“Devi writes and works for the subaltern – The Denotified and Nomadic tribes – for whom independence has not yet come”

John Charles Hawley

CHAPTER III
REVISITING SUBALTERN HISTORY VIS-A-VIS MYTHS, FOLKLORES AND MEMORY IN

In writing the novels *Book of Hunters* (2002), and *Mother of 1084* (1997) Mahasweta Devi has claimed to have written a work of fiction which nonetheless serves as a microcosmic reflection of tribal life, its exploitation and the repercussions of the same in the history of India. In both novels, the attempt of the chapter is to highlight the significance of Orality and recover it as an indispensable tool of writing subaltern history. In the novel, *Book of Hunters* the author has endeavoured to challenge the romanticising of the tribal, which has led to numerous strands of fragmented, inorganic and to put it bluntly scandalous representations of the tribal in Indian history. In tracing the germ of this blatant loophole of history, Devi through this novel has not only rewritten tribal history from the vantage of the tribal but also presented her work as a proof of colonial and postcolonial stratagem of criminalising the indigenous. Whereas, in the novel *Mother of 1084*, the chapter examines Mahasweta Devi’s *Mother of 1084* as a testimony of subaltern memory or Orality in that it is a subversive tool of rectification which firstly revisits the contradictory accounts of past as produced in the official history; secondly acts as a corroborating and counter-hegemonic evidence to apprehend and correct the falsification of history; and thirdly inaugurates the making of subaltern account thereby empowering the subaltern to articulate its identity.

In the preface to the novel, *Book of Hunters*, Mahasweta Devi has defined her modus operandi in writing the work as firstly appropriating Mukundaram’s poem as a source; secondly incorporating her own knowledge regarding the subject; and thirdly what her life’s quest has been vis-a-vis tribal history and its reclamation (*Book* viii). One can discern her revisionist methodology, to ascertain her work as an important chapter in Indian history. In discussing her historic technique, she lays emphasis on Mukundaram’s book titled *Abhayamangal* which stands as a repository of “direct experience and acquired knowledge” implying that the book had been a work of Mukundaram’s personal interaction with the tribals namely the hunter tribes (the Shabars) and what Mukundaram had gathered by secondary and tertiary sources (*Book* viii). The second issue in Devi’s historical technique has been incorporation of her personal ventures into the lives of the tribals namely – Santhals, Mundas, Oraons and then Shabars tribes especially the Shabars of Medinipur in West Bengal and the Kheria Shabars of Purulia. In this technique, her objective has been to as she writes:
The materials for knowing the history of any adivasi community are their traditions of oral lore, songs, and folk tales which have been handed down by memory and preserved. (Besides the Lodhas) have helped out by writing about themselves in *Bortika* (A literary quarterly, a journal for the subalterns where contributors are mainly tribals and marginalised groups) which served as a significant source of her knowledge regarding the hunting tribes as she claims).

*(Book viii)*

Orality as claimed by the author hence has been a powerful source aiding her in the retrieval of subaltern history. It is pertinent to note the significance of *Bortika* which as stated above is a platform where the subaltern can speak without the agency of a historian etc. and the issues expressed in the journal range from “tribal groups of West Bengal, brick kiln workers, the plight of workers in factories that have closed own, witch-killing, bonded and contract labour etc.”*(Book ix).* The driving cause behind Devi’s meticulous survey of these sources has been to effectively expose and effectively indict the damaging misrepresentation of the tribals as “criminals”. This aspect of tribals’ life which has continued to haunt, mar and serve as a reason of their discrimination even today has provoked Devi to make an attempt in apprehending this calumny of colonial era that continues to infect the present. She states:

I do not know why the British rulers declared them to be ‘criminal’ in 1871. That stigma is still operative among people of other groups who live in Medinipur ...In present-day India, the tribes once known as ‘criminal’ are the ones in greatest distress, whether they are the Sansis of Punjab and Delhi, the Parhawaiyas of Bihar, or the Lodha Shabars and Kheria Shabars of West Bengal...Social anthropologist could have helped (the tribes in regaining its self-respect) but Chuni Kotal is proof that they have failed...

*(Book ix-x)*

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In exposing the ignoble reality of this libel Devi has cited the case of Chuni Kotal. Chuni Kotal belonged to one of the denotified tribe of India which is a postcolonial replacement of the pejorative ‘criminal’. Kotal owing to her ethnicity of being an aboriginal was subjected to pernicious attacks of discrimination owing to the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act of the country that assigned Lodhas, the tribe she belonged to, as criminal. The woman was accosted with racial slurs, abuse at work and was disgraced for being a criminal class. In the wake of this dehumanization, the Kotal committed suicide. Such pathetic tales of calumnious histories reinforce the need of tribal history that has been the objective of the author. As these misrepresentations act as a vicious cycle endlessly stereotyping the tribals as criminals, it is to attack this continuity of the erstwhile British era’s violent misrepresentation, that Devi enforces the need for an authentic tribal history. Devi also proposes to effectively right this wrong, by listening to the wide repository of subaltern records - oral lore which her work is a testament to, and how oral lore can arrest the shocking falsities while reclaiming a true subaltern history. Devi in this regard vehemently exclaims:

It is with regard to these tribes and their rehabilitation in history that it is necessary to seek out the oral lore which once existed and is no longer available. In the process of suffering atrocious cruelties and becoming uprooted, they have lost their oral traditions. (Hence) In the novel I undertook for the first time to seek out the tribal identity of the Shabars...every detail will certainly be corroborated by the Shabars themselves...they are the ones who will provide corrections...Such is my goal (to highlight) the profound ignorance of mainstream people about the adivasi society- these are all truth...

