CHAPTER – I

MAHASWETA DEVI- HER LIFE AND AGE

“One fails to evaluate a writer if the writer’s setting in time and history is not taken into account.” Mahasweta Devi

A writer portrays the spirit of the times in which he lives and it is useful to locate him in his historical setting in order to fully grasp the import of his work. This approach is significant in regard to Mahasweta Devi too as her life is inextricably linked with the social and political happenings of her times. It is in fact, impossible to separate the writer Mahasweta from the socio-political-economic milieu of the India of 20th century.

Born on Jan 14, 1926 in pre-independent and undivided India (India got divided with Pakistan in 1947 and with Bangladesh in 1973); Mahasweta is a witness to the drastic political fluctuations and changes that transformed the face of Indian subcontinent. This was a time of great social upheaval in India or as Shashi Tharoor puts it “a decade of triumph and tragedy.”

The world was in the grip of the Second World War. The Nationalist “Quit India” campaign of 1942, led to the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and thousands of Indian Nationalists. The suppression of the Nationalists triggered widespread violence. It was the time of the Great Bengal Famine (1942-44) caused by the cutting off of the Burma rice supply and the administrative bungling during the war. In 1946, the Great Calcutta riots broke out as communal rioting among Hindus and Muslims took place in Calcutta unleashed by the intensifying conflict between the Hindu-dominated parties and the Muslim League. On August 15, 1947, the British Indian Empire ceased to exist and India achieved its independence. Along with millions of Indians, Mahasweta too shared the happiness of the attainment of the much-sought freedom and the hope for a better future that Nehru’s Tryst With Destiny speech assured, as he unfurled the
Tricolour over Red Fort with India awakening to life and freedom. The triumph of freedom, however was diluted by the tragedy of partition which was marked by violent, large-scale communal disturbances; a toll of many thousand of casualties and the migration of several million persons. “The cities”, recalled Devi were “bathed with blood”; passions were so inflamed that on January 30, 1948, Gandhi was assassinated by a young Hindu extremist. “It was a tumultuous and violent time. As a young college student during the famine, Devi joined her classmates in relief work: distributing food, picking through the dead bodies in the streets to find those still alive, feeding them and bringing them to the relief centers. The sight of suffering and death deeply affected her. During this time of uncertainty and violence, Devi came out of her relatively protected middle-class life.³

Being born the daughter of a renowned poet and novelist Manish Ghata and Dharitri Devi who was also a writer; Mahasweta had an environment at home conducive to her growth as an individual with finer sensibilities, an open-mind and a much-awakened soul. With writing, she also inherited a tradition of social work and activism. For becoming an acclaimed writer a mental discipline is a necessary pre-condition which her parents had engendered within her very early in life. The parents’ way of living came as a part of training for mental development which led her towards social activism and continuous hard-work. While Devi briefly attended Eden Montessori school in Dhaka where she was born in the home of her maternal grand-father; she grew up in West Bengal and completed her high school and Bachelor’s degree (English Hons) at Visva Bharti Shantiniketan and took her Master’s degree in English Literature from Calcutta University. Hers was a family with a long tradition of civic spirit and high literacy. Even her grandparents were involved in various movements aimed at the promotion of western education and social reform, initiated and inspired by Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), who has been called an important mentor of modern India, and such leaders of nineteenth-century Bengali Renaissance as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Thus, she grew up in the midst of a large and intellectually
stimulating family. The eldest of nine children, she was raised in the rich milieu of Bengali high culture. Her father was a part of a group of young writers, who, in the 1920’s, broke new grounds by writing a new type of realist stories that dealt with the slum life and the seamier underside of Indian society. Her mother, Dharitri Devi was a writer who loved Pearl Buck’s novels about Old China and translated some of her works. She met the famous American author when the latter visited Bombay in 1934 and was gifted with a copy of one of Buck’s books. Dharitri Devi was also a social worker who, like her own mother, devoted a great part of her time to promoting literacy among underprivileged children. Mahasweta mentions her mother as a very bold woman in her conversation with Nandini Sen.

“I would not call myself a feminist. I write about all oppressed women. My mother was a very bold woman. She used to help all women refugees who used to come from East Bengal when we used to stay in Behrampur. She did not believe in caste system and would treat everyone equally.”

Among the close relatives are assorted well-known people who have won prominence as artists, journalist, actors and filmmakers, among them the pioneering, British-trained cinematographer Sudhish Ghatak, actor and film-director Ritwik Ghatak, journalist Sachin choudhary and sculptor Sankho Choudhary. These talented and creative people shaped and influenced Mahasweta in various ways. Proximity to these persons helped in broadening the horizons of her thought and imagination that enlarged her outlook on life and world.

Her parents instilled in their children a curiosity for new things and other places and enjoyed taking them to the cinemas in Calcutta (called Kolkata since 2001) to watch the British and American movies. She was raised to love books and develop an interest in music, theatre and films. Thus, the home had an atmosphere where everyone read and read and read. “There was no bar on my reading” she recalls. Thus while still young, she became acquainted with western authors such as Charles Dickens, Balzac and Anton Chekhov, as well as such Bengali Classics as
the sixteenth century “Chandi Mangal” by ‘MukundRam Chakravorty’ (more popularly known as Kavikankan), narrative poems that stirred her interest in fiction and history.⁶

Since an early age she developed a deep concern for the underprivileged women as the women in her family were involved in volunteer work to spread literacy among the poor. Devi recalls that on visits to her parents’ ancestral village in eastern Bengal, her grandparents always admonished them against wearing expensive clothes and they insisted that they wear what the poorest in the village wore. As her father’s was a permanent job as an income tax officer they had to move around a lot. Hence, Devi picked up her education at various places. She finished her elementary education at Medinipur Missionary Girls’ School in West Bengal in 1935, attended middle school in Shantiniketan (1936-38) and finished high school at Beltala Girls School in Kolkata (1939-42).⁷

Shantiniketan left a deep impression on young Devi. The school in Shantiniketan was an experiment in education started in 1901 by R.N.Tagore (1886-1941). Devi’s father was an admirer and friend of Tagore. Her uncles too, either attended Shantiniketan or moved in the same circle as Tagore. Shantiniketan embodied Tagore’s ideas of education, open-air classes, freedom from traditional restrictions, where students of all countries came together to participate in a life of creative harmony. Here, Devi came in contact with students from all over India and came to think of herself as part of a larger country. She listened to well-known Bengali writers; watched Tagore’s dance-dramas performed, cultivated her love for literature and the arts, enjoyed outdoor games, and learned the value of independent study. Tagore spent a lot of time in Shantiniketan and, once briefly took over as teacher in Devi’s class in Bengali. Devi’s first published piece of writing was an essay on Tagore’s “My Boyhood Days” for a Bengali Children’s magazine, written when she was thirteen. After high school she attended Ashutosh College of Calcutta University (1943-44) and then returned to Shantiniketan to earn Bachelor’s Degree (English Honors) in 1946. Tagore had passed away and Devi felt that Shantiniketan had lost something of
its old, pastoral charm. After her college education in 1946, she married Bijon Bhattacharya, a playwright, who acted in her uncle, Ritwik Ghatak’s films and was one of the founding members of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). He was also a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI). She married Bijon for love much against her family’s wishes.8

Founded in 1928, the CPI was ascendant at the time Devi was in the University. The party had legal status and Bijon was active in organizing, propaganda and electoral work. It was an important influence on Devi though she herself never joined the party.

