“Is she (Devi) an adivasi taken to literature or a writer drawn to the adivasi?”

G.N. Devy
The purpose of this chapter is to assemble the individual strands, findings and assessments of the preceding chapters, and connecting these into a comprehensive whole. The target is to arrive at a distinct inference of Mahasweta Devi as a subaltern historian in the light of B.R. Ambedkar’s observation:

A historian ought to be exact, sincere and impartial; free from passion, unbiased by interest, fear, resentment or affection; and faithful to the truth, which is the mother of history the preserver of great actions, the enemy of oblivion, the witness of the past, the director of the future.

*(Who Were the Shudras Vol 1)*

The Indian past is the collection of histories which subaltern critics have explored and exposed and the same discourse has been applied to the selected works of Mahasweta Devi to envision her as an unflinching subaltern historian. Taking a cue from Ranajit Guha, Gyan Prakash, Sumit Sarkar, Gayatri Spivak and other prominent subaltern critics who have created a subaltern history by their unanimous attempt to become, “an original site for a new kind of history of below, a people’s history free of national constraints, a post-nationalist reimagining of the Indian nation on the underside, at the margins, outside nationalism…to reimagine history itself”, the goal of the thesis hence has been to deconstruct the elitist historiography vis-a-vis the vantage point of the subaltern. The thesis, in the light of this endeavour has aimed at projecting Mahasweta Devi as a formidable literary luminary and an authentic chronicler who has exposed and apprehended the pre-colonial to postcolonial conflicts which have been scarcely or hardly documented in the lopsided terrains of Indian historiography.

In Indian narrative with particular reference to pre-colonial to postcolonial era, the official history has conveniently excluded the record of indigenous communities, the low castes and other subalternized sections of the society. In order to rectify this bankruptcy of elite history, and reclaim the past of the subaltern, the thesis has meticulously analyzed an authentic account of India’s past as portrayed in the selected novels of Mahasweta Devi. The present research work advocates rewriting of official history, usage of oral sources, bridging
the gap between the elite and subaltern, attack on bigoted social hierarchies, thereby establishing Mahasweta Devi as a subaltern historian who reinstates the subaltern as the maker of his/her own history.

An outline of the development of subaltern historiography in Chapter one highlights the evolution of history from being a study of secluded and a separatist representation of the elite into an encompassing mirror of the subaltern as a whole. In the chapter, it has been investigated how there used to be widespread belief perpetuated by known critics as Hegel, Marx and others that India had no history of its own. Moreover, this consensus had reached such an extent of validation that prominent intellectuals and luminaries of the West declared India had no historians and those who were present had no methodology to write history. Based on this assumption, the chapter has observed the unanimous pronouncements of Macaulay, James Mill and Edward Thompson that “Indians are not historians, and they rarely show any critical ability. Even their most useful books…exasperated with their repetitions and diffuseness” (Modernizing Democracy 198). Refuting these assumptions, the Introduction highlights the historical craft of the Subaltern Studies historians as prominent and significant.

The chapter has further analyzed the development of subaltern historiography and how a consortium of Indian and English historians began to question the making of subaltern history at the end of 1970. This intellectual discourse addressed the history and society of subalterns. In the meticulous editorship of Ranajit Guha, and his ‘assortment of marginalized academics’ three volumes of essays entitled Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society (1982) subverted the hegemonic discourse of the elite by its exposition on the subaltern masses of pre-colonial and colonial India (A Subaltern Studies Reader xiv). This initial movement was followed by the publishing of Selected Subaltern Studies (1988) edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak, with a foreword by the renowned post-colonial critic Edward Said. Its cardinal focus has been to “rewrite the history of colonial and post-colonial India by resetting the parameters of historiography itself... National narratives, orientalist images, ethnic stereotypes, and Hindu majoritarianism (Reading Subaltern Studies 3-304). It has been constantly declared by subaltern critics that, “the historiography of Indian
nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism - colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism…” (Selected Subaltern Studies 37).