(Book x-xi)

In writing a subaltern history, hence, it is a cardinal focus of Devi to employ the oral sources and also listen to the subaltern speak that is the Lodha tribes and also yield them the authority to correct and verify the facts incorporated in the novel if found erroneous. In
carefully considering these roles, her work hence serves as an intervention wherein the subaltern is allowed to speak, is heard and also empowered to rectify what is not his history. The objective of Devi is to sensitise the masses about the tribals as it is due to the dismal unawareness of the masses, the horrifying conditions the tribals are put through remain undisclosed and hence unchecked to put a stop. In incorporating a Mukundaram’s work, also the oral sources and other modes of knowledge extraction and scrutiny, *Book of Hunters* hence stands as a vindication of Devi’s original goal – to rehabilitate history of the tribals and seek out a tribal history on the lines of a subaltern history. That is:

...to contribute to the reconstruction of Shabar tribal history and identity, and to inform and instruct Indian society. (In this work) legends and history, fact and fiction, narration and dialogue coalesce into a dramatic whole.

*(Book xii)*

Further, in examining the epistemological advantages of Orality as an instrument of rectifying history, and thereby empowering the subaltern identity by including the subaltern, many debates shed light on its pros and cons and often negate it by emphasising on its demerits as being the only face of Orality. In the light of such tenuous perusals of Orality, employing Orality in narrating a historical chapter or historical fiction can be deemed as a controversial project; after all if Orality is hugely disparaged as a source of authentic record, using it can either discount the work as paltry or persuade the critics or the masses to take no note of it at all. In the wake of such polemical stances on Orality, Devi’s role as harbouring and reinforcing its worth, its significance and preservation comes across as a powerful project to resurrect Orality from the shadows of contempt and disregard. To add more, in re-enforcing the objective of the novel taken in the chapter, and its impact on rehabilitating history, the role of Orality is further cemented as not something to be brushed aside as inconsequential. It was owing to Orality, Devi has been able to correct the damaging misrepresentation of the tribes by narrating their tale which is entirely a refutation and an attack on the vicious import of colonial official history and its blind appropriation by native elites. Critics in this regard have attested as to how Orality hence serves to expose these
fatalities of incorrect histories, and thereby launch an inclusive model of history – subaltern history:

(Orality is) equally relevant in arena of history in general and the Indian history in particular. The oral tradition of the history must be factored in historical research, and its use in the ancient Indian history and that of the world in general would provide new direction and insight. Moreover (and most importantly), it would unravel many mysteries and conspiracies that have been doing rounds since the long time.

(The Greatest Farce of History 78)

Orality hence as analysed above rectifies the nonconformity of history with truth, and ensures a subaltern account of the marginalised is represented to rid the records of fatal stigmas, libels and slanders. In doing so, Orality empowers the subaltern - in listening to the subaltern, listening to his own story on his own words and in his own oral tradition. As Muthukumaraswamy states:

There is no doubt that oral discourse gives a voice to the marginalised, subaltern identities even within a dominant, written discourse...It does not simply provide valuable information for constructing history of such community, but also helps to provide crucial space for countering the onslaught of a dominant discourse.

(Folklore as Discourse 93)

In saying so, he further claims that Orality should not be considered as a monopoly on evidences or sources for writing history, as the reasoning which critics wish to table is that Orality does not supersede written materials, and neither does the latter. It is in conjunction both of them work to substantiate and corroborate each other and result in a subaltern record.
That is, “...oral and written discourses are not mutually exclusive categories, rather, they should be treated as complementary categories” (Folklore 93). It is because of these observations, that Orality is gaining recognition to know the past in its entirety than relying on one-sided train of evidences and placing the burden of true history on its head.

In investigating the issues as stated above, it can be seen that in charting a historical truth while narrating a fictional tale, Mahasweta Devi’s work Book of Hunters is an exemplary instance. In surveying the past and connecting it with the present, Devi has in the novel narrated a history of difference between the elite and the subaltern (tribal). This difference that was used as a justification for discrimination has been examined in the novel. The novel traces the roots of this discrimination, in the castiest psyche of the elite; it traces it as reflected in the myths of the tribals; and it also explores it in the system of feudalism which has perpetrated, solidified and used it as an instrument. In doing so the novel stands as a microcosm of India’s past and present with respect to the relationship between the elitist communities and the tribal. As Devi has employed the oral sources, by incorporating what the Lodhars have to say about their own past, the novel hence serves as an evidence to expose discrimination, and challenge it, while ensuring the history of the tribal is not any further scandalized due to elitist practices of prejudice, bigotry and power abuse. The chapter attempts to analyze these intricate issues by exploring the various facets of this elite-subaltern relationship as narrated in the novel.

Mahasweta Devi’s novel hence as discussed above is a historical narrative of the society. Further it also highlights how discrimination was an embedded reality of the society. The work Book of Hunters is also a solemn attack on the stark racial difference between the elite and the subaltern. Mahasweta has depicted the racial parochialism that existed in the ethos of the society and which has continued to recur even today. She has represented the lives of Brahman Mukundaram and his wife as symbolic of elite, and the young Shabars-Phuli and Kalya as symbolic of a subaltern to underscore the race hierarchies that polarize the society into high and low and infest the society with complicacies of alarming overtones. The objective being that the Shabars may have been criminalized by the colonial regime but the society was also in derision of the aboriginals, so much so that contemporary times in regards to this discrimination have not found any resolution.
In the novel taken, Mahasweta Devi has exposed this racial bigotry which has fostered a chasm between the elite and the subaltern. She highlights this chauvinistic discrimination through the eyes of the protagonist Mukunda. Mukunda has been portrayed as elite who endeavours to bridge the gap between the elite and subaltern. When he becomes aware of the exploitation faced by the tribes, he is determined to document their history. In Mukunda’s search for an authentic history, one can discern author’s own revisiting into the chapters of tribal history. Mukunda belongs to the elitist class in the hierarchical set up established in the rural society. Mahasweta has unfolded the voice in his conscience that persuades him to write a piece of historical importance. What that piece is to be, reveals itself when Mukunda comes in contact with the discriminated section of the society namely the hunting tribes. Mukunda is represented as an ideal elite who is not repulsed by the low castes and sees a friend in Ganesh, who belonged to the Bagdi caste which is deemed as the lowest in the social stratification of Indian society. In seeing the exploitation faced by the likes of Ganesh, and how he himself is forced to leave his own hometown due to anarchic exploitation of the feudal lords, Mukunda develops a consciousness – that is realization of the sufferings and torture borne by the low castes around him. It is in this forced exodus, Mukunda faces the cruel reality of his society, “he didn’t know anything about the cycles of rule, but he knew one thing that difficult and evil times have driven him from Daminya( his native town) to Ararha…ruler’s oppression…land full of sinners…wrack and ruin came into the people’s lives (Book 13-21). It is also when he arrives in the new land Ararha, that his family interacts with the tribe of hunters. And during one of these encounters, Mukunda is mobilized to write and record the endangered existence of the aboriginals.

