“(Mahasweta Devi is a) champion of the tribal cause and decrier of class prejudice”

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CHAPTER V

Mahasweta Devi in her novels *Bedanabala. Her Life. Her Times* and *Armenium Champa Tree* has put forth a corrigendum on elitist or official narration of history which has: firstly rendered the subaltern mute; secondly has misrepresented him to justify this oppression; and thirdly has relegated not only the subaltern but his/her Orality wherein lies the truth of who is the subaltern, accordingly, the aim of the chapter is to emphasize on the substance of Orality to underscore the need for an authentic documentation of history. In the novels taken in the present chapter, Mahasweta Devi has resurrected the voice of the subaltern by means of oral sources and has not only identified Orality as the voice of the subaltern but has also highlighted how it can serve to expose the deliberate fabrications of the history which has relegated the subaltern to oblivion.

The story of an outcast – an outcast who is shunned from the world while still exploited by the same, is how the novel *Bedanabala. Her Life Her Times* (2005) was narrated by Mahasweta Devi. It revolved around the subaltern memories of a woman, Bedanabala, whose mother was liberated from a house of ill-repute and in these recollections, Mahasweta Devi has radically attacked official histories which do not incorporate these historically significant tales of human exploitation. The novel is an uncompromising narrative of India’s society that is ridden with tales of oppression, which are strategically eclipsed in the official epistemologies. The chapter addresses the representation of a subaltern as an outcast in the backdrop of India’s Independence movement, rise of nationalistic or elitist patriotism, leaping strides of modernism which but do not surface in the underbelly of India’s oppressive customs of social discrimination. The chapter also aims to address the subversive significance of Orality as in the subaltern memories which in the novel are recollected by Bedanabala to attack the universalised, provincial and exclusive confines of Indian historiography. Why the pages of elite history ignore the voice of the subaltern? How this annihilation of subaltern story is detrimental to the making of subaltern identity? Finally, how to ensure these undocumented stories are invoked to author subaltern histories and thereby reinstate subaltern as a maker than an outcast of society and its history. In light of these arguments, the objective of the novel can be ascertained as:

(to) construct a history not often documented. A history that runs parallel to the official narrative of India’s modernism and nationalism: that of woman outcast
because they are fallen.... (Who are under duress)
entertaining men, developing liaisons, intertwining their
dreams and passions with the destiny of a country
struggling for independence and questioning oppressive
time-worn social customs.

(Bedanabala. Her Life Her Times  1)

Raising these issues of the deliberate ignorance of Indian historiography, the novel
apprises the readers with the ramifications of being cast out as an outcast – how this tradition
of outcast continues unchecked; the outcast yearns to be accepted but is exploited to only
further his/her subalternity; his/her history which is written represents him/her as an immoral
weed of the society and not as humans; those who are able to break away, are but still
stigmatised as a source of scandal, sin, and malady; finally if at all there are changes with
time, these modernizing proposals and projects do not at all reach the fringes, the margins,
and the cesspools where the outcast as an subaltern is imprisoned. In the novel, the outcasts
are the prostitutes who had been abducted when young, and were sold off into this profession.

In the novel, the women wish to return to the society as one with it than as
scandalized victims of it. They yearn to be respected by the society so the cycle of violence
against hem is ended; to become a respectable member of a household than to be abused for
being an outcast as the writer notes:

A household’s happiness isn’t fated for a whore...The
temptation to be a householder gripped (them) too
strong. That’s what whores die of! ... Nothing but an
unfortunate death for every whore that hankers for a
home ... No whore gets to heaven my dear...What’s
Hindu-Muslim to a whore...Whores die when their
bodies break...

(Bedanabala. Her Life Her Times  3-8)
Branded as sins, the women as subaltern are hence misrepresented which guarantees they remain lodged in the recesses of society as a victim. Further, those who struggle to break these calumnious and painful fetters are but unsuccessful because of the sheer rigidity of the system that refuses to rehabilitate them. The impetus of the novel is to highlight the incorrigibility of the system and its oppression that any subaltern who fights against it is bound to lose its dignity, its spirit, its identity, and even its life to its invertebrate practices of subjugation and malice. Known in the society as “rotten to the core”, hence how can a subaltern be uplifted by even when the society sees them as a social malaise, a scourge of sin, and other scandalous epithets and names. Hence, the subaltern who is once made an outcast, unless his/her story is recognised by the mainstream, and a radical step is taken to sensitize the masses, there can be no recourse for them. Knowing these ignoble state of affairs, Mahasweta Devi hence has attempted to attack the system, and its corrupt making of history which intentionally marginalises the subaltern in print, so that it’s Orality is not able to expose the malevolent elements of authority that runs this system.