There have been polemical questions taken up by the critics such as, “How did historiography come to acquire this particular blind spot and never find a cure” and one of the progenitor of Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha has decisively answered it in his series of works which are aptly titled as Elementary Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India (1983), An Indian Historiography of India (1988) and Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography (1997) etc. The chapter has also underscored the Gramscian notion of subaltern which was the spark that initiated the academic discourse of Subaltern Studies, thereby, reinventing the discipline of history vis-a-vis the subalternity and representation. In tracing the genesis of subaltern history, it is evident that subaltern history drew its models from critics other than Gramsci such as Jacobson, Barthes, Foucault and others and by transforming these existing paradigms, subaltern history emerged as a distinctive field. It can be affirmed:

...subaltern history promised more than “history from below”: the very idea of the “subaltern” had been captured from Gramsci, and the Jacobson and Barthes, the post-structuralism of Foucault, and the critique of Enlightenment epistemologies associated with Derrida, Lyotard and others....subaltern history...might be read from the gaps, fissures, interstices, and rhetorical strategies that marked dominant discourse...subaltern history was clearly to be distinguished from a host of other phenomenon.

(History and Theory 137)

In noting these observations, the distinctive feature of subaltern history can be ascertained. It aims to explore history in the gaps, fissures and strategies that are prevalent in the official narratives. In exposing and rectifying the same, subaltern history has evolved into
more than ‘a history from below’. Furthermore, the chapter has also highlighted the affinity between Subaltern Studies and Postcolonialism. It was the basis of the study to combine the historical analysis of colonial India by historians to the attention of postcolonial theorists. The volumes of Subaltern Studies were, indeed, established to address the postcolonial fraternity rather than to be undertaken as a technical field of history per se. The chapter has in this respect highlighted how race as a tool of prejudice was dissected in Postcolonialism, similarly, caste and other media of discrimination in Indian context has been exposed by the subaltern critics.

In the light of the development of Subaltern Studies, the position of Mahasweta Devi as a subaltern historian has been highlighted. In doing so, the indispensable stature of Mahasweta Devi in the corpus of Indian fiction has been highlighted and recognized. The literary representation of the subaltern began with the pioneering works of Indian writers as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan who are credited to have initiated a dynamic discourse on subaltern history. In their unprecedented efforts to document the histories of the margins, the literature of subalternity found its niche. The contemporary writers following this ever-widening field of Subalternity have furthered this tradition with positive ramifications. For instance, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhuti Roy, Rohinton Mistry and Kiran Desai defied the elitist model of narrative and incorporated the local histories of everyday lives of common people.

In the literary arena of subaltern literature, the prominence of Mahasweta Devi is undeniably distinguished. The research has deftly analysed Mahasweta Devi as the author of radical works on tribal revolts, low-caste suppression and so on to actively pursue the recovery of subaltern identity. Her foremost pledge to wrest subaltern history from the false representations and fabricated narratives of the pedagogic historians forms the bedrock of subaltern literature. It is her activist allegiance to the cause, that the author declares, “I have always been driven by a strong sense of history …In all my writings I have tried to present the subaltern point of view” (Jhansi 321). Critics such as Sen and Yadav in the Introduction to An Anthology of Recent Criticism (2008) have aptly reiterated the objective of Mahasweta Devi when they assert, “Devi, presumably belongs to no tradition, no cluster of thinking, avows to no aesthetic principles and is utterly unique in her engagement with tribals and rural
poor. This then is Postcoloniality from below” (*An Anthology* 25). Subaltern Studies is, hence, Postcoloniality from below that is, it explores the rehabilitation of the low classes with respect to their identity, historicity, and exploitation in the realm of the mainstream society.

Subsequently, the thesis has highlighted how Mahasweta Devi as an author and an activist has arrested the tampered history of India’s unsung heroic figures, the rural communities, and the tribals who have remained a subaltern because no history was ever written or preserved about them. In her prolific works, Mahasweta Devi has articulated her ‘consciousness of history’ and her ‘curiosity about our national life’ which stand testimony to her demand for a bona fide subaltern history (*Jhansi* ix). Mahasweta hence has rejected the official historiography to build a subaltern history from the rich repository of folk-lore. Bill Ashcroft in this regard has claimed, “…that fictional narrative is not a rival discourse to history; rather it is history…which gives the fictional narrative…something to interpolate” (*Anthology* 15).