Mahasweta Devi also presents another facet to his personality to investigate how deeply the weeds of discrimination have entrenched themselves, that even sensitized elite can fall to its trap. Devi notes how, despite Mukunda’s attempts to know and empathise with the hunter tribes, he still is intolerant of the ways of the Shabars whom he considers as illiterate when compared to his depth of erudition. He is startled to know that the Shabars do not, “treat the king as their king, and they don’t bow to greet a Brahman…their ways and rules are different’ (Book 56). In narrating how Mukunda at times turns into the tyranny he wishes to oppose, Devi highlights one episode wherein Mukunda is not able to dissuade his prejudice to interfere with his rationality. For instance, when he learns of Tejota, who being a tribal is still
well-versed in medicinal aptitude without any prior learning, Mukunda becomes rapt in his sanctimonious dismissal of it:

Mukunda did not believe that a forest-dwelling Shabar could know much about anything. In his arrogance, stemming from the prolonged study of numerous Sanskrit texts, he believed that knowledge only came from the formal cultivation of learning. He was not conscious that he possessed this arrogance.

(Book 55)

Despite his humanitarian mien and tolerance of character, Mukunda finds himself acting prejudiced at seeing an apparently naïve tribal can make knowledgeable strides akin an erudite. And the fact that he is not conscious of this presumptuous hate, tells of the elite-subaltern conflict that can be addressed only by conscious sensitization of the same issue. To this note, Mukunda continues to, despite the temptations to manifest discrimination, makes a progressive attempt to ‘go and find out about them’ without letting any historical hate, cultural racism or societal stereotype and prejudice hampering his endeavour. In noting these two sides of the same coin, Mahasweta aims to peel the mask off of how discrimination is acutely ingrained in the society hence to rebel against it would require a conscious effort - to realize it can infect even the likes of elites like Mukunda.

Further, in the novel we find how the protagonist is forced to reckon the anarchic structures of feudalism, and caste-system that have driven the tribals to abandon their lands. It is owing to these personal confrontations with absolute power, that he finds the will and spirit to write. The objective behind his writing is to make sense of the society which is running toward a precipice, and to also document the tribals who as he finds are gravely misrepresented in the society. Hence, we can find tell-tale strains of Mahasweta Devi in the character, a both are “are interested to recover subaltern voices because (they) are invested in changing contemporary power relations” and in doing so they write. It should also be noted that such an activity of re-writing history from the subaltern point of view does not entail the entire writing of history as futile or mala fide. Rather, ‘the connections between us and the
subalterns we seek to recover exist also in the fact that past histories continue to inform the world we live in” (Postcolonialism/Colonialism 203). To this note of personal emotions interjecting with the public agenda of situating the subaltern, Mahasweta has portrayed how Mukunda wishes to write about the Shabars with an unbiased eye.

During the course of the novel, Mukunda begins to comprehend the delicate nature of writing the history of the tribals. He realizes how it should not corrupt their life by false concoctions and scandals, and must not infringe on their lives by criminalizing or exploiting them. It is pertinent to note how Ranajit Guha has emphasized on this cardinal rule of writing a historiography in the second volume of Subaltern Studies, when he says:

the subaltern is the maker of his own history and the architect of his destiny…the subaltern groups are to write that history and oppose elitism through the detailed intensity of their scrutiny of the past record no matter how great the difficulties posed by the recovery of information about the past.

(Reading 192)

In observing these precepts of subaltern history, one can draw three delineations; first, subaltern should be the maker of his history which should be deemed as evident; second, historians have to ensure to write their history as Mahasweta Devi has done by pursuing written as well as oral accounts to set the stage for the subaltern to speak; third this recovery of the past must be diligently pursued as any half-hearted and questionable methods of history writings also serves to further the devious scheme of discrimination. In further drawing attention to the dynamic transformation that is perceptible in the character of Mukunda, Mahasweta ensures that there is always hope of reconciliation. Mukunda, as depicted on the novel, begins to reconcile with Tejota and begins to respect the diversity in the cultures of his society. In not meddling with their private histories, Mukunda begins to situate the history of the subaltern, “No, no, I don’t; want to ask about family matters…I want to know about Megha Raja! And about Banachandi, the forest goddess…” (Book 67).
The savant Tejota also attempts to bridge the gap between the high castes and her tribal communities. She emphasizes on the need of interdependence between the elite and subaltern, “There are different shops, wares and castes! We don’t honour them, and we will not. But that was then when we dealt with no other castes. Now these are people of all kinds around us. They buy, we sell (Book 106-121). It is in this essence, the objective of Mahasweta comes forth that the class difference must surrender to mutual accord. In the stream of her novel, progressive attempts are made by Tejota and Mukunda in the wake of their own people’s aversion to this notion. It is not only that discord is emanating from the elitist sections but that the subalternized communities also refuse to reconcile with the elite and are determined to continue the ancient hate into the present. Hence, both parties are in constant aversion to each other, and it is upto Mukunda and Tejota to break the shackles of prejudices and settle the warring parties into an accord. Kayla, for instance, who is the son of Tejota is irrevocably derisive of the notion to trust a Brahman. He thrashes out at his mother, his wife when they even mention the Brahmans, “I am a Shabar. I do not tread on the shadow of a Brahman” (Book 111). Mukunda is also bewildered at these proclamations, so much so his curiosity about the hunting tribes oscillates between a scathing judgment and a perplexed cringe. He is at a loss to accept the diversity of other cultures, and questions them for being ‘other’:

What do they eat? How do they look so healthy? What do they wear? How do they manage to walk off with their heads held high like royalty? People are so different in other communities. There are people selling liquor in the market, and there are prostitutes too. How does Shabar life remain so innocent?

