CHAPTER IV

Tribal Women and the Narrative of Gender

Since the early 1980s the concept of “gender” has been used in feminist theory to refer to the social construction of the differences between men and women. Joan Scott defines the concept of gender as “a way of referring to the exclusively social origins of the subjective identities of men and women. Gender is, in this definition, a social category imposed on a sexed body” (32). Here “gender” as a symbolic construct is used in contrast with the notion of “sex” which refers to their biological difference. Gender studies thus focuses on the discursive structures of human knowledge as well as social institutions and practices that determine the ways in which men and women are perceived differently and unequally. It also interrogates these structures and practices that have kept women in a subservient position vis-à-vis men, and denied her equal rights as a social and political being throughout history.
Recently gender studies has begun to perceive that some of the basic assumptions of western feminism has tended to universalize and essentialize the category of “woman” by assuming that the white woman’s experience stood for the experience of all women. Taking into consideration the inputs from women all over the world- the coloured women of America and Europe, the native women of Africa, Asia, Latin America and other parts of the world- gender studies has become more conscious of the intersections of the constructions of gender with that of race and class. In India too, gender studies is becoming more sensitive to the need to address the question of gender with a cross-cultural perspective, given the diversity of India’s socio-cultural fabric. It is increasingly being recognized that womens’ studies in India should not obscure the heterogeneity of the category of ‘woman’, “whose attributes and activities have varied in relation to the diverse intersections of caste, class, age, kinship, religion, region, and so on” (Tazia 143). Postcolonial feminists like Gayatri Spivak, Kumkum Sangari, Susie Tharu, Uma Chakravarthy, Ania Loomba, Rajeshwari Sunderarajan and others have examined the aspect of gender in relation to aspects of class, tribe and caste, both in colonial and postcolonial India, and highlighted the fact that articulations of the category of the “native Indian woman”, especially in colonial discourse, is usually associated with upper class women of India, and ignores the presence of the subaltern women within
the Indian nation. As Jasodhara Bagchi perceives, “…the myth of Indian womanhood has naturalized not merely gender oppression, but has encoded the programme for caste and class oppression as well.” (*Indian Women* 1) Feminist studies in India have critically examined the ways in which the female subject has been constructed in literature, in order to uncover the ideologies that have reinforced these constructions in political, social and familial practices.

Mahasweta Devi’s works articulate the concerns of gender with precisely this sort of sensitivity to the socio-historic specificities of the women she represents in her fiction. Mahasweta has often claimed that she is not a feminist writer, insisting that her concern is for all exploited people, not just for women. Although she shies away from the label of “feminist”, Mahasweta does not make light of the issue of gendered oppression. In an interview with Gabrielle Collu, she says, “Women have to pay a lot. They also have their special problems…I will not say feminist but whenever I see women, I want to bring out what they do.” (224-5) Even while respecting the writer’s resistance to labeling, one cannot but respond to the overtly gender-sensitive delineation of the lives of marginalized people in India in her writing, which is also linked to the issues of class, caste or tribe. Her portrayals of women -as mothers, wives, daughters, working women, bonded labourers, witches, prostitutes, revolutionaries and rebels – have encompassed different
historical periods and diverse social milieu. The Santhal woman who is a Naxal revolutionary in “Draupadi”, Jashoda, the poor Brahman woman in “Stanadayini”, the low-caste woman who becomes a professional mourner in “Rudali”, Sujatha, the middle-class mother in *Mother of 1084*, - they have all embodied Mahasweta’s deep and abiding concern with representing the suffering and exploitation faced by women from a cross-section of Indian society, especially from the subaltern groups.