The Introduction establishes Mahasweta Devi as a contemporary subaltern historian, who has professed significant importance to history when it comes to writing. It has been pointed out that the author has employed two ways to historicize her works. Firstly it is the subaltern point of view which she adheres to in rewriting elitist history. Secondly, she incorporates oral history into her works to apprehend the ignorance of the mainstream about the tribals. The novels which have been taken in the present study address these two modes of historicizing techniques. In investigating these ingenious techniques, the thesis has also highlighted the author’s method of collecting materials for her novels. For instance, Devi personally investigated the places where Rani Laxmi Bai fought the British. She travelled to these places to collect official data and oral history. It was the need for money that prompted her to writing but it was her zeal to document social realities that drove her. She has opined that writing came to her early but it didn’t have a purpose, while the dint of social activism fructified only later with time.

The watershed transformation in Devi’s writings came when in 1956 she visited Palamau, an isolated and indigent region in Bihar which is called ‘a mirror of tribal India.’
She traversed these places gaining first-hand experience of the untold horrors of feudalism and its system of debt bondage on marginalised communities, thereby, exposing the same pathetic socio-economic conditions of tribals in the margins of mainstream society. On seeing the inhuman plight of the inhabitants in particular reference to lack of health care, education, roads and poor financial resources, Devi as a sensitive writer delianted these indelible expressions in her works namely *Kavi Bandyoghoti Gayiner Jivan O Mrityu (The Life And Death of poet Bandyoghoti Gayin*, 1966) which portrayed the strife of a low-caste boy in fifteenth-century Bengal and *Andharmanik (Jewel in Darkness* 1966), which exposed the commotion in Bengal’s social life caused by the Bargi (Maratha cavalry) invasions during the mid-eighteenth century. The author’s sense of social activism is remarkably and poignantly reflected in *Hajar Chaurashir Ma (Mother of 1084)*. The novel traces the psychological dilemma and predicament of a mother who grapples with the issue of son’s involvement in the Naxalite movement, an insurgence that began in 1967 in the village of Naxalbari, northern West Bengal, and soon extended to metropolitan areas in the region until the mid-1970s. The novel is hence a vehement attempt to highlight the sufferings of tribals and how this cause was hijacked and sabotaged by the elitist powers at the helm.

Understandably, Mahasweta Devi’s major thematic concerns have been revisiting Indian historiography as she has claimed “I think being conscious about history is a primary condition of being a writer” (*Muffled Voices* 196). Her fiction is interlaced with historic facts, which impart her works a historical veracity. It is due to this her works are often included in the genre of historical fiction. Her most significant historical fiction includes *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, which is a scathing exposition on feudal exploitation, imperial subjugation and the post-Independent India stuck in the mire of Emergency, tribal rebellion and etc. Mahasweta looks back at the past to connect it with the present, so that the history is not forgotten and its mistakes are not reiterated in the future. In an interview in 1983, she said, “It is my conviction that a story writer should be motivated by a sense of history that would help her readers to understand their own times. I have never had the capacity or the urge to create art for art’s sake” (*Five Plays*, xii). In her introduction to *Agnigarbha* (1978), Devi has explained her reason for writing activist novels. It is in these lines one can see in her a subaltern historian who is determined to resolve the glaring issues of discrimination, subjugation and dehumanization faced by the subalterns of India. She avers:
I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate, directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints is the only source of inspiration in all my writing. All the parties to the Left as well as to the Right have failed to keep their commitment to the common people. I do not hope to see in my lifetime any reason to change this conviction of mine. Hence I go on writing to the best of my abilities about the people, so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt and shame. For a writer faces judgments in her lifetime and remains answerable.

(“Writing as Social service” 2011)

In order to stand up to her conviction, Mahasweta Devi has founded many forums and organization to spread awareness about the rigid and totalitarian system of feudalism in India. For instance, she founded Palamau (Bihar) Zila Bandhua Samiti, India’s first bonded-labour organization, with the help of local journalist, Rameshwaram. The objective was to raise public awareness of the bonded-labour system and drew together thousands of bonded labours in common action to call for an end to bonded labour and demand a program of land-to-the-tillers. She started editing the Bengali quarterly Bortika, an obscure literary periodical her father had edited. She turned it into a forum where tribals, small peasants, agricultural labourers, factory workers and rickshaw pullers wrote about their life and problems. Mahasweta turned Bortika into a publication that gave precedence to the view-from-below and the documentation of social and economic conditions through surveys and reports done by the local people themselves.