Devi and her husband briefly stayed with Bijon’s family and then lived on their own in a one-room apartment on the outskirts of Calcutta. In 1948, they had a child (Nabarun, who would become a poet, actor and novelist). It was a difficult time for the family. Communists and their sympathizers were harassed and Bijon could not find a job. To help support the family, Devi sold dye powders and even became involved in a friend’s failed venture to supply thousands of research monkeys to laboratories in the United States. She also worked as a teacher in Puddopukur Girl’s school (1948-49), did private tutoring and then gained employment as an upper division clerk in the regional office of the Deputy Accountant General of Post and Telegraph (1949-50). Accused of being a communist, she was retrenched from her government job after someone planted books of Marx, Engel and Lenin in her office drawer. She started writing for ‘Sachitra Bharat’, a Bengali weekly, under the pen name Sumitra Devi. During this period she wrote a lot of light fiction, “romantic stories, ghost stories, family stories and this was mainly to augment her income. In 1962, her marriage came to an end and she divorced Bijon, leaving her fourteen year old son with his father. She lived on her own in the remote southern outskirts of Calcutta and went through a terrible spell of depression during which she attempted suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. The attempt failed, she woke up, she said, and the first image she had was that of her son. Surviving death, she recalls feeling “a tremendous urge for living.”9
In 1963, she finished her Master’s degree in English Literature at Calcutta University and from 1964-84, served as a lecturer in English at Bijoygarh Jyotish Roy College, a small private college that served poor students in a refugee area. During this time she married an aspiring writer but this marriage did not work out either and came to an end in 1975.\textsuperscript{10}

Devi began writing furiously publishing novels, stories and articles. She wrote plays, textbooks and children’s fiction; adapted folklore for young readers, translated works in other languages and even did biographies of her own father, Manish Ghatak, and the famous Chinese writer Lu Xun. It was at this time that there was a marked intensification of social purpose in her writings. Her visit to Palamau, a remote district in Bihar marked a turning point in her writing career. She called Palamau as “a mirror of Tribal India”. On foot, she moved from place to place and became a witness to the impact of absentee landlordism, a despoiled environment, debt bondage and state neglect on the indigenous population. Exploitation and neglect had reduced people to a subhuman existence. There was no education, healthcare, roads and income. The Palamau experience brought her face to face with the misery of a people largely excluded from official, mainstream history.\textsuperscript{11}

And Literature does not merely reflect the dominant tendencies of its time, but sometimes militates against it. Her writings raised the voice against the exploitative social and political mechanism and exposed the social evils trenchantly. The effect of Texts on the readers is palpable. Her works exercise complete hold on them. Her literary activism acts as a force to bring change in a positive direction. There is felt a dire necessity to reform the existing social trends to fight for the people and set the disorderly set-up in order. Mahasweta’s social and literary activism has touched the sphere of social and political mechanism and she acts as a strong pillar of reform to bring the society in order. The urgency in her writing affects both sections of the society elite and downtrodden effectively. Presently she lives a life on her own terms, doing her activism; both social and literary with a passion. The presence of her voice of protest and anger
causes fear in the political circles and administration as she is the upholder of the rights of the masses and acts as a representative voice. “She listens and gives advice, makes referrals to her extensive network of contacts or personally intercedes for them by bringing their grievances to the attention of state agencies and officials. Each year, she tirelessly writes several hundred letters of complaint or petition addressed to the government and publishes columns and articles documenting abuses by police, landlords and politicians. She has made the cause of the tribals and the poor her own, and her reputation as an advocate has spread far and wide.”¹²

**Creative Writer**

In an interview to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahasweta emphasized on the persistent urge inside her to write: “I have such a great asthirata in me, such restlessness; an udbeg, this anxiety; I have to write somehow.”¹³ With this restlessness, this anxiety and urgency to write is aligned the effort and commitment to write and on being asked by Naveen Kishore in an interview, on the process of writing; she very plainly admits that nothing flows that easily. “I have lots of things scribbled down…let me see…my notebooks are scattered…there was a time when I would write down words I came across…”¹⁴ These words indicate that writing for her is a total involvement, physical and mental exercise that she undertakes with full sincerity. And it is important that words are taken seriously because they set things in motion, they conjure, set up atmospheres. Words can inspire, strengthen, encourage and can cause revolutions. In context of their use, the words become a symbol of tremendous energy and force. They bear the power that exercises its control over the mind of man. As Emerson declares in his essay entitled, The Poet (1844) that: “Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the Divine energy.”
Words are also actions and actions are a kind of words. Words, in a sense are the real cause of action, the movement, the force. They have the power to make the world move. They symbolize and reveal the real emotion that stirs the soul. Words become symbols and symbols become words depending upon the need and articulation. Only a reality can be symbolized as symbols help in defining subtler, indefinable shades of reality. It is ‘reality’ that needs expression, better definition and understanding. An unreal object/thing doesn’t need further explanations as its ultimate remains a falsity.”

Reality is that which human beings make common by work or language. In the very acts of perception and communication, the practical interaction of what is personally seen, interpreted and organized and what can be socially recognized is richly and subtly manifested.