Her narratives articulate the aspect of gender within the specific socio-historical context of tribal life, and raise the issues of gender inequality, sexual exploitation and violence that tribal women face, both within their own community as well as in their interface with mainstream groups in India. If the tribal communities in India face historical, political, economic and socio-cultural marginalization, then the tribal women are doubly marginalized in the name of gender discrimination also. Contemporary sociologists observe that women’s issues are often left unaddressed, subsumed within the larger question of tribal identity and rights as a whole. (Xaxa *Womens’ Studies* 475-491) Tiplut Nongbri states, “Since women’s gender identity is generally treated as synonymous with ethnic identity, ethnic politics has the effect of reinforcing women’s subordination.” (230). Sen and Yadav point out that, by foregrounding the aspect of gender in her narratives, Mahasweta
offers a way of “recovering the discourse of gender” from the larger discourse of class oppression that threaten the livelihoods and ethnic identity of the tribals in India. (18)

It is a generally–held belief that the women in tribal societies enjoy more freedom, better social status and are more empowered than their counterparts in non-tribal societies in India. This is a view that owes its origin to the sociological/anthropological writings of the colonial and early postcolonial era, which compared and contrasted the status of tribal women with that of non-tribal women of India, and were based on studies of older tribal societies that were large, and fairly autonomous. Contemporary sociologists point out, however, that these differences were relative, and were related to the structure and history of their societies. It has been seen that if the women of certain tribes enjoyed equality in aspects like property rights and inheritance, they often faced discriminations in matters related to traditional occupations and rituals. (Xaxa Women’s Studies 475-479; Nongbri 210-230). With the insights that she has gleaned from her long and close association with tribal communities, Mahasweta Devi feels that the relatively higher status and security that tribal women seem to enjoy in their societies is a measure of the superiority of their ancient civilization. She says:

Bits of their old culture can still be glimpsed. Among the Austric and Dravidian tribes…widow remarriage has always
been the custom. In tribal society, there is no dowry system. Only bride-price...Among the tribals, insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime. Rape is unknown to them. Women have a place of honour in tribal society. (The Author in Conversation IM i-ix)

Mahasweta offers many such examples of strong, independent tribal women in many of her works, especially in those that are set in an earlier historical period. In The Book of the Hunter, the figure of Tejota stands tall and proud. She is the matriarch of the Shabar tribe, and the custodian of the oral lore and secret wisdom that is the key to their identity and survival. Such embodiments of courage and resilience can also be found in the stories with more contemporary settings. Dopdi Mehjen, the heroine of Mahasweta’s arguably most famous story “Draupadi”, is an active link in the Naxal rebellion of the 1970s who courageously confronts her oppressor. Mary Oraon, the protagonist of “The Hunt”, is a proud, independent, half-tribal woman who does not hesitate to reactivate and enact the tribal ritual of the women’s hunt to trap and kill her oppressor. “Tribal women have terrible resilience, terrible courage,” says Mahasweta. (Interview An Anthology 226). However, Mahasweta does not romanticize the tribal woman through such heroic portrayals. Instead, she historicizes her narratives and incorporates a critique of the socio-historical factors that have led to
their present oppressed and marginalized condition in India. The gendered exploitation of tribal women is embedded within the larger scene of class exploitation that was discussed in the second chapter. Their gender makes them vulnerable targets and helpless victims of sexual exploitation, in addition to the general class exploitation faced by their communities as a whole.

