Hence the relevance of the use of her
myths and her re-reading of the myths could be examined in the context of feminism.

Fourthly, translation studies on Mahasweta Devi’s works, a significant aspect of research, are particularly relevant. Mahasweta Devi is originally a vernacular/cultural/regional writer who writes mainly in Bengali. Many of her works have been translated into English and many other languages. The linguistic/stylistic transitions and transactions from the source language (Bengali) to the target language (English etc) need to be studied in the context of Mahasweta Devi’s works, in order to understand Mahasweta Devi in the proper cultural and also transactional perspective.

Then, the thesis has dealt with three tropes of oppression, namely caste, class and gender oppression. However the researcher identifies another trope of oppression viz. human oppression versus the environment. Mahasweta Devi’s concern for the human world and ecological environment forms an important issue of discussion. Her love and responsibility for the protection of environment is reflected in her works like *Aranyer Adhikar, Chotti Munda and his Arrow* and short stories like “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pritha” and “Arjun”. The author says that this concern is a result of her school life experiences in Shantiniketan where Tagore’s direct influence was prevalent. He taught the students to take care of nature by planting trees, watering the saplings and digging
ponds in the nearby tribal areas. She marks her stance as an environmental crusader in India by voicing her support for the restoration of forests as well as land and forest rights to the original inhabitants of India, the *Adivasis*.

To conclude, Mahasweta Devi is not merely a champion of the underprivileged or a successful creative writer but also an honest and tireless narrator of the world of the exploited. What makes her a distinct writer is her power to mix realism with melodrama, irony with indifference and the documentary with creativity to produce a wonderful and unusual blend that defies any accepted model. Her relentless battle for the homeless and the oppressed is not just confined to fiction writing but finds expression in other genres of non-fiction writing that has created a great impact.
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