While accepting the Ramon Magsaysay award in 1997, she said, “My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness, a curtain that separates the mainstream society from poor and the deprived. But then why my India alone? As the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our own true faces in the process.” Real sufferings, pains and deprivations find words in her texts which she herself calls as “documentation.” She documents history and traces out its political interference/implications in the life of the present. Her words emerge out of the anger at humanity’s violation, subjugation and exploitation of a large mass of people, and voice the injustices done to them over a long period of history. She thinks that a work of art should belong to the people, not to the elite and that a creative writer should have a social conscience. The conviction is stated in the author’s Introduction to a 1978 collection of stories, *Agnigarbha* (Womb of Fire):

“A responsible writer, standing at a turning point of history, has to take a stand in defense of the exploited. Otherwise, history would never forgive him. Anger- luminous, burning,
passionate-directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints, is the only source of inspiration for all my writing.”

“She does not see herself as speaking on behalf of the marginalized. According to her, the poor, the downtrodden and the subaltern have always been speaking. It is just that their voices are muted and subsumed in the mainstream discourse. She merely decodes and brings these voices to the fore.” While her creativity engages itself with the grass root, existential concerns of the tribal, at the academic level, her creative expression engages itself with the current subaltern scholarship so as to give voice to the ‘subaltern’. Ranajit Guha of the intellectual collective called the ‘Subaltern Studies’ group, while talking of the margins comprising the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of urban sub proletariat, the dalit, the women, writes of the violence done to the voice and agency of such people – the subalterns – in the Indian history. She studied the history of the peoples and wrote about them by examining archival documents; by collecting myths, legends and ballads; and by direct observation in her frequent traveling through the countryside.

Guha (1982) and the subaltern Studies project asserted that both interpretations of Indian history shared the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and its people were wholly elite achievements, thereby stripping the common people of their agency. The project’s aim therefore was to ‘rectify the elitist biases’. Based on Antonio Gramsci’s prison writings, ‘Subaltern’ refers to what Ranajit Guha, in opening “Subaltern Studies-I” described as “the general attribute of subordination”. Literally, it refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station. Importantly, it positioned the dominant and the dominated in history primarily in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture. It means recognition of the lower peasantry and the urban poor, working people, more generally women, untouchables and tribal cultivators. Commonly, the term refers to persons who are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic
power. Subalternity has become the phenomenon that is shaping and reshaping contemporary social, political, educational landscape by focusing on issues around voice, silence, multiple identities, relations of power and the intersections among these. Although one may be in a position of disadvantage due to an aspect of one’s identity (e.g., race, gender, class, religion), one can equally be in positions of privilege due to other aspects of his or her identity and lived reality (e.g., language, sexuality, ability). It is because of these and similar reasons that issues around voice and freedom of expression have come to occupy a central place in democratic-discourses. Mahasweta’s empirical research into oral history as it lives in the cultures and memories of the tribal communities has allowed creating fiction rooted in history and folk myth as well as in contemporary reality. Combining narratives with segments of oral history and social critique, she moved between past and present as she presents characters formed in the thick, time shaped materiality of their social existence. **Voicing the concerns of the excluded subaltern people is a vocation to which she has responded willingly by involved and creative writing. Voice acts as a central phenomenon that brings forth the connection between the self and the society. “Literary activism is the crux of her writing career and the subaltern metaphor is the core of her ideological orientation and artistic imagination that pleads for effecting necessary social transformation that would give identity and dignity to the marginalized poor.”**

Foucault argued that discourse and Power are intimately related because those who have access to voice can wield power within a system. When a social activist gives voice to his/her protest through literature various hidden agendas, motives, truths, intentions, inordinate ambitions get a proper exposure and in this capacity a writer instills knowledge and fear in the audiences; it creates a possibility of collective awareness and timely action which might yet help in survival and sustenance of life, both at global and local level. She is “the decolonized Native” who fully returns to her own culture and masses, but can eventually move beyond immediate social contexts and racial identities. A decolonized native writer is agitated enough to ‘rouse the
people” and has an important role to play in shaping the future, “opening up new, unlimited horizons.”

In an interview, on being asked what it means to be an Indian to her, she said, “Why should I define it? I’ve been to many countries but every time, I want to come back even though many things have been bypassed since 1947. I can’t live anywhere else. I just can’t stand it. I belong to India. It’s what gives me pride. If my mother was poor, skeletal and couldn’t give me food, I would still be proud to call her my mother. It’s like that. It’s my country. It’s my country.”

And it is this sense of concern for the deprived, underprivileged Indians that causes her to work consistently showing them a path of empowerment and agency. She writes from a subaltern perspective with a strong conviction that all those who write on behalf of the victims of social exploitation fight equally Her creative enterprise is geared towards making powerful, politically committed statements in favour of the subaltern and thus transforming her literary production from the clichéd pieces of art into acts of empowering resistance. Her aesthetics is to be seen keeping in mind that she is a post-colonial woman writer working for the tribals and women in particular.

Her aesthetics is deeply implicated in activism, rather it is her activism that becomes the defining principle of her aesthetics; and writing occurs to her as an instrument in her battle against exploitation. Aesthetics is not what she writes for. In fact, she repeatedly in her interviews and articles insist on being recognized more as an activist than as a litterateur. Her works may not fare very well if evaluated in terms of Plot-construction, characterization, mythology etc. as it is activism that she concentrates upon and has its bearing on her style. ‘Authenticity of fiction;’ though a contradiction in terms, is the first condition for its effective application for activist purposes. This portrayal of real details is not, emphatically not for the aesthetic satisfaction of her readers but is purposive; its task being to arouse the consciousness of the readers so that they create a positive effort through their work, speech or writing in favour of
the marginalized. Its motive is not the presentation of a folk-culture for simple enjoyment of the weird; nor is it a commodification of the aboriginal identities or places but is a sincere effort to change the exploitative, insensitive scene. It speaks vehemently against the commodification of the Tribes, their lands and rituals. Her fiction begins with a fact-profile of either an area or a character or a local practice, before it gets the shape of a story. In *Agnigarbha*, for instance, the corpse of Santhal farmer quite metaphorically begins to simmer with fire threatening the very survival of feudalism.

Her fiction is not a fantasy nor is it a pastoral romance. It is firmly rooted in ground reality and solidity of facts. Detailed documentation goes into the making of the narrative. It suggests social action even to a casual reader. She creates the effect of documentary realism by representing reality with precision and economy of detail, using irony and satire and avoiding romantic cliché. She sentimentalizes what she would otherwise slide into the realm of melodrama, by grounding her fiction in the particularities of the actual; her stories acquire the authenticity of lived experience at the margins. She doesn’t follow the conventional linguistic standards as set; rather the language in her narratives acts as a tool to portray the irony implicit and simultaneously satirize the system. She rejects the stereotyped symbols, myths and imagery and her allegorical approach in the narratives alters the established literary aesthetics. The images reflect the practical state of affairs and the reality behind them. As for example, “Singbhum is like the white-haired old woman collecting firewood in the jungles, who never answers a stranger, never looks at anyone. Keeping the intruders into her grief at a distance, beyond the barrier of her silence, she continues collecting firewood.”