Thus, demonstrating Orality as a tool of protest which a subaltern yields to rectify its misrepresentation in the society, one can draw a comparison between story and history. In saying this the argument is not to create a rift between the two or show one superior or inferior to the other, but to find out how story works as an instrument of power for the subaltern. History has been a weapon of the elite to justify and perpetuate its dominance, in the midst of this, how stories allowed the subaltern to retain its identity. In the Indian context, it can be examined how story (Katha) became an instrument by which the subaltern could subvert the official narratives or (Itihas) and find a niche of his own. It can be stated:

The term ‘story’ (katha) . . . is different from both ‘History’ as established by academic historians and ‘Itihas’ as defined by traditionist historians, as an Indian way to know the past. In fact, the way ‘Itihas’ has been defined by a group of historians stretches its roots to Puranic stories. ‘Itihas’, in this sense stands for the story of a dominant tradition. On the other hand, the term ‘story’, liberates even marginalized groups of Indian society and enables them to enter the meaningful domain.
of knowing, inventing, creating and telling the past as a constant dialogue with the present. The ‘Story’ is not the fiction or fictional narrative of the printed literary world. The ‘story’ as narrated by communities is not just fiction. It is an existential narrative reflecting living cultural contexts.

(Folklore Tradition 43)

While noting this profound exemplification of story and history, Mahasweta Devi’s work can examined as employing story or oral records as a tool of history writing to rectify the dominant tradition, and consequently liberate the subjugated classes of Indian society. Hence, story is not fiction; it is a symbolic representative of the living ethos of a subaltern community and a powerful medium to assert it. In this intervention, reinterpretation, subversion of history by means of story or Orality, the dehumanized groups of India are empowered to speak and can be listened to in the mainstream. Mahasweta has also claimed that this form of history writing is a ‘very valuable source of history” and has further attested to the empowering attributes of such technique of history writing by stating, “I have always tried to explore people’s version of history . . . I felt that history comes alive authentically through the oral tradition” (Rani Laxmi 24).

Further, in examining the ugly ramifications of being an outcast, Mahasweta Devi further highlights how the society has ritualized this tradition of subordination that it continues even today. In order to emphasise on this tradition, and its ritualistic custom of discrimination, Devi notes how the whores are through an elaborate ritual pushed into the profession. In this ritual the chapter examines; firstly the incorrigibility of the system, in that it cannot be challenged; the brainwashing of the subaltern that it cannot rise once it has been made a subaltern; as a ritual carries with itself divine injunctions, the process of exploitation is hence vindicated in the name of god; and finally how this ritual even prepares the subaltern to accept its subalternity as justifiable. Mahasweta Devi writes:
...a whore needs a priest only twice in her life. When she marries into the profession...And once more at the end. When she’s dead...(the ritual has been exposed by the author as)

To this blade of iron I now marry you

All trouble and strife I cross out for you

Everybody’s woman. Alone no more.

Till now, a girl. From now, a whore.

You have no afterlife, no rebirth. This lifetime is equal to a hundred lives, a hundred births Wait till tomorrow, you’ll find out why.

(Bedanabala. Her Life Her Times 22)

Explicitly and without further exaggerations, Devi through the memory testament of Bedanabala, records the grim reality of Indian society. It is this Orality which Devi has vehemently demanded from the elite to include in the official tracts. Only in exposing and recognizing the subalternization of the victims, can any step be taken to correct it. In recording oral narratives, Mahasweta Devi hence apprises the Indian society of its vicious catacombs and sadistic zones where exploitation of the subaltern remains a truth unheard or unchecked. To challenge and rectify this grim reality, the novel aims to attack the superficialities, hypocrisies and pretensions of the elite which show either apathy or antipathy for the subalternized outcast.

It has been a debatable issue as to who has the authority to speak for the subaltern. For instance, what gives a non-dalit the right to interpret the Orality of the dalits? This concern has been contested by many subaltern critics, one such by Gayatri Spivak. She has maintained that, “there is nothing wrong at all in a non-dalit speaking on behalf of the subalterns-since unlike their ontology, which belongs to themselves, their epistemology might often be accessible only to specialist” (Anthology 102). Ranajit Guha also emphasizes
this point by referring to Bankim Chandra who had endeavoured to write the history of true India. Guha opines:

Who speaks for the Indian people/ was historically predicated on another: who has the right to interpret their past?” …Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who wrote in the Bangadarshan of 1880:”Bengal (India) must have her own history. Otherwise there is no hope for Bengal. Who is to write? You are to write it. I have to write. All of us have to write…it is not a task that can be done by one person alone; it is a task for all of us to do together.