Mahasweta Devi’s passionate commitment for the upliftment of marginalised communities has found its creative outburst in various journalistic writings too which range from the Economic and Political Weekly (founded by her uncle Sachin Chowdhary), Business Standard, Sunday, Frontier and New Republic, written in English and
Bengali, and others. The issues which she has tackled are mainly topics as police atrocities, failures in the implementation of government programmes, exploitation of sharecroppers and miners, unemployment and landlessness, environmental degradation and the need to protect and foster tribal languages and identity (“Writing as Social service” 2011). Accordingly, the Introduction has established how the author embraces journalism in writing her novels, and considers it more as a forum for social activism than a profession Mahasweta’s zeal as a writer can be discerned in her preface to the story collection ‘Shrestha Galpa’ (1985):

I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation…I have a reverence for materials collected from folklore, for they reveal how the common people have overlooked at an experience in the past and look at it now…To capture the continuities between the past and present held together in the folk imagination, I bring legends, mythical figures and mythical happenings into a contemporary setting, and make an ironic use of these...

(Musings on Indian Writing 205)

In 1996, for lifetime literary achievement, she was given the Jnanpith Award in ceremonies in New Delhi attended by Nelson Mandela. In conferring the award to her, Mandela honoured her work by saying that “In throwing light on the experience of the most downtrodden, Mahasweta Devi holds a mirror to the condition of the world as we enter the new millennium. holds a mirror to the conditions of the world as we enter the new millennium” (Writing as Social service, 26, Oct, 2011). Mahasweta has revisited history to rectify its distortion. She has attacked the scourge of caste system that has contaminated the historical facts and criminalized the victims in the society. Caste system hence finds a prominent rectification in her works. It is interesting to note that in Postcolonialism, race is the root cause of polarization which festers between the Occident and Orient. In Subaltern Studies it is caste, in relation to the fabric of Indian society that divides the people into high and low classes and it is this system of discrimination the author has indicted as the root cause of hijacking of history.
The discipline of Subaltern Studies, as discussed in the chapter, has investigated the issues of elite/subaltern history, representation/misrepresentation, Orality/written script, agency/subalternity etc. It explores these important issues from both sides, i.e., giving emphasis to both the elements of the dichotomy and studying them in a relationship than in isolation. In the selected works of Mahasweta Devi, this principle has been established to underscore the relevance of subaltern history and the consequent empowering of tribals and low classes in India. The major focus of Subaltern critics has been to rectify elite history and not discard it; and write subaltern history and not monopolize it. To add more, an investigation into the critical context of Subaltern History has ensured the prejudiced practices as caste-system, racism and other systems of discrimination are apprehended which distort life stories of the subalterns due to which they are abused as outcastes and untouchables. The relevance of the present study has addressed these issues from local to global level as marginalization is a global phenomenon that needs immediate rectification.

The present study has attempted to test the hypothesis that, Subaltern History as an inclusive model of historiography serves to empower the marginalized communities with a voice. In addition to this perspective, the thesis also has attested to the indispensable role of Orality and how it can corroborate written records to envisage a subaltern document. The target has been to critically analyze the selected novels of Mahasweta Devi as evidences of subaltern history and substantiate her position as a subaltern historian. Due to the strategic exclusion of the subaltern, the social groups as in the aboriginals, the low castes and other marginalized communities are deprived of the lines of social mobility to address their rehabilitation, preservation of culture, assertion of identity, and sustenance of life in its totality. The present research has not only been an investigation into the parameters of history writing, gathering of oral sources and other techniques of keeping and verifying records, as it holds a vehement stance on empowering the subaltern with the means to tell his/her tale of exploitation, expose the culprits and demand justice as is their right.

In pre-colonial times, the feudal landlords divested the subalterns from knowing their history. If the history happened to be written then the reality was fabricated to suit the feudal
ends of self-aggrandizement. During the British reign, this subjugation of the marginalized communities continued and was highly consolidated to procure domination of the country. The tribes, low classes and other subalternized communities who rebelled with the aim to liberate themselves were criminalized in the eyes of law and society. After Independence, this distortion of history prevailed to the point that even now the criminalized tribes for instance have not been liberated from this stigma. Hence, the Indian history as a whole has a glaring lacuna in it which the thesis intends to rectify by reclaiming the past of the subaltern. The thesis hence has presented the need of subaltern history, its role in empowering the subaltern and how if it is actively pursued the subaltern can be protected from extinction.