Anjum Katyal has this to say of one of her text (*Rudali*): “A major concern of the text is to establish itself as reality, not fiction…There is the materiality of the text, its relentless desentimentalization, the reiterated message that considerations of the stomach are primary, beyond censure, outweighing emotion or socio-religious convention and the driving force behind
all action. No romantic clichés are permitted to stand, nor idealized notions of village life. The
author stresses upon material details of food production, labour, the struggle to survive. The
harsh realities of poverty, exploitation and death are exposed in brutal detail with all their
attendant degradation.

…Real details of real poverty, learnt at first hand. Real characters with real-life histories.
And a text which is not constructed as a linear narrative. The narrative makes no attempt to move
aggressively or concentratedly to a denouement: this is to be read as reality, not fiction; not even
a ‘fictionalizing’ of the real. The ‘storyline’ is scarcely privileged over the space given to
segments of oral history or social critique. There is no concern with building character,
atmosphere or suspense. The narrative begins informally, slips into a life at some indistinct point.
There is no dramatic opening incident, no frozen moment lending purpose and justification to the
starting point. There is, in other words, no acknowledgement of fictionalization. The narrating
voice moves back in time in an informal, arbitrary manner, stopping to comment and to add
contextual details which continuously anchor the private story in the more public history. This
loosely looped narrative approach closely approximates the oral form of reminiscence and
conversation, the ‘primary source’ of journalistic reporting and oral history. As in life, there is
space for digression, comment.”

The interactions between her characters make them evolve as individuals. She relates the entire story through dialogues and captures the tones of oral
narratives, colloquial phrases and impure idioms of everyday speech that adds to the reality of
the text. There is present in the narratives an emotional charge but there is no sentimental
romanticization. Thus, her fictional art becomes an amalgam of journalistic endeavour, activist
intervention and literary creation. These three facets of her creativity manifest themselves in
numerous blends in her literature. Gayatri Chakarvorty Spivak notes, “Her writing and her
activism reflect one another, they are precisely that – ‘a folding back upon one another – re-
flection in the root sense . . . Indeed, if one reads carefully, one may be seen as the other’s difference”

Traveling extensively in the villages she collects information about peoples sufferings, complaints, political exploitation, their protests and writes about these in the press. Her journalism, her social activism and creative writing all these projects sustain and overlap each other in forwarding her political convictions. The uncompromising realism of her fiction has led critics to see her works as a critique of the Bengali renaissance. Devi departs from the high diction and musicality of renaissance writing by immersing herself in the non-sanskritic idiom of the tribal world and by assuming the terse, direct style of modern journalism. It is for certain that the historical and cultural factors determine the form of her language and medium. She jots down the minute details of a belief, a norm or custom as existent in the lower section of people whom she contacts as she travels; be it about the Kolhati tribe of Maharashtra, the dombaris of the Andhra Pradesh or the Saora tribe. She brings forth the story behind the prevailing customs, their paintings, songs and folk-lores to show their meaning to a foreign world. Her closeness to the tribesmen lends warmth to her narratives. The impact of locale is evident as there is an aroma of rusticity and compassion in her words. The words like gotra, kobiraj, mekhola, Bhadra, Chaitra, toka, Rarh, Singhala, Utruni-mela, Tamralipta, Kalinga portay the historical time and space and the cultural-context. The fervour of such words used, as in the original, have relevance as they aid in imaging the soci-cultural-geographical context. They also reflect the affinity of the author to her experience. As she says in a conversation with Naveen Kishore, publisher and photographer, “All my life I have been seeing small people and their small dreams. I feel as if they wanted to lock up all the dreams, but somehow some dreams have escaped. A jail break of dreams…” She writes with an avowed intention of writing about the lesser known world of lesser known people.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes very importantly that it was with Aranyer Adhikar (1977) that Mahasweta Devi began ‘putting together a prose that is a collage of literary Bengali,
street Bengali, tribal Bengali and the languages of the tribals.’ In crafting this style, Devi has succeeded in melting the often discordant realities of modern Indian life. Transgressing the boundaries of language, she has broken down the barriers of class as well.  

27 Clifford Greetz practices “thick description” a term he borrows from the Oxford publishers Gilbert Ryle. Greetz thickly describes, in other words, unearths the underlying meaningful structures of local events and local interactions, and from these interactions generalizes whole societies.  

28 Mahasweta’s narratives also depend on these “thick descriptions”. Reading Mahasweta Devi is like being transported into an original and different world of beings who are much one’s own, a part of everyone’s own self, an configuration of that humaneness that is in every human being; sometimes hidden, sometimes apparent and also in varied measures; but existent in all. It is the divisions among men that have hampered the much-sought realization of ‘oneness’ with the ‘other’ the excluded one and the tales of pain and suffering is alike in every part of the world.

This sense of oneness or commonality on the realm of pain renders universality to her works.

**Literary Works:**

Starting from 1956, Mahasweta’s creative writings can be divided into four phases; constituting ten years each. In the year 1956-65 during which 19 titles got published. Between 1966-75, 09 titles got published. During 1976-85, 27 titles got published. And between 1986-95 39 titles saw their publication.

Her first book *Jhansir Rani* appeared in Bengali in 1956. The book is translated in English as The Queen of Jhansi by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta and published by Seagull Books Calcutta in 2002. “Everything begins in History” 29 is Devi’s assertion and perhaps this belief motivated her to write and reconstruct the life of the most influential woman rebel of pre-independent India. Due to lack of sufficient written records on Maharani Laxmibai, Mahasweta undertook a journey to Bundelkhand in the company of her husband. She interacted with the
common mass, the housewives, herdsmen, rural people who have kept alive the spirit of the dead Queen amidst them in their oral narratives and folk-lores. So, the book is a recreation partly from the written sources but mostly from the oral-interviews of the people of Bundelkhand. Of this book, in an interview with Nandini Sen she remarks,

“I remained interested in history. For me the real history remains in the space between two printed lines-the white space because there one has to search for people’s history.”

Her research on Laxmibai encompassed family reminiscence, oral literature, people’s histories as well as the more traditional sources of British and Indian historians.