(Dominance without Hegemony 153)

In the light of these assessments, Mahasweta Devi’s role in representing the subaltern can be agreed with. Besides, it is not the question of who speaks for whom, but what is being spoken. That is, is the representation correct or fallacious? Does it attempt to empower the subaltern or further relegate it to the fringes? Does it, to surmise, speak the truth or not? The chapter also argues that perhaps histories have been written on the prostitutes, but do they rectify the misrepresentation of these women who are generally projected as vermin, sluts, and other slanders? Consequently, in saying histories of the subaltern have been written, the question - is it the truth that is being written? – a representation or a misrepresentation? Gayatri Spivak when she put forth the powerful question “Can the Subaltern Speak”, what did she imply:

Gayatri Spivak’s point was never that subaltern did not speak, but that historians, blind to their own representations did not see how their narratives worked to “speak for” rather than “speak to” subaltern speech, cries and laughter.

(A Colonial Lexicon 160)
Consequently, in writing or rewriting history which only strengthens these misrepresentations does not imply that the subaltern can speak. The public knows about the prostitutes but they see them, read about them, and hence cultivate their mentality which slanders these women as “sinners”; hence in this knowledge about the subaltern that is based on misrepresentation, it is downright wrong to say the subaltern can speak. In the novel it is reiterated that these women’s history is written but this history constantly brands them as sinners, hence what is needed is a history that sees them as human, as victims, as subalterns so that the mentality which stamps them as ‘bundles of sin’ is apprehended. These slanderous names have becomes so naturalised that the even women do not read them as insults. Devi in this regard notes:

Whores, slut, prostitutes, so many names. But they were just that, names. Neither society nor the women had yet perceived them as insults. These names were old...buried in our history...and every age has branded them different...

Barbilashini
Barjyoshith
Kumbha
Manjika
Dehapajibini
Janapabadhu
Rupajeeba
Hattabilashini...

(Bedanabala. Her Life Her Times  37)
Mahasweta Devi in this narration intends to prove that despite the name being changed and more added to the list, the condition of these women since ages has not ameliorated to a substantial extent. Besides, these names which should be treated as insults are but due to their naturalisation by ritualization have become just names. Further, what these names suggest - is that this tradition of subalternity has been a recurring continuity, and despite its past ranging from one age to another, History is still at a loss to record these stories. Has this loss of history also been naturalised as something legal, legitimate and not a blunder at all? Has it not shocked the historians to rectify history writing so that subaltern records are also incorporated? Has the society forgotten them or is deliberately trying to be amnesiac when it comes to these harrowing oral narratives of subordination and suffering? In provoking the readers to ask these questions and shaking the very foundation of Indian historiography, Mahasweta Devi intends to shatter the comfort zone of history writing so it does not blunder as if its errors are also sanctioned by law.

In the novel it is, further, shown that though the majority continues its disdain at the subaltern, there are some sensitised men and women who take steps to rehabilitate the outcast. She records the Missions as in the Nabya Hindu Mission which narrate the simplified interpretations of Gita to the outcast who were hitherto restricted to know them. The Swadeshi volunteers who have built homeopathic centres for the homeless and the poor, and also the followers of Vivekananda who in the light of the “bogus deviations of Hinduism” strive to reform it. (Bedanabala. Her Life Her Times 24). In the novel it is shown how the society criticises these activists for working for the cause of the subaltern, “Why do these damned women come here?” to which they, defiant in their goal, simply reply, “Is there any law forbidding that...we too believe that the Lord may be best served through the care of each and every one of His creations” (Bedanabala. Her Life Her Times 26-27). The novel also notes the diligent work done by the outcasts for the betterment of the society as a whole. Though they are abandoned by the masses rather dehumanized as objects, the women do not shirk to do their part in the progress of the nation. Devi notes, “They (prostitutes) feed the poor here, give money for the free medical centre... (Substantial funds are contributed by the women from) the famous red-light area of Calcutta (Bedanabala. Her Life Her Times 27).
In the novel, Mahasweta in documenting that changing times also highlights an episode where a man from a respectable household decides to marry Bedanabala’s mother who lived in the whorehouse. He admonishes his peers when they question his act, and scolds them to reform their mentality if they wish to reform the country. Devi notes:

…such narrow minds have no business serving the motherland…Prostitutes, Whores. Kept women. And who are they, who visit them? Who enter their rooms? Young men, from homes like yours and mine…freedom is not far…but how can you fight when your hearts are weighed down with ancient custom? Is just the burning of foreign goods enough? And what about the superstition heaped upon soul?