Chapter II juxtaposes two powerful novels of Mahasweta Devi which revisit the life narratives of two prominent figures of India - Rani Laxmi Bai and Titu Mir who have been subalternized in the historical records of official history. The chapter focuses how these two figures have been subjected to an unbalanced representation which grossly underplays their pioneering role in India’s struggle for independence. It is in this respect, the chapter projects Mahasweta Devi as a chronicler of marginalized voices such as Laxmi Bai and Titu Mir who would have remained underrepresented and misrepresented in the absence of a ‘humble biography’ by the writer. The chapter hence establishes how Devi’s intensive and exhaustive research, along with her historic technique has apprehended the misrepresentation of India’s historic figures and dismantled the power structures which perpetrated subalternity. In doing so, the chapter examines Laxmi Bai as a harbinger of India’s freedom struggle and similarly Titu Mir, a peasant rebel, has been acknowledged as a significant contributor to India’s independence.

Furthermore, when it comes to Rani Laxmi Bai, it is true, she has been commemorated and profusely represented in the historical texts, cinema, and other modes of knowledge production, but the question which has been addressed in Chapter II is – how far is it justifiable to say that a figure has been copiously represented hence does not need any revisiting? Therefore, the chapter finds answers to these polemical arguments by revisiting colonial and nationalist renditions of Laxmi Bai and then has established how Mahasweta Devi’s historical technique arrests the false representations which fabricate histories. In doing so, the complicity between power and representation has been attacked to create a subaltern
history that aims for an authentic depiction of the subalternized historic figures. The end result being that the subaltern in question remains relegated to the margins as an outsider, as well as an unsung participant to the point of being criminalised or scandalised as witnessed in the case of Laxmi Bai. Hence, it was palpable that incorporation of oral sources substantially resolved these polemics of representation and subaltern history. Besides, Mahasweta Devi’s approach to Orality in this regard has been seen as a step forward towards realising the significance of this field.

The second iconic historic figure referred to in Chapter II is Titu Mir. The chapter investigates Titu Mir as a reconstruction of peasant history from the prism of subaltern history by establishing that peasant consciousness is not created or imported by the will of the colonial/native elite but is an integral part of the marginalised peasant. The chapter has further examined Titu Mir as a proof of subaltern history which gives precedence to the individual in history and rectifies misrepresentation of the same. It further attempts to investigate Titu Mir as a reconstruction of peasant history from the prism of subaltern in history – that is his/her consciousness is not created/ imported by the will of the colonial or native elite but is an integral part of him/her and he/she is the author of it. Further, the chapter has highlighted the objective of the author to arrest the propagandist misrepresentation of Titu Mir, and how the writer has not only apprehended but also debunked the falsities to create a subaltern history. In highlighting these aspects of the novel, the chapter hence has aimed to attack the polemical representation of a peasant through the study of Titu Mir as a peasant rebel. In view of this argument, the chapter examines four aspects in the historical rendering of Titu Mir, beginning first with the history of his consciousness – how he and his community were exploited by the elitist colonials and the native elites, and how an awareness of these untold sufferings became a primary trigger to revolt; secondly how the innumerable and periodic jacqueries against the dominion were a significant prompt to India’s freedom struggle; thirdly if these peasant revolts were a formidable subversion of dictatorial systems, then is it not pertinent to create a subaltern history of the peasants struggles which can stand as autonomous, uncontaminated and duly acknowledged representation of peasants; lastly and most importantly what role Orality as in rumours, spoken conversation, etc had to play in furthering the organic struggle of the peasant. These significant aspects of peasant as a rebel have been highlighted in the chapter,
and the attempt has been to dissect each with respect to Mahasweta Devi’s work *Titu Mir* (2002).