Romtha was written in 1964 and first published in Subhoga Basanta in the year 1968. The book is translated in English by ‘Pinaki Bhattacharya’ and published by Seagull Books, Calcutta. The book cover defines it as ‘Fiction/Cultural history’. The story is set in twelfth century Bengal and moves round the royal city of Gaur and the forests and rivers of rural Bengal. The protagonist is a Romtha, meaning a branded criminal who awaits his own death. This young man named Sharan is condemned to death for murdering a beautiful courtesan whom he loved. Even after her death he yearns for her remaining unaware of the love of a young widow who secretly adores him. The book depicts the rude and rigid laws of the land and shows the passion, vengeance and an overwhelming hunger for life.

Dewana Khoimala O Thakurbot-er Kahani was first published in Satrang, Calcutta in 1968 and subsequently included in Subhoga Basanta. The text is translated into English by ‘Pinaki Bhattacharya’ as Dewana, Khoimala and the Holy Banyan Tree. With a picturesque description of the eighteenth century rural Bengal the novel sarcastically points to the social and religious taboos pertaining to caste-system, child-marriage and Sati. Despite their unflinching love for each-other; the low-caste boatman lad Golak and the poor Brahmin girl Khoimala’s love for each-other can never be requited due to the unsurpassable caste-difference. Suffering all odds and much to their despair the boy cannot rescue her from her atrocities imposed on her in the
name of tradition nor can he openly declare his love. The numerous man-made barriers impede free communion of man with man or woman.

*Aandharmanik* got published in 1967. The text is translated in Hindi by ‘Sushil Gupta’ and published by Radhakrishna Prakashan-2004. In the Introductory of the book Devi recalls that the period when she wrote the books like *Romtha, Dewana, Khoimala and the Holy Banyan Tree, Amrit-Sanchay, Aandharmanik* was a pleasant phase in her writing. She read innumerable books, jotted down notes and read a lot of history. She declares that all her writings that bear importance to her are basically a statement of the history of the masses. With *Aandharmanik* the storyline bent towards the history of the people. Set in the eighteenth century Bengal, the text reflects the society and the deteriorating values, belief-system, superstitions, exploitative rituals of the middle and upper-middle class. This class was economically powerful yet there was extreme crisis of basic human values amongst them.

The tales of love and passion like *Romtha, Aandharmanik, Dewana, Khoimala and the Holy Banyan Tree* shows the alienation that a creative writer experiences in the world around him. This alienation becomes a source of creativity.

Since the beginning of her writing career Devi wrote a lot of children’s literature too. She had started writing for children from 1965, in *Mouchhak*, a well-established children’s magazine that she had herself read in her younger days. From 1975, her stories began to appear in “*Sandesh*”, when one of its editors, Satyajit Ray, invited her to contribute. All the stories in this collection were first published in Sandesh between 1972 and 1992. In the children stories, she is a weaver of dreams and a revealer of family secrets. She remarks, “For children, one should write with a great deal of love and respect; that is why those children’s books are usually the best which the grown-ups cannot resist.”

The grown-ups in her children’s tales have no notion of reality, fathers and aunts live in eternal innocence, and non-vegetarian cows prosper. Here, with a single clove of garlic, you can
cook two and a half mounds of mouth-watering venison. Mahasweta Devi offers us a free supply of that ‘Royal Garlic’ in these stories. 31


…There is a compassionate Cheetah-man from Garhwal who finally volunteers to be shot at to save a despairing and frustrated Jim Corbett the shame of failure. The real hero of the story is, however, not Cheetah-man but Phalgu, to whom the Cheetah tells his story. This is a world where anything can happen. Pet hens lay eggs all over the house- inside hats, in the folds of mosquito nets; little boys spring out of television sets to play with lonely little kids in empty homes; flowering rose-gardens appear overnight in the backyard; Shivaji offers you a ride on his ultra special horse.” 32
In her children-stories, the imaginary, surrealist description that Mahasweta weaves a tapestry of shows her reflective capability.

_The Armenian Champa Tree_ was first published in original Bengali as _Armani Champar Gachh_ in the children’s magazine ‘Sandesh’ in 1968. The book is translated in English by Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee and published by Naveen Kishore on behalf of Seagull Books, 1998. Through the story of a ten year Buno Tribal boy Devi exposes the manner in which religion exploits superstition for its own end. The fake Sadhus use the rituals of religion as a ruse for exploiting the ignorant, illiterate people.

The book _Bitter Soil_ is a collection of four stories namely, _Little Ones, Seeds, The Witch_ and _Salt_. Translated by “Ipsita Chanda” and first printed in 1998 by Seagull Books the book bears an introductory note by the author herself. As its name suggests, the book presents a fearful picture of exploitation of the marginalized in an independent country that boosts of having constituted an effective political and administrative machinery to serve the state. In the Introduction to the book, the author clears her aim of writing: “I believe in documentation. After reading my work, the reader should face the truth of facts, and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India.”

_Rudali_ was first published in _Naixitey Megh_ in 1979. Translated by “Anjum Katyal” it is a powerful story that revolves around the life of Shanichari, a poor low-caste village woman and shows the struggle for survival of the downtrodden. Categorized as one of the important feminist text, it is adapted into a play by ‘Usha Ganguly’, a leading theatre director of Calcutta and became one of the most acclaimed productions. Sanichari represents a class of the downtrodden women struggling for survival amidst a cruel social and cultural set-up.

The original Bengali version of _The Book of the Hunter_ is _Byadhkhanda_ which was published in 1994 by Dey’s publishing, Calcutta. The book is translated into English by Mandira and Sagaree Sengupta and published by Seagull Books 2002. The story is set in the sixteenth
century medieval Bengal and moves round the life of the great medieval poet Kabikankan Mukundram Chakraborti, whose epic poem Abhaymangal, better known as ‘Chandimangal’ records the socio-political history of the times. Mahasweta uses the lives of two couples, the Brahman Mukundram and his wife, and the young Shabars, Phuli and Kalya to capture the contrasting socio-cultural norms of rural society of the times. Though set in past historical times the stories bear a relevance to the present conditions and will remain so for all times to come as they disseminate social and universal values, have a humanitarian approach and sense of concern for all. Inequalities in the name of caste, class, creed, religion, ethnicity etc, have been present in all civilizations of the world and so has remained abhorrence for the other. This conflict breeds anger, pain and anguish of suffering and exploitation. The exposition of this conflict and the cause of it bring forth the solution to the conflict which lies in the problem itself.