(Bedanabala 56)

Through this episode, the author highlights the need to change the parochial conception of whores as class of outcasts, so the masses can see them as humans “born with some rights, some hopes, and not just a scar across their fates” (Bedanabala 39). She also tinged the novel with hope that as long as there are ‘organic intellectuals’ who wish to rid the nation of its provincial mentality, the subaltern can be empowered to work with these intellectuals and further the cause of justice and equality. Further in Bedanabala’s testimonials and in Devi’s recording of them, it is evident that once the masses are aware, sensitized and empathetic of the conditions of the outcasts, the subaltern can rise above their imposed statures in the society.

However, towards the ending of the novel, Mahasweta Devi, traces the subaltern memories of Bedanabala, asks whether the change that is evident in the elite circles is also visible in the fringes. She further questions whether it is enough that Bedanabala been able to narrate her recollections of past. Should it not be important that she is also heard? Firstly attacking the localised strides of modernity that remains limited to the elite hubs and secondly exposing how the subaltern might be speaking but that no one is listening, Mahasweta Devi avers:
All changed, the places. Although the change has been merely on the outside. Why just in the city? In villages-districts-markets-maidens-parks-pavements-hotels-clubs-borders-stations- this trade is alive, thriving and flourishing. Where’s the change? Just that they can speak up now? I am a sex worker and this is my profession? Just that much... (not) enough for their history to be written.

*(Bedanabala. Her Life Her Times 75)*

In further exposing the irony of India’s modernity and nationalism, Devi states that it is upto the women to know that they have their right to break away. They had been brainwashed to believe in their subalternity as divined by the heavens, and such a strategic activity allowed their exploitation to run unchecked. Devi exhorts the subaltern to awaken his subaltern consciousness, and manifest it in fighting for his rights. She writes:

...each prostitute, each sex worker, has the right to light, to break free of darkness. They must know this. They must earn this for themselves.

*(Bedanabala. Her Life Her Times 76)*

This assertion brings us to the question – How can Orality or subaltern history then empower these women? In re-examining the discussions of the chapter, it can be stated that by rectifying the misrepresentation of the official narratives, firstly Orality retrieves and recovers the true subaltern identity. Secondly it by exposing the gaps and loopholes of official history ensures the making of a subaltern history which makes the masses aware of the exploitation of the subaltern. Thirdly, in doing so, the subaltern is provided a pedestal to speak and be heard. In light of these aspects, it can be stated that it is indeed the focus of subaltern historiography to seek for social justice that is be it class or gender oppression, the history should provide the subalterns with an agency to articulate their concerns and issues.
Dipesh Chakrabarty in The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital (1997) has stated that it is fundamental to situate Subaltern history in the broader context of historiography. That is, it must address the socially committed commandments that form the basis of its task. As he writes, “Writing subaltern history, documenting resistance to oppression and exploitation, must be a larger effort to make the world socially just. To wrench subaltern studies away from the keen sense of social justice that gave rise to project would be to violate the spirit that gives this project its sense of commitment and intellectual energy” (The Politics 35).

The author has diligently addressed this issue by actively pursuing a history which empowers the subalternized outcasts. She has narrated how in the progress of time, the society broke its orthodox hold of draconian rules and began to heed the voice of these women. Mahasweta writes, “Who knew then, that a day would come when the whores would see for the very first time that there were some people after all who would give them respect, who would not greet them with disgust, with scorn? Who knew then that one day the whores would write in their own hand…” (Bedanabala 25). As a subaltern, these women slowly with time have been empowered as the masses are beginning to listen, and acknowledge the debt of Orality in rectifying official narratives. As a result, it can be stated that Mahasweta Devi’s work Bedanabala. Her Life. Her Times is a testimony to the value of Orality. In her declarations which are amply exemplified in her works, the significance of Orality as a source of history cannot be negated. The author does not only wish to highlight the history of the subaltern but also intends to enforce the importance of Orality as a historical record.