Chapter III addresses the concern of Devi’s rewriting of past to empower the tribals and to sensitize the mainstream society by juxtaposing two novels namely *Book of Hunters* and *Mother of 1084*. To proceed in this direction, the novels taken in the chapter have been viewed to be a bona fide portrayal of the contentious relationship between the elite and subaltern and how this discordant relationship has various manifestations and ramifications which impact the representation or misrepresentation of the subaltern in the mainstream. The novel titled *Book of Hunters* vehemently questions the misrepresentation of the tribal, the need of tribal history and further lays emphasis on Orality as an aid in empowering the subaltern. In doing so, the writer emerges as a strong voice who draws a reconciliatory model by resolving the discordant rivalry between the elite and the subaltern. On the whole, the chapter examines this novel to analyse the historical technique of Mahasweta Devi wherein she emphasis on depicting a realistic representation, while employing Orality and hence moulds her literature to serve a social purpose. Further, the chapter highlights Devi’s attempt to write a subaltern history which rectifies the slanderous obstructions and fabrications of elitist history. It has been shown how in *Book of Hunters*, Devi has documented the tribal folklores and myths to rewrite the official records in an authentic light.

In the similar vein, the Chapter III addresses the significance of memory as a part of Orality, and how subaltern memory serves to corroborate history and thereby renders a subaltern account of the past. In the novel, it is through the figure of Sujata, the significance of subaltern memory as an integral part of subaltern history is established. Sujata’s family on hearing their son was involved in the insurgency of the Naxalites, enforces every attempt to erase altogether the memory of their son. Under the weight of this strategic erasure of subaltern memory and imposition of a false hisory which is contrary to the turn of real events, the role of subaltern memory as a distinct aspect of Orality has been ascertained. Further, Mahasweta Devi has revisited the official records of tribal insurgency and its repercussions on the society at large - the tribal rebellion, the youth, the political parties, the police, the bourgeois society and other factors which find a holistic depiction in Mahasweta Devi’s *Mother of 1084*. Hence, in juxtaposing these two novels, the chapter establishes the
indispensable role of Orality which serves not only as the voice of the subaltern but also apprehends the official fabrications of history.

The argument in Chapter IV progresses towards highlighting Mahasweta Devi as a formidable campaigner in attacking the dogmatism of caste which continues to pluralize the country since pre-colonial era. In the novels taken, the author has asserted that caste-system has been an invariable source of discrimination against the tribals and the low castes because this system has been accorded a divine justification to validate itself. Mahasweta Devi in the novel *Glory of Sree Sree Ganesh*, highlights this grim reality by portraying a North Indian village as a microcosm of rural villages of India. The novel serves as an exposition on the societies beset by caste system and feudalism and shows how Mahasweta Devi has through her realistic depiction attacked such oppressive systems and its purveyors of discrimination. Furthermore, it has been highlighted how the subalterns protest against the discriminatory exigencies of caste system through the medium of songs, and how this usage presents an indispensable service of Orality in articulating one’s identity and subaltern consciousness. It is in these oral songs, that the subaltern expresses his/her exploitation at the hands of the elite and hence gives a voice to his consciousness. Can then it be said that these records if captured in an authentic light serve as a source of subaltern history? Can it also be claimed if these songs are prohibited then that invariably silences the subaltern? The work has championed the voice of the enslaved and marginalized low castes-the Lachhimas, the Rukmanis, the Mohors and the Haroas and has attacked the subversive practices of the elite lords-the Medinis and Ganeshas. Mahasweta as examined in the chapter has dealt a manifold attack on the elites in order to expose the corrupt practices which not only relegate the subaltern in life but also in print. It is in the voice – songs of protest- of these low class men and woman, that Devi’s indictment of the elite has been examined as paramount.

If caste system has been attacked by Mahasweta Devi in *Glory of Sree Sree Ganesh*, the author has in the similar utmost concern attacked the ignominious weeds of caste in the novel *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*. The peasants, the adivasis, and low castes of India embody a travesty which Mahasweta Devi has vehemently exposed, and actively attempted to rectify. The milieu of the novel sketched around the village of Chotti is a symbol of ‘tribal aspiration’ in the face of overwhelming odds of prejudice and disenfranchisement. The novel
has been established as a testimony to subaltern history in that it; firstly exposes the objectionable fabrications and gaping holes in the official history which has ignored the tribal; secondly the novel serves to rewrite history by manifesting a subaltern history of tribal life and revolt; thirdly it attacks caste system as the grounds behind the discrimination of the subaltern in India; and finally the novel highlights Devi’s attempt to capture the Orality of the tribals vis-à-vis folklore, legends and songs to weave a subaltern history that sensitizes the masses and apprehends the corrupt elite. Furthermore, the chapter has also investigated how Mahasweta has exposed the colonial as well postcolonial history of India to state how the subaltern masses were dehumanized by the colonizers in the colonial India and were treated with the same conduct by the native elites of colonial and post-colonial India. To add more, the chapter has also highlighted the role of Orality as a means of protest and as a means of rectifying official narratives. Hence, in juxtaposing the two novels, the attempt has been to recognize and protest the inhuman manners of oppression dealt to the tribal and other subalternized masses. Similarly, the significant role of Orality is also highlighted which serves as a voice of the masses.