The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh is translated by Ipsita Chanda and is published by Seagull Books in 2003. Devi wrote this book in 1981 and in this she has dealt with issues like agrarian land relations, inter-caste violence, and the contrast between the lives of the underdogs to the lives of their all powerful overlords. She shows a clear picture of the development claims made by the government and the position of women in rural areas.

Chotti Munda and his Arrow is translated and introduced by ‘Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’ and published by Seagull in 2002. The novel, written by Mahasweta in 1980 raises questions about the place of the tribal on the map of national identity, land rights and human rights and the museumization of ethnic cultures. The novel shows the events in the life of Chotti, a Munda boy that encompass him and his struggle. The novel gives a portrayal of the colonial rule to independence and the unrest of the 1970’s.

Considering plays to be more accessible to the largely illiterate audience whom she wanted to reach, Mahasweta dramatized one of her major novels *Mother of 1084* and four of her finest stories. In *Mother of 1084*, the mother of a Naxalite martyr discovers both her son and her own self after a year of her son’s death and becomes aware of the lacunas that exist in the social and political scene.

*Aajir* is about a slave who got into slavery by an ancient bond of debt and discovers too late that the bond nowhere exists. Mahasweta shows the burden of a traditional constraint that result in severe exploitation of the marginalized population. The play *Urvashi and Johnny* shows a ventriloquist intensely in love with his “Speaking doll” that loses his voice to throat cancer. *Bayen* shows a son who acknowledged his mother who has been made outcast and branded a witch by the community only after her death. *Water* is the story of a traditional water-diviner who rises to a different role and becomes a threat to the administration. These plays are rooted in history and folk-myth as well as in contemporary reality.

*Breast Stories* is translated with an Introduction by ‘Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’ and published by Seagull Books in 1997. Breast Stories comprises three stories *Draupadi, Breast-Giver* and *Behind the Bodice*. In *Draupadi* the protagonist is a revolutionary tribal woman who, arrested and gang-raped in custody, turns the terrible wounds of her breasts into a counter-offensive. In *Breast-Giver*, a woman becomes a professional wet-nurse to support her family dies of painful breast-cancer betrayed alike by all. In *Behind the Bodice*, migrant labourer Gangor’s ‘statuesque’ breasts excite the attention of ace photographer Upin Puri, triggering off a train of violence that ends in tragedy.

was published in 1986, and *Bolechhilo Pani* (*He said, Pani*) was published in 1995. All these stories are centered on women characters. There is kuli (Divorce) who finds herself unexpectedly divorced in the heat of a quarrel, but decides to defy societal taboos and comes to live again with her ex-husband, companion of many years. Mohini (Saga of Kagaboga) lonely after her sons leave home, vows that since her husband objects to her verbosity, she will henceforth talk only to the crows and cranes. Kamal (The Poet’s Wife) discovers how harsh the indifference of today’s world can be; while Anandi (He said, Pani ) mourns the sudden loss of her only friend and the simple pleasures of their companionship, even as insensitive forces question her links with the old man. Then, there is the ageing actress, Kusum (Love Story) who after a lifetime of devotion to her lover, finds herself alone at last and questions the need and value of a relationship.


The book *Old Women* has two stories *Statue* and *The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur* translated by ‘Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’ published in 1999. Translator Gayatri Spivak says: “Here in this text, you’ll find what Kamla Visweswaran has called ‘woman as subaltern’- the first story- and ‘subaltern women’- the second.”

*Bedanabala* was first written in 1996 and translated by Sunandini Banerjee. The book seeks to empathize with women who are condemned not only by men but also by other women as they are beyond the bounds of decency and social acceptance. Starting from the late nineteenth century, the voice of Bedanabala bears witness to the experiences of many women who find themselves outside the safety of domestic walls for various reasons.

The book *Dust on the Road* is a collection of the activist writings of Mahasweta Devi. It is edited with an introductory essay by Maitreya Ghatak published by Seagull Books 2000. It is a
collection of articles by Mahasweta Devi, written between 1981 and 1992. It covers most of her activist writings in English, published in journals and newspapers as Economic and Political Weekly, Business Standard, Sunday, and Frontier. The articles deal with a range of issues relating to the deprivation, degradation of life and environment, exploitation and struggles of the labouring poor and the underprivileged, the landless and small peasants, share croppers, bonded labour, contract labour, and miners in West Bengal and Bihar.

*Titu Mir* is a proof of Devi’s concern for the portrayal of the socio-economic exploitation as a means of holding a mirror to injustice and oppression. Translated by ‘Rimi B. Chatterjee’ it retains the rhythm of an oral recital. In this novel, Devi draws upon a combination of history, folk-tales and legends to recreate the story of a man with an innate sense of fairness as well as courage to fight against odds for the rights of the ordinary people.

The translated works can be said to be sporadic as the translators have not followed any consensual rationale or chronology. Translations, as Rachel May has pointed out, emerge from a perceived need to change the readership and surrounding culture of a text.\(^{35}\) Translations within, say, Indian languages, or ‘endotropic’translations, as Diptiranjan Pattanaik argues, helped the expansion of local literatures and facilitated democratization. They are a site of persistent cultural interchange in literary studies.

Translation, as Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi remind us, is an act of ‘intercultural transfer’. It involves more than just movement across or between languages; it is rooted in particular cultural and political contexts, power-relations (between languages and cultures, text and translator) and social structures.\(^{36}\) The translators have succeeded in representing the predominant concerns of the author that she wants to bring forth through her writings. The anguish of dispossessed tribals, landless workers, bonded labourers, exploitation of the tribal and his land by the rich landed peasantry and the urban administrative machinery, prostitution, the plight of women in patriarchal set-up, women as victim of sexual violence, the pain of poor
widows, dependent daughters, ill-treated wives all have come forth demanding reformation and change in the social system. Her books have been translated into Hindi, Assamese, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Gujarati, Ho and Santhali. She has been translated into foreign languages like English, Italian, Japanese and French. Wide translations have been done because of their social value and they act as a force for bringing a change in the existing social scenario. Rooted in the Indian rural and tribal society; it is the social problems that are dealt with by the writer and so her works offer a point of discussion to the sociologists, political thinkers, economists, philanthropists and administrators. “The postcolonial condition is that of being between spaces, languages, identities, in perpetual translation and transition between and across languages”.

Besides her creative writings, she has done articles and investigative reports for English-language periodicals such as the Economic and Political Weekly (founded by her Uncle Sachin Chowdhary), Business Standard, Sunday, Frontier and New Republic, written in English and Bengali. Her topics include exploitation of sharecroppers and miners, unemployment, police atrocities, failure in the implementation of government programmes, environmental degradation etc. For her, it is social advocacy as she locates herself in the rural districts. She identifies with the people she writes about and works with them for redressal.