In keeping with the need of Orality, the chapter further examines Mahasweta Devi’s The Armeniun Champa Tree. In the onset of the novel, Mahasweta Devi proposes the intent of the work to write an unheard story with emphasis on story. The work serves to enforce Devi’s deliberations on what is history, its relations to Orality, and the need to rehabilitate the marginalised existences of the subalterns. In order to reflect these significant issues which are emblematic of her writing, Devi has narrated a story that encompasses these tales into one. The interesting thing to note is that unlike her uncompromising fiction, this work is written in mild overtones echoing a new facet of Devi’s writing style. The chapter in this respect aims to examine: firstly the discourse on history and its contention with Orality; secondly signifying Orality as reflecting a microcosm; and thirdly apprehending the exploitative
practices of power apparatuses as in religion, feudalism and colonial authority as represented in the work.

While investigating these aspects evident in the novel, the chapter highlights Mahasweta Devi’s representation of a tribal boy called Buno and through him how she reflects the era of ‘76 that witnessed episodes as: Bengal famine, surge in dacoity, prevalence of religious superstitions and continuance of feudal totalitarianism. In the backdrop of these events, Mahasweta Devi has narrated a simple story of a tribal boy, in her distinctive style of resurrecting the individual in history. In doing so, she has put forward a question which tempts introspection; it is also a question but also a clarion call for those who believe that only written texts carry the truth and not the sources which are oral in nature. Devi writes:

...You have not read about these things anywhere.
Not everything is written down in books. No book contains the story of Mato of the Buno quarters, of his goat Arjun and of the old padre sahib of the church.
Though not written down, it is all true.

(The Armeniun Champa Tree 2)

In articulating these concern over Orality and its legitimacy, critics also emphasize on the “dialogic relationship” between oral sources and written discourse, in saying how they should be analysed as “complementary categories” and not “mutually exclusive categories” (Folklore as Discourse 93). In the field of Subaltern Studies, this approach towards Orality has also found new grounds, keen engagements, and studies to discern methods and methodologies for reading of oral texts, and investigating its tools. The objective being to highlight the need to resurrect the importance of Orality as it has been overshadowed by the monopoly of written texts. This can be undone by allowing analysis of oral sources in tandem with written texts than declaring supremacy of one over the other. To attack this notion of elitism, and manifest a complementary exercise of oral sources and written texts in the formation of history this work stands the test of these polemical issues.
While further, setting the tone of the novel, and engaging the readers to discover a new facet of writing history, Devi has addressed her claim:

An old pandit once asked me, Who says these are true? This pandit does not believe in anything that is not written in books or palm-leaf manuscripts or inscribed on stone. Even the bookworms in his house are highly learned, and as for his cats and dogs, they’re great scholars.

*(The Armenian Champa Tree 2-3)*

The import of these scathing remarks can be understood in Mahasweta Devi’s active role in signifying the importance of Orality; in that she is critical of the views that call it inconsequential or contradict its usage. Knowing that the stories of the tribal are generally oral records as in the folklores, myths, legends or simple narratives as this work, hence if Orality is underestimated, that would threaten the oral culture of the aboriginals of India.

The basic and the most significant advantage of Orality is in its direct association with tribal culture, and hence the tribal himself. Orality, allows the listener to hear the subaltern speak, in the process of which the subaltern is empowered to re-enforce his identity. In discerning the primacy of individual representation over representation which are far removed from the epicentre of tribal ethos, the author has relied on the functionality of Oral tradition and oral history. This emphasis is established knowing how tribal literature is generated in Orality hence in declining to accept it as a legitimate field, invariably relegates the tribal literature to the margins. In the academia, various arguments and issues are raised to ascertain the relevance and veracity of Orality, with key concerns being:

...the role oral discourse plays in the construction of the genealogy of identity of a particular group or community. There is no doubt that oral discourse gives a voice to the marginalised, subaltern identities even within a dominant, written discourse. But the
role it plays in the construction of the history of a community without a written discourse is paramount. It does not simply provide valuable information for constructing history of such a community, but also helps to provide crucial space for constructing the onslaught of a dominant discourse.

(Folklore as Discourse 93)

Hence, Devi is vehement in her stance to write a story recovered from her repository of oral lore and hence starts her otherwise simple story with a formidable allegiance to Orality; the target being to create a space for tribal literature and hence construct subaltern history which rectifies official or dominant history. As she claims with regard to the story:

But I think all this is definitely true. Many be I haven’t seen Mato with my own eyes. But surely, somewhere, there is a romantic boy who turns positive on rainy day? Gets angry on a cloudy evening...or desperately love an abandoned, vagabond goat? If so, why can’t Mato exist?