Chapter V highlights Mahasweta Devi’s attempt to put forth a corrigendum on the official narration of history in the novels Bedanabala. Her Life. Her Times and Armenium Champa Tree. The chapter highlights oral lore as a means of resurrecting the buried history of the marginalized and how it also serves as a means of empowerment. In the former novel, the wretched state of the victimized women as prostitutes is exposed with stress on their continuous misrepresentation by the mainstream society. It has also been underscored how they are cast out by the society and deprived of any agency to speak and thus articulate their oppression. Besides this, the novel also highlights the significance of Orality wherein the protagonist through her subaltern memory highlights the subalternity of the prostitutes. The oral narrative as evidenced in the novel shows how Orality serves as an authentication and augmentation of history and hence why it should be deemed as a legitimate source of history. Further, in recovering Orality, it is the voice of the subaltern which is being retrieved. Orality hence makes the subaltern an architect of his history and gives him/her the power to speak his story. In this mode of history telling, the subaltern as evidenced in the novel, hence is an active participant in speaking his history, where in he/she can rectify official records, reclaim his past and narrate a subaltern record.
The second novel, projects Devi as a staunch campaigner of Orality in her assertion that history progresses due to rumours. In this novel, a tribal boy is hunted by the society for not abiding to its elitist diktats. Mahasweta Devi in this regard wishes to sensitise the mainstream as to why the masses are not heeding these stories wherein tribals are consistently subjected to exploitation. Further, it has been attested that *The Armeniun Champa Tree* is a proof of the endangered position of Orality and how if it is tapped into, the discrimination faced by the subalterns can be exposed and resolved. Oral tradition is not only a minstrel collection of pastoral poems etc but entails the ancestral lineage/genealogy of the tribals till today. It is a history which is rendered into a legend, an anecdote, a lullaby or a song instead of being written into a script. Consequently, the objective in investigating these two novels has been to break the trivialization of Orality because of which the voice of the subaltern is deemed inconsequential and irrelevant. Furthermore, the target has been to expose the gaping errors of official history and to rewrite it ensuring inclusion of the subalterns.

The thesis in the light of the polemical relationship between the elite and the subaltern, has established Mahasweta Devi as a writer, historian, and a formidable voice who has painstakingly dissected the elite/subaltern binarism with respect to the myriad ‘forces and discourses’ that interplay in the selected novels of the author taken in the present study. *(Postcolonialism/Colonialism 200)*. The chapter has accordingly addressed these multitudinous facets of the author and explored the Indian past as an anthology of subaltern histories. The endevour has been to include the “invisible history in the official history of the nation” as the author asserted in the Inaugural speech at the Frankfurt Book fair:

Since the 1980s, I have been vocal about the daily injustice and exploitation faced by the most marginalised and dispossessed of our people: tribals, the landless rural poor who then turn into itinerant labour or pavement dwellers in cities. I have sought to bring the harsh reality of this ignored segment of India’s population to the notice of the nation, I have sought to include their forgotten and invisible history in the official history of the nation. I have said over and over, our Independence was false; there has been no
Independence for these dispossessed peoples, still deprived of their most basic rights.

(“A Writer’s Testament of Faith” April 9, 2010)

The target of the research hence has been to examine the parameters of Subaltern Historiography in the selected novels of Mahasweta Devi. The aim has been to analyze how the author revisits the official narratives, papers and historical documents in her works as: *Queen Of Jhansi* (2000), *Titu Mir* (2000), *Book of Hunters* (2002), *Mother of 1084* (1997), *The Glory of Sree Sree Ganesh* (2003), *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2002), *Bedanabala. Her Life. Her Times* (2005) and *The Armenian Champa Tree* (1998). Subsequently other objectives have been: to examine Subaltern History as envisaging an inclusive model of historiography; to rectify the misrepresentation of the subaltern communities and thereby apprehend the official history of India; to investigate the position of Mahasweta Devi as a subaltern historian; to emphasize on the importance of Orality and distinguish its types; to focus on the dichotomous relationship between the elite and subaltern; and to analyze the theoretical grounds of Subaltern Studies in the selected fictional works of Mahasweta Devi.