In 1964, she took a two year leave from the college where she had been teaching English literature and joined Jugantar, a Bengali newspaper, as a roving reporter. This gave her greater opportunity to travel and learn conditions of life in the rural India. Her involvement with the lives of the deprived class was full and consequently, she resigned from her teaching job in 1984 and became a full-time writer and activist. She wrote for a Bengali daily, Dainik Basumati, for about a year and then joined Bartman, another Bengali daily, for which she wrote a weekly column until 1991. Since 1992 she contributes, from time to time, to another Bengali newspaper, Aajkal. She has embraced journalism as social advocacy; identifies with the people she writes
about and works side by side with them for the redressal of their problems. Since 1980, she had started editing Bortika that was earlier edited by her father. As she took the charge after the death of her father in 1979, she changed the journal beyond recognition. Bortika became a forum where small peasants, agricultural labourers, tribals, workers in factories, rickshaw pullers could write about their life and problems. Many of the Lodha and Kheria tribals of Medinipur and Purulia have written for this journal. It also provided a forum for a number of young, middle-class people, activists, even people working for the government, to write on a wide range of subjects that concerned the common people. The editor only insisted that the contributions must be based on facts, figures, observations and even surveys- only those actually relevant to an understanding of a problem that affected the people, or those which provided some directions for change.

This period also coincided with her growing familiarity and fondness for tribals in areas like Palamau, Murshidabadd, Medinipur and Purulia. “In the very first year of her visit to Palamau in 1981, she and her local associates had a long discussion with the bonded labourers and landless people. At the end of the discussion, a slate was brought, and Mahasweta, in her wobbly handwriting in Hindi wrote, ‘Semra Bandhua Mukti Morcha’. This later became the Palamau District Bonded Labourer Liberation Front.”

In the May day of the year 1983, for the first time in the history of Daltonganj in Palamau, a large number of bonded labourers, men and women, assembled in a 2-day meeting and then marched in a procession to the office of the district’s administrative head, with Mahasweta, the well-known social activist Swami Agnivesh, Rameshwaram and other associates. In 1985, Mahasweta Devi visited a conference of the bonded labourers at Palamau. It was well-attended by activists and media persons from various parts of the country. Within a few years of her last visit there, radical peasant movements involving issues of landlord exploitation, land,
wages, collection of forest products, had taken root and the major CPI (ML) organizations were all present in the district, in growing strength.  

Mahasweta believed in organized group action especially by people who belong to the marginalized section of society; for the redressal of their individual problems is not meted by the negligent administrative system. United the common men can bring pressure on the authorities and actively participate in whatever needs to be done for them.

Over the years, she has been associated with many grassroot level organizations like-

- Paschim Banga Munda Tribal Samaj Sugar Ganthra, Paschim Banga Lodha Sabar Denotified Tribe Kalyan Samiti, Paschim Banga Bhumij Tribal Samajkalyan Samiti (Medinipur district),
- Paschim Banga Bhumij Tribal Samajkalyan Samiti (Purulia district), Paschim Banga Oraon Tribal Kalyan Samiti, Paschim Banga Sahis Scheduled Caste Kalyan Samiti, Paschim Banga Harijan Kalyan Samiti (North 24 Parganas district), Bharat Ker Adim Jaati Tribal Samiti (North 24 Parganas), Adivasi Kalyan Samiti (South 24 Parganas district), Palamau Zilla Bandhua Samiti (Palamau district, Bihar), Adim Jati Aikya Parishad, Behrampur Municipal Sweeper Association (Murshidabad district), Paschim Banga Baul Fakir Sangha (Murshidabad district), Paschim Banga Baul Fakir Sangha (murshidabad district), and Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti Purulia. Such associations of Mahasweta Devi brought her closer to the ground realities of the marginalized people whose sufferings found a voice in her literature and who also benefited through her consistent activism.

In 1948, Devi pioneered in forging Adim Jaati Akiya Parishad (Ancient Tribes Union); a forum of thirty-eight West Bengali Tribal groups ,formed to enable tribes to claim their rightful socio-economic and civil liberties. This forum promoted cooperative action among big and small tribes, reduced the incidence of intertribal violence and instilled in them the value of collective action.
Whether it is an organization distributing artificial limbs amongst the physically handicapped in North Bengal, or another mobilizing public opinion against the taking over of agricultural lands for industrial projects in Southern Bengal, or another protesting against police atrocities in some remote village, or against the government move to set up a missile-testing range in Chandipur in Orissa-all take her active support for granted and generally get it. The activist-writer was awarded the title “Padamshree” for her committed activism amongst small tribal groups of the Purulia and Medinipur districts of West Bengal. She is as comfortable leading processions of bonded labourers through the streets of Daltonganj in Palamau, Bihar, as she is shouting slogans before the office of the Deputy Commissioner, or marching with the sweepers and scavengers of Behrampur in West Bengal or shouting slogans with striking workers or dancing with tribal men and women, in high spirits, at a fair in Purulia district.42

In 1990, Devi instituted the Shabara Mela, an annual fair based on traditional Indian country fairs, held after winter harvest in Rajnagar some thirty kilometers from Purulia, West Bengal. It features crafts, exhibits, contests and theatrical performances dealing with social themes such as literacy, anti-alcoholism. The yearly fair has grown into a celebration of values of tribal dignity and autonomy. Through her activism and literary writings she tries to eradicate the tribal and marginalized society of the evils of superstitions and blind faith. She leads a hectic schedule involving her self fully, irrespective of whether these are national, headlines making issues like the Singur- Nandigram political controversy or the near undocumented plight of tribals in Gujarat.

Between visits to Delhi and travels in Maharashtra, she made frequent trips to Gujarat. Baroda became her second home, Tejgadh her sacred grove for communion with the adivasis. ‘In Tejgadh alone,’ she said, ‘my bones will find rest. Ganesh, you will understand, I am tired, of it all, this praise, this deification. I hate it.’43 She has miles to walk, under the scorching Sun and over the barren fields of Purulia, Medinipur, Palamau or Singbhum and yet she remains quite
oblivious of all physical discomforts. She is a woman of film-songs than of the ragas, of laughter than long-face pontification, is closer to what reveals than decorates and conceals. And yet she is detached from everything, completely. You cannot please her by praise or by providing her with comforts. She is almost not there when one thinks she is very much there. Fiercely independent, Devi is critical of the failure of Political parties.