(The Armeniun Champa Tree 3)

In these lines, Mahasweta Devi wishes to state that Orality that she has incorporated in writing this particular work has tabled a microcosmic representation of an Indian village with its social hierarchies intact and other systems cum institutions running as they did in the year ’76. In keeping with the truth of a characteristic Indian village, the emblematic aspects of little tribal children, the irrefutable issues of poverty, starvation, bonded labour, and other facets which give a symbolic impression of a colonial India, Devi has hence weaved an illustrative story of a tribal boy – any tribal boy and his world, her objective being:
...using her considerable experience of oral history and grassroot realities ... (Devi has) weaved stories which educate future adults about an India very few of them would otherwise know.

(\textit{The Armeniun Champa Tree} 1)

Here, the great writer intends to sensitise the mainstream of a society which from colonial to postcolonial era has remained in the fringes. And instead of telling the facts, she weaves the facts into a narrative that makes this novel an aesthetic as well as a social realistic venture to foster awareness.

Beginning her story, Mahasweta Devi apprises us of the figure of Janakinath Singh, a machiavellian landlord, who plays tricks with the aboriginals to steal their lands, their harvest and even their lives so they work for him for generations at end. He loans paddy during famine, but then next year exacts cash or paddy from the poor farmers and if they are unable to pay, he seizes their lands and their labour. In presenting the story of this landlord, Devi intends to articulate the feudal set up of Indians society and its treacherous exploitation of the subalternized communities such as the tribals. She further represents the life of the dacoits as to why they were forced to turn to this life for making ends meet. Through the figure of Mato’s older brother, Chhibilas, Devi describes that these dacoits, as unknown to the masses, were originally recruited as army personnel in the military of Nawab Ali Vardi. The objective was to fend off attack of the \textit{bargis} (Maratha invaders) or the Afghans. But after the colonial invasion of India the company rulers terminated their employment and as these men only knew how to fight, they were not skilled of farming, hence became dacoits. Besides, as they claim, in such dire times, “how can one support a family without dacoity?” (\textit{The Armeniun Champa Tree} 6).

The author represents the social hierarchy of the village with detailed representation of the Buno tribes, their work, life and culture when she writes:
...Bunos go and clear underbrush, build thatched shelters, collect firewood and banana leaves. They carry piles of spinach-brinjal-radish-pumpkin-gourd-chillies in yoked baskets, on their shoulders...it is the Bunos who tend to the oxen, give them water and fodder. There are other jobs too. Suppose someone wants to get a road constructed in the name of his mother or father or guru, or a well dug, or a quay built for the bathers in the Ganga. These jobs belong to the Bunos.

(The Armenian Champa Tree 9)

In these explicit details, Devi has striven to represent the details which to any other writer would seem trivial, but not to Devi. It is the attribute of her historic technique that she highlights the individual in the history, with considerable details on the human element, lives, jobs, and matters rather than the events; that is, Devi portrays how a human influences an event than how an event sways a human. Though she ensures both sides of the tales are depicted, Devi but gives more precedence to the former than the latter. Hence, in the work we find Devi’s characteristic emphasis on the persona of the individuals mentioned and how they stir the plot along to denouement. It is her adherence to Orality that has allowed her to capture the individual in history. This in turn renders the story of the tribal as if it is an autobiography of the subaltern. Orality as discerned above, fortifies the identity of the tribal, and in doing so it also attacks the elitist representation of the subaltern that is perpetuated as a gospel truth in the historical texts. As the elitist representations in history are considered to be a model of absolute truth, the need of Orality to subvert thereby resurect the subaltern record hence becomes indispensabel and matter of urgency. In this regard, it has been stated:

Oral history, when represented as an autobiographical account of a subaltern subject, often diverges from historical representation constructed from an elitist perspective and thus sheds light on aspects outside the
vision of official history. It is thus arguable that oral history may produce alternative historical narratives that challenge dominant historical view.