Most of Mahasweta’s works narrate the stories of tribal women as victims of such exploitative practices in post-independence India. Her journalistic articles highlight the statistical details of the working conditions of tribals, dalits and other poor women who work as migrant and bonded labourers in agriculture and industry in the states of Bihar, West Bengal and Punjab. *(Dust on the Road* 1-24, 87-96) She has narrativized the condition of the tribal women who are caught in this vicious cycle of exploitation and violence exploitation in many short stories. In the short story “The Fairytale of Rajabasha” *(Outcast* 57-82), Mahasweta uses the structure of a fairy tale to invoke the endless and repetitive pattern of exploitation that structures the lives of the tribals, both men and women. A fairy tale has a beginning, but no end, with only a series of episodes following a predictable pattern or formula, repeated endlessly. The only things that change in this pattern are the names of the characters, the time and the place.
The characters in this tale are the Ho tribals of Kolhan, the place is Rajabasha in Singhbhum district in the 1980s, when the tribal agitation for statehood for Jharkhand was at its peak. The tale follows the fortunes, or rather the misfortunes, of a Ho tribal couple, Sarjom Purti and Josmina. “Their’s was a true love marriage...There was much happiness and peace in this first chapter of the fairy tale of Rajabasha.” (57). The narrative juxtaposes the episode of the tribal's exploitation with the “fairytale” rise of the “adarsh kissans” of Punjab who run a profitable business by buying and selling poor tribals and dalits to use them as cheap labour in their fields of wheat and sugarcane. "Well-endowed, attractive women like Josmina are an added bonus.” (65) This is also only a reflection of the commonly held attitudes of the non-tribal male to women of lower castes and tribes. They are referred to as “wild jungle females”, sexually free and receptive, which is a reflection of how colonial attitudes to race and gender have become part of the mainstream Indian male's discourse. (66-67, 72) A terrifying cycle of rape and sexual exploitation continues unabated for almost a year, with episode following episode, till it seems unreal and "fairytale" -like to Sarjom and Josmina. “How exhausting and repetitive a part of their lifestory all this running away is!” (77)

As in all her stories, Mahasweta inserts the tribal’s discourse into the narrative, in an effort to foreground the tribal's perspective. Sarjom
and Josmina try to make sense of their misfortune, by harking back to their oral tradition of legend and myth. They remember the legend of the two magical “nagaras” or “iron drums” that the tribals found in the forest and which were later stolen by outsiders to build the “nagaras” or “towns” of Chottanagara and Monoharpur. "There was a time when we would beat the nagaras when the enemy entered Kolhan ... It would say, "Children of Kolhan! Beware! Beware!" (76). When she discovers she is pregnant after the last episode of rape, they return to their village, only to discover that the ancient drums have start beating in their lives. The strictures of their tribe declare a woman a “jatietka” (an outcaste) if she carries an outsider's child. Josmina thus suffers from the violence of the patriarchal structures of both her own community as well as non-tribal society. The tribal woman's body thus becomes a site where oppression is played out on three levels, that of class, tribe and gender. Their old traditions are as good as dead to tribal society today, but they are invariably invoked when it comes to a woman's honour, “But we forgot to beat the nagara when the likes of Nandlal entered! When was the nagara beaten? When a girl gave birth to a diku child! Society made such a girl jatietka!” (16)

Her fears for her family’s status in their society drive Josmina to suicide, scripting an end to this particular character in this particular episode in the fairytale. “The wind blew, the Koyna flowed on, the fairy
tale of Rajabasha did not end, not all fairytales do...” (81). Mahasweta Devi hints at the continuity of the cycle of the dehumanizing exploitation that is likely to continue in the name of progress and development, with the tribals, especially tribal women, at the receiving end. Caught in the cross-currents of the hegemonic male discourses of patriarchy, both within their own community and others, the tribal woman is thus repeatedly pushed into a position of powerlessness and becomes the object of violent sexual harassment, in addition to the already existing exploitation faced in the name of class and tribe.

In the story “Douloti the Bountiful” (IM 19-94), Mahasweta deals with the horrifying reality of women who are caught in the web of the bonded labour system in modern day India. Douloti Nagesia, the fourteen year old daughter of “Crook” Ganori Nagesia (so called because his back was broken when his master made him cart the plough on his own shoulders instead of a bullock's), belongs to a minor tribal community in Seora village of Palamu district. Crook Nagesia wonders about the injustice of the system that has kept his family poor and bonded for generations, but he is helpless to do anything about it. The caste/class hierarchies have been in place for so many years as to seem 'natural' to both the groups. “Behind it is a narrative that is as immemorial as the Ganga River or the Himalayas.” (26). It is also as
natural as this for the women of the bonded labourer to be the sexual slave of the masters.