(Book 119)

In one of the climactic dialogues between Mukunda and Kalya Shabar, Mahasweta has highlighted the sunken roots of hate that vitiate the chance of any cordial relationship between the elite class and the subalterned tribes. Kalya feels threatened by Mukunda’s curiosity about his tribe owing to a historical animosity that has worsened over the years. He exclaims over his heritage with an élan to fortify his culture as superior and not inferior as was the usual understanding of the elites, “The goddess Abhayachandi has given you puja for work, books, a
granary, and a cowshed, while she gave us the jungle. We’re Shabars, you hear, children of the jungle... Now, Thakur! Go and read your manuscripts! ” (Book 52-53).

Mahasweta has in the backdrop of this class tension, narrated a mythopoeic version of the race conflict between the elite and subaltern. It is in this oral lore that Mahasweta tries to identify the causes behind the rigid hate that exists between the elite and subaltern. The lore narrates that a Brahman stole a goddess’s statue and a Shabar trusted him which had led to this theft. Because of this, the contention between the Brahman and Shabar continues to exist:

A great sin...the Shabars have sinned as well-why did they trust a Brahman?...they will suffer hardship if they ever place trust in anyone other the children of the forest…they will not give respect to the Brahman or touch their feet in reverent greeting.

(Book 69)

The lore suggests that the dispute between the elite and subaltern runs deep and needs a revisionist thinking to assuage the parties into an amicable understanding. The Brahmans think of the Shabars as, “polluted by birth and race…a wild race’ (Book 70-76) and the Shabars think of Brahman as untrustworthy. In Mukunda’s learning of this myth of Kapila one begins to comprehend the levels of racial mentality that is symbolic in the same myth. As discussed above, the myth dictates the injunctions of racial hierarchy that has kept the aversion between the elite and subaltern rigid and inscrutable. In recording these intricate facts of histories, through the mode of Orality, Mahasweta discerns the inherent binary opposition between elite and subaltern. In her novel, it is noticeable that one cannot just stamp this elite-subaltern opposition on any text because, “these binarisms of colonizer-colonized, western-non-western, domination-resistance help initiate the analysis of power but also constrain the study of the ways in which power is engaged, contested, deflected and appropriated” (Reading 216). Binarism as highlighted in the novel has its own myriad causes, repercussions and codifications and cannot be singularly addressed as elite-subaltern. Mahasweta hence has eloquently taken into consideration the historical, the social and
economical factors that contributed into the making of this opposition instead of ‘mechanistically’ rendering the social strata of the novel into the categories of elite and subaltern (Reading 224). Hence, by highlighting the myth and religiosity of the tribals, Mahasweta has in fact suggested:

(Reading 232)

In this discussion it is evident that myth of Kapli served as recourse for the tribals to voice their ‘dissatisfaction’ and protest against the exploitation of the elites. There have been many instances in which myth and cosmologies has been employed by the tribals to give justification to their cause which otherwise would have been silenced. The Chipko movement, for instance, used the verses of Gita to stamp felling of trees as sacrilegious (Reading 231). In the creation myth of Rathwas of Chhta Udepur, the landlord was canonized by the tribals as ‘Valyo Vaniyo’ meaning ‘come-back’ to represent ‘the unrelenting manner in which he pursued his debtors’ (Subaltern Studies 21). Consequently it stands to show that only by a holistic narration of history which encompasses the social, political and economic conditions of the society can a piece of work serve as a bona fide historiography or subaltern history.

The Shabars, in the novel are represented as are true forest dwellers, and how they wish to be left alone in their woods. But in the modern day encroachment of towns and cities into the jungles, their lives are threatened. This in turn is another reason for the Shabars to deride the changing times and also maintain their discrimination for the elites who are the harbingers of this change; further the lité are also imposing this change upon them without their consent. Mahasweta having personally observed and listened to the grievances of the tribals hence
unequivocally demands that the authorities leave the tribals and their lands alone. This entreaty is explicit in her words:

There was no stopping the times from changing! A Shabar understood that the more others encroached, the more his existence would be threatened…the inescapable times! the forests keep receding and the cities keep coming forward…There must be a place where there existed no city, no market, no king or any other caste or tribe where there were only the forest, water and hills.

(Book 122-148)

This same zeal is evident in Mukunda as well, who in the tussle of his times, witnesses the slow extinction of the Shabars. He sees the corrupt practices of the day and of his own castes. He asks for forgiveness believing it to be his people’s culpability. Mukunda knows he is only a glimmer in the colossal game plan of the world that is after the tribals. He realizes that despite his sincere empathy for these hunting tribes, he does not know the Shabars and is only a ‘spectator’ (Book 152). Mukunda at the end of the novel finds the his spirit to write especially realizing the untoward death of Kalya and his wife Phulli. This death shocks him to consider it as the death of an entire tribe - Who will know them? Who will once they are exterminated in the name of ethnic cleansing? How to stop this from happening? It is this episode which grips his spirits to write and thereby expose the tragedies of his times, so the future can at least aim to correct it. Hence, Mukunda is possessed with an indignant fervour to situate a subaltern history, so that, ‘Everyone will know about Kalketu and Phullora, and you all will live forever!’ (Book 153).

In the novel hence we find how in mapping this subaltern history of the tribals, Mahasweta has vehemently exposed the ploys of the elite in silencing an entire community from existence. It is an ideological and a socio-political stratagem to hijack history and replace it with a Eurocentric and bourgeois-centric dictation and adlib of history. Spivak calls this, ‘a process of epistemic violence’ and that ‘history is not simply a disinterested
production of facts… (but) an interested construction…with no reality outside its representation” (White Mythologies 200). It has been the impetus of Subaltern Studies to highlight the binarism between the elite and subaltern. In order to deconstruct this interaction, history has been investigated as being a monopoly of the official narratives. It is due to this rigid arrangement, that the histories of the ethnic communities are relegated to the margins, and if present in the mainstream, it is not a kernel of truth but a fabrication.