*(Gender, Discourse and the Self 197)*

These statements can be reiterated with respect to Orality and tribal literature of India. It has been established that tribal literature is rendered in oral form, and in realizing the trivialization of Orality, once can invariably recognize the trivialisation of tribal literature. In speaking about the repository of tribal literature which is spoken than written, G.N. Devy has also stated:

Tribal literature, in spite of its rich traditions, has been subjected to gross cultural neglect just because it is oral. If the visibility of tribal languages has remained somewhat poor, those languages need not be blamed for want of creativity. The responsibility rests with the received idea that literature, in order to be literature, has to be written and printed as well. After the print technology started impacting Indian languages during the 19th century, the fate of the oral became precarious. A gross cultural neglect had to be faced by the languages which remained outside the print technology.

*(“Wealth of Wisdom” The Hindu)*

That is, due to the oral nature of tribal lore it is deemed inconsequential which hence also undermines the creative power of it. Further, the import of the critic is to highlight the contemporary reality of oral literatures and how they have been marginalised with the preference and supremacy given to written texts. According to the critic, the oral literature is being smothered into the realms of amnesia not because they do not carry creative
significance, but that they are oral in nature. Highlighting Mahasweta Devi’s role to legitimatise Orality thereby establishing the significance of tribal literature, G.N. Devy has aptly commented:

What is the source of her remarkable memory, the frightening economy of her words, that great simplicity which having distributed life between necessary and the unnecessary, shuns all that is unnecessary? Is she an adivasi taken to literature, or a writer drawn to the adivasi?

(“The adivasi Mahasweta” 2004)

Devi, undoubtedly, embodies the universal truth of an “an adivasi taken to literature, or a writer drawn to the adivasi”. Hence, it can be discerned that the simplicity of Devi’s language, her concern for the tribal, and her remarkable oral knowledge about the tribal has aided her to present a symbolic demonstration of the tribal life. In the light of the above mentioned words of G.N. Devy, the work also highlights the extreme discrimination rather violence against oral literature and how even in the contemporary scenario, Orality is deemed as tenuous, inconsequential and detrimental to the production of knowledge. It is this adverse mentality that needs revisiting, and in order to mobilise such a radical change, Mahasweta Devi’s emphasis on Orality prove immensely substantial.

In the work, *The Armeniun Champa Tree* Mahasweta Devi’s portrayal of Mato’s mother as a spirited tribal woman and as a leader of her tribe, whom everyone calls a “tigress… the Bunos cannot do without her… (She) is a natural leader” is an attempt to eulogise the tribal authority (*The Armeniun Champa Tree* 14). It is Mato’s mother who does not keep quiet when it comes to the sufferings of her tribe. In challenging the local landlord Janakinath, she does not flinch to report on his conniving practices of fleecing the tribes and other communities as she roars:

All the Bunos and Bagdis are furious with you…or are the self-styled mahajans safe from the fear of sin?
(She further indicts him for grabbing their lands) ... you give us paddy and rice during the famine and scheme to swallow up our lands, hearts and homes.

(The Armeniun Champa Tree 14)

Amidst, such a scenario, the village of Mato is visited by a “kapalik” – tantric mystic who makes an ill-foreboding that unless a goat is sacrificed, the village will be inundated, “There will be a great flood. The big rives Padma and Bhagirati, and even our small Khorey will swell with tides and waves likes the ocean” (The Armeniun Champa Tree 7). Hearing this proclamation, Mato realises his pet goat would be sacrificed and so he flees with it in the pitch of the night. He makes his way for the Armenium church, which in the novel has been represented as a haven and its padre as a benign saviour. In Mato’s precarious journey, traced by Devi, one can symbolise in it an escape of the tribal from the vicious claws of social hierarchy, feudalism, and religious intransigence. Mato despite being weak because of his congenital condition is nevertheless determined to save his goat and reach the church before the rigid society of the elite overpowers him. In his strenuous journey through the jungle, the waters and other equally perilous places, Devi apprises the readers of other characters, their stories, and how each play a significant role in testing the courage of the tribal boy. Despite all the hazardous obstacles, Mato finds himself in front of the church and before he is caught, he enters without any fear or apprehension. The old padre on hearing the ruckus, steps out, and Devi notes how the mob which had gathered outside still do not budge and demand that the boy be returned for the sacrificial puja:

(the padre) After listening to the whole story, he said, I won’t hand him over at any cost. Besides, once a beast is inside the Church, it no longer remains fit for sacrifice to your Mother goddess... It’s you who say so.