Expressing her impatience with “mere party politics”, she says, ‘Life is not airthematic, and man is not made for the game of politics. For me, all political programmes and creeds should aim at the realization of the claims of man to survival and justice. I desire a transformation of the present social system. I do not believe in narrow party politics. After thirty-one years of independence, 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 for all my writing. All the parties to the Left as well as those 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 his judgment in his lifetime and remains answerable.”

Her texts show the fulfillment of her objective of writing as they reflect the dominant tendencies in the social and political structure. They act as a question mark over the claims of development as is continuously stated by the Government and political parties. Focussing on the upliftment of the underprivileged they depict the seamier side of life and conditions of survival.

She is impatient with hypocrisy, complacency and indifference which are face to face with almost at every juncture of her activism. By the time the state government or the law takes the necessary action on her complaints she acts on her own to provide the required help to the victim/victims. As Ganesh N Devy recalls: When Budhan was killed in police custody in Purulia,
Mahasweta had filed a case in the Calcutta High Court. The judgment ordered compensation to Budhan’s widow, Shyamali. By the time this judgment was delivered by Justice Ruma Paul, Mahasweta Devi and I had already started our work at Chharanagar. We established a library there, for which she donated the amount received by her as the first Yasmin award. The Times of India reported on June 23, 2009 that the noted writer Mahasweta Devi has asked the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government not to arrest Chhatradhar Mahato, the People’s committee against Police atrocities (PCPA) leader.

“If Chhatradhar Mahato is arrested, I’ll go and sit on a dharna outside the office of Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. This is not the time to send force to Lalgarh,” she told reporters in Kolkata. Similarly, she was not hesitant to call the Mamta Banerjee ruled State Government as Fascist for apparently not granting permission to rights groups to hold rally in Kolkata. The interests and welfare of the common mass always occupied a prime position in her agenda. As a mark of protest over the conferment of titles and prizes to the people of Government’s liking she resigned as chairperson of Bangla Academy on 2003. “Everything is political” remarked Mahasweta Devi and the overlooking of the Academy’s choice indicated that the power-relations governing language, publishing, awards and usability are, in effect, still colonial.

Her activism and intellect drew the attention of Film-makers who successfully brought her works to the fore through their films. As Stephen Greenbalt remarks that the Shakespearean plays induced large numbers of men and women of different social classes and divergent beliefs to explode with laughter or weep or experience a complex blend of anxiety and exaltation. In the same vein, the films based on Mahasweta’s stories have the capacity to overwhelm the audience with the pain of the oppressed and fill them with remorse of being a mere spectator of the ills practiced in the society. They demand an urgent need of change and upliftment from the bourgeoise and the elite alike. The films based on Mahasweta Devi’s works are:

Kolkata based Bangla; Posted on June 28, 2012 that Mahasweta will herself now appear in one being adapted for celluloid. The movie, Ullas consists of three stories, all written by the writer, one of which is Dour (Run) in which the prominent tribal rights activist has acted. This information was passed on by the 86 year old writer herself in a press meet at the film hub ‘Nandan’ where some clips of the movie, based on tribal exploitation was shown. “I haven’t shared a frame with any important member of the cast. But this is the first time I am facing the camera,” Mahasweta said in her characteristic style of understatement.  

Eminent film critic Shamik Bandyopadhayay said, “Ullas”, which he has seen, would mark a welcome break from the urban-centric topics of human relationship in today’s Bengali films. “Ullas brings back the flavour of the 70’s when the exploitation of the poor and the subalterns were the leitmotif of the films…” He regretted that such a vital topic was not turned into celluloid before. Mahasweta Devi is the most disturbing writer India has ever produced and yet her writings are necessary in the present context. She lashes the readers out of complacency in the way conscience is supposed to do. The activities she is involved in are political to the core and so are her writings

Most of Mahasweta’s predominant concerns- the predicament of the tribal backwaters, the exploitation of the Adivasis by the landed rich or the urban administrative machinery callously perpetuating a legacy of complicity with the colonizers, bonded labour and prostitution, the destitution and misery of city dwellers who are condemned to live at the fringes and eke out a meager livelihood, the plight of women who are breadwinners and /or victims of male sexual
violence, dependent widows, ill-treated wives, and unwanted daughters whose bodies can fetch a price – are adequately represented through the translations done by Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak, Samik Bandyopadhyay, Ipsita Chanda, Mandira and Sagaree Sengupta. “She is a celebrated icon of Third World literature in the First World academia. Consequently, her secure place in the literary genres of contemporary regional Indian fiction, Third World literature and Postcolonial writing is beyond question. Academic curriculums in Bangla, English and Comparative Literature have been unable to ignore the topical relevance of her works. Many of her short stories and novels are now an intrinsic part of syllabi in Indian and other universities.”

The test of a literary text is its quality of universality which is present in the works of Mahasweta Devi as her books speak for all the deprived class in the language of pain and shows the illimitable capacity of humanity to endure that pain. As a writer, she knows no bounds save those of humanity. It is these qualities of universality, suggestiveness, appeal to our emotions and its ability to awaken the mind that ascertains her works a remarkable recognition and a definite space in the world academia and are included in the syllabi of universities.

Mahasweta has been criticized by literary purists who feel that she is merely a chronicler of social reality. But even a superficial reading of her fiction will establish that this is unjustified. As writer even when she concerns herself in chronicling the events and realities she side by side provides an insight into human nature, human emotions, human sufferings and reasons behind the sad state of human lives. Through the representations of the past Mahasweta tries to find its implications and relevance in the present. As her writings speak for the rights and priviledges of the marginalized and in the process through her literary and social activism she dares to interrogate the social-order and the dominant cultural hold; she possesses the spirit of a fighter who moves on with life, trying to remove hurdles that come on her way of activism.
As she says, “…I’m actually very happy with life. I don’t owe anything to anyone, I don’t abide by any rules laid down by the society, I do what I want to, go wherever I want to, write down whatever I like, roam around…Anyway, life has been very much worth living.”

A committed writer and activist need this indomitable will and spirit to live and write so that the society can be enlivened and made to reciprocate to the much-needed change and betterment of the living-conditions of its people. Her words, “I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty towards society. Yet I don’t really know why I do these things. The sense of duty is an obsession. I must remain accountable to myself.” shows her undeterred commitment towards her activism.

Dr Nelson Mandela, handing her the Jnanpith- the highest literary award- in Delhi, said that ‘she holds a mirror to the conditions of the world as we enter the new millennium’.
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