History which is proposed and published in the majority is a lopsided telling of one section of the community and either ignores the others sections or criminalizes them for ulterior motives. This stratagem which has been pervasive in the writing of history is investigated by Subaltern Studies and as observed in the novel, has been attacked most fervently by the author Mahasweta Devi. The contention is how history is intentionally narrativized with fabrications to suit a hidden agenda of colonial or postcolonial ramification. To check this surge of false histories and criminal representations, Mahasweta has, as examined in the chapter, attacked the shocking obliteration of knowledge about the tribals, and has developed an epistemology that is of and for the subalterns. It has been the belief of the author that a writer has an onus towards the rehabilitation of the society. It is by meticulously documenting the history of the indigenous communities, that the author has been able to do justice to her claim as a subaltern historian.

Continuation to this, it can be argued whether Devi’s work of fiction or literature in totality can serve to tell history. In observing the arguments discussed above, the novel certainly attacks the myopic vies that fiction is inferior to history and hence cannot tell truth or serve to apprise the world of the truth; further the novel also attacks the cemented belief that fiction is in direct contradiction to history, and is an opposing force; and that it is a harbinger of falsehoods. These blinkered views on the power of Fiction are significantly assailed by Devi’s work which allows for a rethinking of these rigid views and ensuring fiction is considered an ally to history and rather a maker of history, and also vice versa. That is, literature can tell history as the difference between history and literature has more to do with the degree of truth than negating one as a harbinger of falsehood. History is given more precedence and is considered legitimate while literature is seen as a world of imagination.
This has made it difficult to appreciate the truth which is narrated in the literary works and historians reject literature as being inauthentic. Gayatri Spivak has averred:

That history deals with real events and literature with imagined ones may now be seen as a difference in degree rather than in kind. The difference between cases of historical and literary events will always be there as a differential moment in terms of what is called “the effect of the real”. What is called history will always seem more real to us than what is called literature. Our very uses of the two separate words guarantee that. This difference can never be exhaustively systematized.

(In the Other Worlds 335)

It has been observed that literature is considered a purely imaginative output and its legitimacy as a source of truth is often debated. As Spivak states there is a difference between literature and history but that is based on a certain level or degree. On such accounts literature should not be negated rather can be investigated to procure a historical truth. For instance, in the works of Mahasweta Devi, the truth is a narrative which has been told by extensive scrutiny of facts and personal investigation of Orality that details the lives of the tribals and low caste communities. In the work it can be analyzed how literature of Devi has not only served to empower the existence of these indigenous and disenfranchised sections of the society but also rewrite history to rehabilitate it. Mahasweta Devi’s novels have a distinct note of historical truth in them, and hence cannot be negated as harbingers of falsehoods. Her writings are not just fictional narratives but the voice of a social activist who champions for the rights of the marginalized communities of India. In her works, Mahasweta has referenced official papers and local documents of history and oral history to narrativize the truth for the sensitization of the mainstream. She has time and again emphasized on her significant attention to history and how she feels history should be documented from authentic sources. Her works hence stand the test of the contentious debates of whether literature can tell a
historical tale, as has been examined in the chapter to substantiate Devi’s historical fiction as based on truth.

Subsequently, we can firmly state that it is due to her reliance and scrutiny of both written and oral sources that Devi’s historic fiction serves to represent the subaltern in an authentic light. Therefore, the chapter has aimed at: attacking the trivialization of Orality; highlighting Devi’s representation of the tribals from the perspective of subaltern history; examining the contention between literature and history; analyzing the relationship between the elite and subaltern from past to present and lastly aiming to sensitize the mainstream people about the history of the tribal.

In continuing her endeavours to highlight the significance of Orality, Mahasweta Devi in the novel *Mother of 1084*, has relied on oral accounts to rectify official records and create a subaltern history. In the novel, it has been examined that the aspect of Orality utilized has been subaltern memory which is exemplified through the figure of Sujata, who reminisces about her son, and hence exposes the underbelly of Naxalite movement and its distortion by the elite. In locating memory as an aspect of Orality or oral tradition, it has been claimed that memory is a vital element of oral cultures. That is:

> How important was memory? ...the first century (for instance) was a memory culture more than it was a manuscript culture. Collective memory was crucial in the predominantly oral cultures of the first century. (It has been observed) how memory predominated over writing and was crucial to every aspect of Orality.

*(The Interface of Orality and Writing 173)*

As stated above, memory finds a vital link to Orality which can be evidenced in the cultures which rely on Orality for instance. It can further be attested that in regards to oral tradition, memory plays a significant role. Orality or oral tradition continues to exist because
of the capacity of memory lest they are forgotten entirely or misremembered. Critics in highlighting this critical aspect of memory vis-a-vis Orality have stated:

Oral tradition is closely related to memory. In order to survive as oral tradition it must be memorable, and particular individuals must remember it. It also forms one part of the social or collective memory of the group to which the tradents (people who hand on the tradition) belong…

(Understanding the Oral Tradition 3)

In the light of this analysis, if history is manufactured to highlight, then Subaltern Memory as a tool of Orality subverts these superficial accounts, in order to furnish a subaltern history. The records, documents and other sources of official transmission and production of history can be tampered with, but by applying the corroborative tool of Subaltern Memory, analyzed in the chapter, a genuine account of history can be established. Memory does not destabilize the order in the society but exposes the concocted lies that are perpetrated so the authority can continue to perform its dominance in the absence of checks and balances. Subaltern Memory, hence, arrests the authority by: firstly exposing the truth of the past, hence ensuring the elite is indicted and deterred to repeat its follies; secondly in mapping individual memories which are a source of identity for the subaltern; and thirdly revisiting the collective memory propagated by the elite to extract the truth and establish it vis-a-vis individual memories.