Hence, the research has been undertaken to analyze the novels from the perspective of an authentic history and how an inclusive model of history serves as a voice for the marginalized communities of India. Consequently, the research also has addressed the writer’s emphasis on an encompassing history and how sources from written to oral should be meticulously scrutinized to serve as records of history.

At this point, it may be concluded that the research has investigated the polemics of re-writing history, while exposing the discriminatory practices which distort history and has consequently highlighted the subaltern as a producer of his/her own history. The thesis hence establishes the need to: firstly highlight the discriminatory practices of caste; secondly reinforce the need to preserve oral lore; thirdly employ orality to corroborate official history and hence create subaltern history; and finally to examine Mahasweta Devi as a subaltern historian. Accordingly, caste as a system of social hierarchy hence needs to be subverted due to which the natives are ostracized and excluded from official history.
An analysis of the selected novels of Mahasweta Devi also highlights the contemporary relevance of the author as a writer and a social activist. The author is known and acknowledged by the significant epithets like “Mother of Shabars”, “Adivasi Champion” and many other sobriquets due to her tireless work for the rehabilitation of aboriginals in the contemporary society. It has been her raison d’être” to seek justice for the subaltern, from colonial to postcolonial era. The renowned historian and critic, G.N. Devy pays glowing tribute to Mahasweta Devi while highlighting the nuances of Mahasweta Devi’s belief system, her literary corpus, and the issues which drive her to arrest the elite and empower the subaltern when he writes:

Here was a no-pretence, no-rhetoric, no-nonsense person, whose compassion and clarity were an invitation for action. Perhaps Mahatma Gandhi alone, among great Indians, spoke like her. ...she spared no one, in particular snobs, ministers, insincere journalists and literary aspirants.

(“The adivasi Mahasweta” 2004)

Mahasweta Devi’s modest as well as indomitable approach transcends the superficialities of hypocrisies, favouritism, and political machinations that Devi has endeavoured to empower the subaltern. Devi through her works has indicted the makers of official history, rectified and rewritten these rigid and malicious narratives, and rescued the oral sources from the catacombs of elitist powers in order to listen to the subaltern, write his story and ensure the mainstream knows who is a subaltern. She has ruthlessly attacked caste system, which is even today responsible for the torture, deaths and genocide of suppressed subalterns all over India, and has hence exposed all the dirty schemes of discrimination be it caste or racism. The subaltern has been shunned as an outcast, an untouchable, a pariah, and a criminal and Devi realizing the emergency of these contemporary social issues has moulded her activist writings to attack the present, expose the past and cure the future. While noting Devi’s indomitable spirit and her ingenuous as well as heartfelt empathy for the subaltern, G.N. Devy aptly writes:
Mahasweta brought to those poor and harassed people a boundless compassion, which they instantly understood though could they neither speak her language nor she theirs. She has a strange ability to communicate with the silenced, her best speech reserved for those to whom no one has spoken.

(“The adivasi Mahasweta” 2004)

The thesis establishes Mahasweta Devi as a writer, reformer and a voice of the silenced communities who have been relegated to the margins due to the atrocities committed by totalitarian upper-caste landlords, government officials and other structures of absolute powe. Devi has, consequently, sensitised the contemporary society of the errors of the past and how it should reform itself for better tomorrow. Devi’s fierce reply to a question posed to her in a 1998 interview, where she was asked, ”What would you like to do for the rest of your life?” to which she responded as, “Fight for the tribals, downtrodden, underprivileged and write creatively if and when I find the time” serves as a departure point and an evidence of Devi’s literary work and contemporary relevance (“Mahasweta Devi” 2016). The thesis in the light of this exploration has established the determined strain of Mahasweta Devi’s writing and social activism. It has further established the relevance of Mahasweta Devi’s writings in the contemporary era, which despite the strides of modernity is still an era of Dark ages for the subaltern. From caste to fabricated histories, from corruption of power to oppression of the subaltern, the author has vigorously challenged the provincial and superficial workings of modern-day democracies with respect to the subaltern.

References

Primary Texts


Secondary Texts


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