(The Armeniun Champa Tree 38)
In dispersing the crowd with his timely alertness, Devi notes that from that day onwards, Mato takes shelter in the church. In this manner, Devi has implicitly imparted the boy with a freedom of choice, as he flees from his rigid society rather than succumb to it. The writer also comments rather satirically that no floods ever came in the village hence highlighting her attack at the superstitious fabrication of religious ideology. In the end, Mato’s mother comes to collect him, but Devi leaves it open-ended whether Mato decides to go or not. However, whether the boy leaves or not, Devi has left it open-ended. All she says is that the boy was not understood by anyone perhaps indicating how the mainstream is similarly unaware of the stories of the tribal world. What happens of the old padre and the tribal boy, Devi again leaves it open-ended. But in the conclusion of the novel, the readers can make an intelligent guess that perchance Devi has imparted them immortality by suggesting how the Armeniun Champa Tree has captured the spirit of the padre and the tribal. In doing so, the tree hence appears or gives an impression of carrying the ‘story’ or essence of the two. Devi notes:

At times the tree looks like an old padre. As if he is standing silently with his head bent, and his hand resting upon somebody’s head.

(The Armeniun Champa Tree 39)

Through such a vivid description, Devi has reiterated her goal by giving a sublime imagery of a tree. The chapter establishes the existence of the tree as a symbol for Orality which continues to grow, flourish, thereby, symbolising the ever-resonant story of Mato and various tribals. Further, the tree as a symbolic imagery for Orality hence continues to tell the story of the tribal boy Mato and highlights the role of Orality in furthering the narratives of the aboriginals through ages to come. Is the tree a symbol for Orality, does it stand for Orality’s mission to tell the story of the marginalised, or can it serve as a symbol of tribal history, these are questions which can have various interpretations, but in the chapter, this assessment has been drawn to emphasise on the importance of Orality as vindicated by the author herself.
In the discussion so far, hence it has been founded that Orality serves two functions, understanding the reasons of which one can recognize the demand of its legitimisation as a tool of history. The first function being to “counter official versions and the sovereign status they implicitly give to European epistemologies”; the second being to “extract counter-narratives of important anti-colonial events, document unheralded and heroic popular participation in them...(and how these) small voices may counter the weight of official discourse because they remain undomesticated and unsullied by ‘state-managed historiography and the ‘monopolizing force of official knowledge” (The Oral History Reader 374).

Realizing these key issues, it can be ascertained that Orality apprehends the apparent irrefutability of colonial epistemologies, and excavates the buried truths of subaltern classes hitherto which were stamped as untruths, and paltry collections of knowledge. And as Mahasweta Devi claims, “the oral tradition is a vital source of Indian history… (Devi) acknowledges that it ought to be preserved as a historical document” (The Radical Humanist 36). In the light of above observations, the importance of tracing oral history and hence tracing the historical account of the subaltern can be attested. The author in doing so has sensitized the mainstream, and apprehended the falsified accounts that are stereotypically stamped on the tribals. In Chotti Munda and his Arrow Mahasweta has declared, “Munda (tribal) language has no script. So they turn significant events into story, and hold them as saying, as song. That’s their history as well” (xii). It has been a general technique of history writing in India as highlighted by Mahasweta Devi to ignore the vast collection of oral lore in favour of written scripts officiated by elitist record makers as the author claims:

India’s history, as it is written today, suffers from the gross negligence. Unwritten oral folk material is equally important as a source of history... Today I am doubly convinced that the local elements, the vast wealth of locally written and oral folk material are not only rich in language and thought, but are also important historical elements. We...have not used this vast legacy of myths, beliefs, social laws, narration by professional story tellers, ballads and
songs. The folk material and the common people’s version of events are assets to literature. In using them – and I do not use them as decoration – I have found salvation.”

(Chotti Munda 16)

As reflected in these words, Devi has attempted to empower the subaltern, by digging the “vast legacy of myths, beliefs, social laws, narration”, thereby, reaffirming her belief that in ignoring the oral lore, the official history and the elite are destroying the voices of the subaltern. Consequently there is no mention of the same in the dominant discourses and epistemologies; as they have been strategically marginalised in the trash bins of history. To conclude, it is evidential Mahasweta Devi has employed her vast repository of oral lore, and weaved a tale to highlight issues as in: subalternity, subaltern memories, and why history needs to be rewritten from the perspective of Orality. In rewriting and refocusing history from the vantage of the subaltern, Mahasweta has reasserted the importance of Orality and also sensitized the masses about the marginalized sections of the society. It has been her primal motive to rewrite history, as in the lack of an authentic artifact about the subaltern; they do not exist in the eyes of the mainstream, and hence are relegated to the margins to survive as victims.
REFERENCES