In the text that has been considered in the chapter, the entire novel Mother of 1084 by Mahasweta Devi is a recollection of the memory of a past. The protagonist Sujata recollects the past of her son, and her endeavour to remember, as evidenced in the novel is being strategically denied and erased by the bourgeoisie family on a personal front and the authority on the public front. Sujata’s memory serves as an individual memory and being a tool of oral
tradition, it narrates to us the reality of Naxalite movement. In this movement, Brati was a victim of betrayal and to find out the truth of this betrayal, Sujata reinforces and resurrects her memory by tracing the accounts of Brati’s fellow activists and their kin who survived him. The novel as such is remembering of the memory, reinforcing of it and a proof that once the memory is strengthened, it also empowers the subaltern to oppose the totalitarian system which had intentionally obscured the reality of the past. In further analyzing the historic technique of Mahasweta Devi, as observed in the novel, the author employs “empirical research into oral history of the cultures and memories of tribal communities (which is deemed to be) the first of its kind in India” (*Women in Black* 118). In underscoring these analyses, the aim of the chapter can be founded as highlighting how:

Non-elite victims and witnesses frequently struggle to preserve and validate their own memories under the weight of state and elite impositions...active memory-work as a survival strategy in appalling circumstances...(can be called as) subaltern memories. (For instance) Partition remains a force in contemporary life–its memorialization continuing to act as a source of communal cohesion and differentiation, simultaneously empowering and disempowering.

(*Memory of Catastrophe* 13)

The key points to be noted in this assessment are the preservation of subaltern memories, attacking elite impositions, and how memory serves as a survival strategy. In regard to the elitist imposition on subaltern memory, Mahasweta Devi through the main protagonist Suajata and her powerful reminiscences has exposed the victimization of the Naxals, and the movement which erupted when these tribals retaliated in West Bengal. It is the aftermath of the revolt which Devi has attempted to recollect through the memory medium of Sujata. Mahasweta Devi has also reiterated that tribal insurgency as Naxalite revolt should not be seen as an isolated event. It is a continuity of the tribal insurgencies, yet it can be asked – why the mainstream forgets this aspect? Is it that it is not aware? Or the
history is not written to include such chapters? The answer is no one is listening to the subaltern – listening to the subaltern accounts through oral sources such memory etc. It is pertinent to note Mahasweta Devi’s emphasis on memory as a source of history-writing. She states:

Memory is so crucial, past is so crucial. Tell me, what is our present other than a continuation and product of the past. Similarly, our future is born out of our present. So, in order to understand our present and visualize our future we have to go back to our past with the help of memory.

(“The Reaction Has Been So Minimal” 23 April 2001)

In observing this statement by Devi, the significance of memory is justified especially in view of her work *Mother of 1084*. To add more, how memory connects the past with the present also attests to its significance. In hearing the oral accounts of the subaltern, if Devi has been able to render a subaltern history, then why such step does not highlight the significance of Orality? To expose this trivialization of oral sources especially memory, Devi’s novel has been examined to acknowledge the indispensability of Orality. The social relevance of Mahasweta Devi’s work does not only serve as a history chapter but also renders a substantial resolution of these polemical issues. In this regard it is pertinent to note Devi’s objective behind the novel:

In the Seventies, in the naxalite movement… I saw history in the making and decided that as a writer it would be my mission to document it… I did not consider the naxalite movement an isolated happening… in the Naxalite movement I saw only a further extension of the movement of the past, especially the Tbhaga, Kakdwip, and Telenga uprisings…

(*Hearing 'Subaltern' Voices* 80)
Hence, it can be discerned that Mahasweta Devi’s attempt has been to connect the past with the present and in doing so she has written history with proper attention to authentic documentation. In examining the novel, and in analyzing the character of Sujata, it has further been investigated how Sujata’s tracing of oral sources wherein she meets and listens to the victims of the revolt, has enabled her to create a subaltern record. Consequently the novel serves to confront the truth which has been erased by the elitist eclipse of the Indian past.

The novel being a poignant depiction of Naxalite movement records its effects in the urban areas of West Bengal. Naxalbari movement in the novel has been exposed by the epithet ‘Decade of Liberation’. The cause in itself was for justice but it was severely distorted due to partisan politics and power abuse. Hence, the youth who volunteered to support the cause could not realize they were being abused by the powers for ulterior motives. They did not know the history of the tribals and so were not aware of the true colours of the cause. If the youth had known the legitimate history, they would have recognized who was the faithful adherent to the cause and who was not. Brati for instance was disillusioned with his father’s blatant promiscuity, his mother’s servility in the face of it, his society’s insulting and pretensions lifestyles, and so he sought a remedy in this movement against his own problems. He like the other young men and women was fighting his own marginalization in the guise of Naxal insurgency. The youth wanted to purge the evils of the society without knowing the truth about the history as to who was to be purged and who to be upheld. Hence, lives were lost, martyrs turned into criminals, defiled, shamed and families were held accountable and were kept bereft of jobs and proper education. The dishonor and stigma of the false history passed to the living and got cemented over and over again, “the weird design of an absurd play unfolding relentlessly” such is how Mahasweta voices her satire at the bizarre turn of events after the collapse of the revolt (Mother of 1084). All these factors Mahasweta Devi has recounted through the oral retelling of history by Sujata;

That was how they (youth) died by trusting too many people. Brati and his fellow workers never realized that those they trusted could be tempted with offers, jobs for some, security for others, a happy life still for others…there were many who had
joined them with the aim of betraying them. They had not realized that the system against which they fought had the capacity to contaminate even the child in the womb.

(Mother of 1084 40)

In mapping the reverberation of this situation, Devi has incorporated the collective memory of the society and has made it stand the test of individual memory. It should be noted that collective memory is the official version of truth which is deprived of authenticity and is blinkered through and through whereas, individual history is a personal account of the past which is borne by the victim or the subaltern. In the novel the aspect of collective memory has been depicted by the elitist authority whereas the subaltern or individual memory has been reflected in the character of Sujata and the victims of the Naxalite revolt. The objective being, that subaltern memory or oral accounts can subvert the power abuse of the elite and engender a subaltern history without any interference of the elite. In examining the novel from his perspective, it has been observed that Devi has attempted to subvert the elitist authority and expose it to render a subaltern record. Further, it has been analyzed how the author has investigated the relation of subaltern memories with power: can it subvert authority? In the novel it has been examined how:

The question of memory’s relation to power lurks within the battle between official and subaltern memories...While the two co-exist within the identity and memory of the locals, that coexistence is unstable, constantly on the cusp of distortion, and perpetually playing the symbiotic game of subversion and donation. Looking at the big structures of history and how they are experienced on the local levels reveals that major transitions, paradigm shifts in the structures of power offer opportunities for the latent, subaltern memories to rise through the cracks and become counter-hegemonic.

(Memory of Catastrophe 76)
In examining these discourses on subaltern memories, it can be said that subaltern memory does not only apprehend the official history but the official memory that is imposed on the community at large as the only legitimate or legal one. In view of this, the two conflicting memories hence are in a continuous process to negate each other as has been witnessed in the novel. Dibyanath who is the father of Brati stands as the emblem of bourgeoisie values and attempts every manipulative strategy to thrust the past of his son in the bins of amnesia. This is where Sujata struggles to retrace it, preserve it and employ it to oppose the official memory and hence the novel proves there always is the game of subversions and domination between official and subaltern memory. Sujata’s recollection of Brati, and her collection of collects oral accounts of the revolt can be witnessed as a counter-hegemonic journey taken by the character to re-enforce the subaltern memory in the face of the official denial and attrition of truth.

In keeping with this method of Orality, Mahasweta Devi has personally investigated the oral tradition of the tribals to observe their daily strife and discrimination at the hands of the elitist authority. In highlighting the significance of treating oral sources as important tools of history, Devi writes:

I am 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.

(“Untapped Resources” 16)

This statement emphasizes Devi’s commitment to history with respect to oral records. Through Orality she intends to listen to the subaltern and then write their subaltern record by meticulously investigating the written records as well. The objective is to firstly hear the subaltern; secondly rectify his/her image in the mainstream and lastly inform the official history with an inclusive model of history. She wishes to bring the true picture of the tribals to he mainstream so they are not scandalized as savages, criminals or inferior. The author in an interview with Spivak claimed that in most of her travels in the remote locations of the India, she has come across various tribes like the Shabars. In all her observations, she has
noticed that the tribals are peace-loving communities who have been but violently misrepresented in the society. In personally interacting with the aboriginals, she has observed:

They are basically gentle, polite, highly civilized, and this innate blood civilization runs back thousands of years. A tribal lives in harmony with the nature around him, with human beings, even intruders…If we think of what Gandhi means, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, tribals have it. The way they suffer us is because they have a very ancient civilization. They can do it, we cannot. We get angry, lose our tempers, become beats, they do not. When they do it, one must understand their extreme desperation.

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow ix)

Despite this grassroots reality, it is astonishing to observe how the tribals are maliciously scandalized as a vicious community. The collective memory or official history hence tends to misrepresent the aboriginals; and due to this there is an urgent need to recover the subaltern memory and rectify the official records without delay. It is this emergency the author has exposed in the novel – the character assassination of the tribal identity, the need of subaltern memory to rectify it, and to emphasize on the inclusive model of subaltern history.

Keeping with this tenor of subaltern history and how it can be retrieved by the medium of memory, Mahasweta has not only rectified the misrepresented identity of the Naxals but the youth as well who were exploited and then criminalized to undermine the cause as a whole. That is, the attempt of the novel has been rewrite history from the vantage of the tribals as well as the youth for instance Brati. This accounts to a record of multiple histories or an encompassing model of history which is the basis of subaltern history. Jose Rabasa in delineating the progress of Subaltern Studies has highlighted its attempt to chart multiple histories than a single history. He states, “The promise of Subaltern studies resides
in the possibility of interrupting narratives that end up in single histories” (Without History 5). Similarly Mahasweta Devi has rectified the false claims of bourgeois society as well as the falsified documents of Naxal insurgency. And in this tracing of multiple histories she has envisioned an authentic subaltern history.

Further analyzing the import of multiple histories, we can draw an analogy between multiple history and multiple memories. Collective memory tends to overlook these heterogeneous histories and gives precedence to a universalized, homogenous and limited model of history or memory. That is, one model for all. In doing so, it shockingly eliminates, relegates or bypasses the histories or memories of the subaltern. In the novel, such a scenario has been observed. Sujata’s memory and those of the other victims of the revolt have been silenced due to which the mainstream people are ignorant of the truth. It is pertinent to further analyze this assertion in examining the two kinds of memory – collective and individual memory. Many proposals are tabled by the elite to set up a collective memory for the society as a whole; that is, a homogenized model which speaks for everyone. This model can have two manifestations – either it incorporates both the elites and the subaltern or undermines one over the other. In examining the strains of collective memory and its proposed agenda, it can be stated:

In the service to the nation, the construction of a collective memory is essential and useful. The critical role of the collective memory is to unify citizens by means of a shared understanding of the past. Collective memory also acts as a force against the nation’s enemies. A single, common memory and a shared history offers lessons for the present and the future. But the worrisome political and cultural facts are that if we do not work toward creating a personal and communal version of the past, there will remain only one memory that might cover up other different memories. This is a scary political fact. The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against being forgotten.

(Oral History in Southeast Asia 2013)
In the light of this argument, the society at large might consider it progressive to foster a collective memory and produce a collective history, but as can be witnessed in the novel, it smothers the different memories hence relegating the subalterns as non-existent victims and even criminals who are not worthy to be considered a part of a country’s history. To add more, in doing so, these subalternized communities are always in danger of being eliminated lest their memory becomes public and challenges the superficial, propagandist, and provincial accounts of the official memory and history. In the novel, hence the struggle of Sujata is against the imposition of amnesia on her memory, which claims that her memory is entirely a figment of imagination. It is due to this reason, Sujata in the novel, felt threatened as if her control on her identity was being seized from her; and the memory of her son, the only consolation of her suffering and reminder of her society’s degradation, was being obscured so that the elite could acquit themselves of any hand in the oppression of the subaltern. If the subaltern memory is sabotaged, what can be its ramifications? The novel pointedly exposes the aftermaths to emphasize on the need to articulate and preserve subaltern memory as otherwise official history would continue to impose on the subaltern the falsities hence ensuring further falsities are carried out without any backlash.

Brati, in the novel, is evocative of his bourgeois family, his bourgeois class and the bourgeois identity that he believes was the reason that dehumanized the tribals. Sujata in recollecting is awakened to this truth, and is able to understand why Brati joined the revolt. In this way, the readers are sensitized to the cause and effect of Naxal crisis. Brati being a native to this crisis is hence embedded to the cause by birth and by proximity. The readers might understand the crisis on the level of human empathy but are ignorant of the fact as to who the culprit is and who is not. As they are not cognizant of it, suggests the ignorance of the mainstream about the truth of the revolution and the recurring dehumanization of the naxals. Brati hence serves as a social pedestal by which Mahasweta exposes the reality of the situation, so the narrative is enmeshed with historical truth.

Brati’s father and the rest of family except Sujata are depicted as the representatives of the bourgeois values of pretences, extravagance, indifference and decadent lifestyles. Brati’s resentment at his father’s dishonest value system makes him connect to the movement which he sees the same bourgeois system crippling the rights of the tribal. Brati dies at the
hands of the traitors in the party, who selfishly abandoned the cause for their personal interests. Sujata receives a call to identify her son’s body that is labeled by the number 1084. It is from that moment on Sujata is provoked to tread down into the underbelly of the Naxalbari movement even when her family is adamant to erase the existence of their criminal son and his death. In the first parts of the novel *Mother of 1084* the role of Sujata as a romantic can be discerned. She is concerned for Brati as a reader who does not know the reality behind Brati’s death but only that his son died. It’s only in the course of the novel, when she traces the truth about the movement through resurrecting the memories, she becomes aware. In tracing the history of the cause and its effect on the youth, she becomes sensitized of the truth. In a vengeful satire at the society and her family, she exclaims:

(Stati) is charged with a crime…that he lost faith in the social system itself. Brati had decided for himself that freedom could not come from the path society and state followed…Brati and those like him were such anti-tricals that their corpses would lie at the Kantapukur morgue.

(*Mother of 1084* 17)

History when becomes known to her, Sujata is able to see her son as a martyr of a true cause and not as a criminal stamped by the bourgeoisie society. History which is authentic and which she gathers by tracing her memory and the oral accounts of the victims of the revolt, makes Sujata cognizant of the reality. Who is a criminal and who is not? If like Sujata the mainstream is educated in the legitimate history or the subaltern history then the marginalization of the subalterns can be resolved. Considering memory as a tool of history has drawn various debates like - can it furnish a subaltern account? Can it be an authentic account? In keeping with these arguments in regard to *Mother of 1084*, it can be sated that memory serves as a repository of the past and these assertions can be substantiated by noting Jan Vansigna, a Belgian anthropologist who also attested the importance of memory in the making of history. He claims:
...the utterances are transitory but the memories are not. No one in oral societies doubts that memories can be faithful repositories which contain the sum total of past experience and explain the how and why of present day conditions...The mind through memory carries culture from generation to generation...

(*Oral Tradition as History* xii)

While evaluating these assertions, the question of memory as a tool of history cannot hence be negated. It is memory which empowers Sujata to see the truth. She after her verbal encounter and personal collection of oral sources rebels against the system of beliefs pervasive in the society at large. Sujata comes to believe if Brati had adhered to the corrupt system of beliefs, he would have been cherished and applauded by his family as one of their own, “If Brati drank like Jyoti, if he could go about drunk like Neepa’s husband, if he could flirt with the slip of a typist the way Brati’s father did…then they could have accepted Brati as one of them” (*Mother of 1084*, 30) but as he rebelled against it, he was an outsider. Sujata’s son like the youth hence was maliciously exploited in the cause. Bourgeois families like that of Dibyanath had to bury his so-called ignominious existence and without knowing the history of the social revolt, they blamed Brati as a criminal, the same way the society had blamed the tribals as criminals.

In further examining the role of memory vis-a-vis the discussion above, it can be said it furnishes an assessment of how our past and our present inform our future. If the memories are painful as in the case Brati, then repression is generally the solution which as observed in the novel was adopted by the Brati’s family. However, if the memories are not in alignment with the present ideology, say present government, we are forced to remake it else our memory might be and will be seen as anti-nationalist or seditious. Further, to be accepted by the society, memories have to be remoulded as in their actual state they might pose a threat to the person in question (might be banished as an outcast). In the novel, considering these nuances of memory and its making, we find why Dibyanath attempted to erase the memory of the son - so he can fit in the society and escape any accusation of being anti-national. Noting this, Devi attempts to emphasize that though his family had branded him as a criminal, people like Dibyanath were but blind to their own debaucheries. This hypocritical stand is what
shocks Sujata who hence without fear of any prosecution retraces, reinforces and exposes the real account of Brati to serve as a mirror for the society. In examining these observations, it can be reiterated:

We compose our memory to make sense of our past and present lives...we remake or repress memories of experience which are still painful and ‘unsafe’ because they do not easily accord with our present ideology, or because their inherent traumas or tensions have never been resolved... (Further and most importantly) Our memories are risky and painful if they do not conform with the public norms or versions of the past. We compose our memories so that they will fit with what is publicly acceptable or, if we have been excluded from general public acceptance.

(The Oral History Reader 344)

Consequently, Sujata while tracing her memory has been able to make sense of her past, Brati’s past, and also comes to recognize the intricacies of repressing memory and how to counter it. It is evident that she by historicizing memory has been able to pave a way for a historical recording of the event – recording which can establish itself as subaltern history. As critics observe, “Amidst the remnants of the collective memories of family, church, and nation, the individual forges his identity by historicizing his own memory (History as Art of Memory 151). In conclusion, it can be observed that even today, the history of the tribals and their marginalization is unknown to the masses. And due to this, the tribals are still criminalized and hunted down by the police. The society does not want to accept them, the government does not want to see them as citizens and due to this mass antipathy, the tribals have been hijacked of their rights. History hence when is manipulated, distorted and inauthentic, it can lead to mortal ramifications. Mahasweta Devi knows this reality and hence her endeavours to write a true history is paramount to her. She wishes to state that natives are
not against the development schemes and rehabilitation plans of the government as long as that does not involve annexing their lands in the name of country or its private proprietors’ profits. With this mission Mahasweta Devi has documented the past of the tribals vis-a-vis Orality found in myths, legends and subaltern memories and has attempted to write a true history to empower the tribals and to sensitize the mainstream society.
REFERENCES