What the Nagesias have not realized are the changes that have come into this system with the rapid industrialization of India's towns. It has created a new category of women: bonded prostitutes or “kamiya whores”. Women of lower castes and tribes from such poor rural areas are brought to shanty towns and industrial townships, and are worked as prostitutes under the most inhuman and exploitative condition imaginable. Douloti duplicates her father's career as a bondslave when she is sold into a vicious ring of prostitution run by the landlord-middle-man –contractor nexus, in the guise of marriage to the Brahman Paramanand Misra.

What follows is a realistic and nightmarish account in Mahasweta's staccato prose style of the horrors of rape and prostitution unleashed on Douloti who is a prototype of all such unfortunate women. As Radha Chakravarty remarks, "Douloti's body becomes a site for the inscription of multiple forms of power, political, economic, ethnic and gendered" ("Visionary Cartography" An Anthology 196). Douloti's unresisting acceptance of her terrible fate, which she shares with similar bond slaves in many states in India, comes from the fact that she has internalized the value-systems of this world that exploits her. As Gayatri Spivak observes:
Yet sweet, innocent, responsible Douloti is not a subject of resistance. Mahasweta dramatizes that difficult truth: internalized gendering perceived as ethical choice is the hardest roadblock for women the world over. The recognition of male exploitation must be supplemented with this acknowledgement. (Appendix IM xxiv-v).

The narrative moves forward in a jerky fashion, with the dialogues of the various players in the drama- the landlords, agents, pimps, prostitutes, brothel owners, socially committed citizens, the tribals- jostling with each other. Mahasweta employs her characteristic technique of narration, to set up a dialogic exchange between different discourses relevant in a particular situation. Mahasweta repeatedly problematizes the narration of the tale of Douloti's suffering by referring again to the “fairy tale” motif. The brahman’s offer to marry Douloti and the relief efforts and benevolent citizens who want to listen to the tribal’s story and “help” them also seem to be “a strange fairy tale” to the disillusioned tribals. (49) Douloti and the other women in the text have no voice in any matters and are shut out from the outside world. Their collective voice, or the discourse of the "gendered subaltern", is recovered through the four songs that are interspersed throughout the story, that speak of their condition in an idiom that is very different from the rest of the narrative:
These are all Paramananda's kamiyas.

Douloti and Reoti and Somni

Field work, digging soil, cutting wells is work

This one doesn't do it, that one doesn't do it…-

The boss has turned them into land

The boss ploughs and ploughs their land and raises the crop

They are all Paramananda's kamiya. (60).

This is how the women are kept in a state of unprotesting acceptance of their lot, through a discourse that reinforces and sanctions the violence committed on their bodies. The sociologist Leela Dubey has explained the ideology behind a very common tribal saying, "Man provides the seed while woman provides only the field". (71) According to this sexual and therefore "natural" conception, both the field and its produce (women and children) become the sole property of the person who sows the seeds, that is, the male. Such discourses serve to place the ownership of woman in the hands of the man, and in a larger sense, the society itself, reinforcing the ideology behind the creation of a patriarchal society and the subordination of women to the dictates of male power. (119-120)

In an ending that has been hailed as a masterful stroke of high irony and subversion, Mohan Srivastava, the conscientious school teacher, finds Douloti's wasted and putrefied body sprawled across the
map of India on the morning of the anniversary of India's independence, which they are about to celebrate in his school. The ravaged body of the kamiya whore parodies the figure of "Mother India" that symbolizes the nation, exposing the hollowness of the rhetoric of Indian "womanhood" that is the bedrock of the Indian nation and culture. Mahasweta juxtaposes the narratives of the suffering tribals alongside the narratives of the other stakeholders in the Indian nation, setting up a dialogue that interrogates the structures that have created and sustained the exploitation of tribals, both men and women, in this country. The critic Jaidev remarks that although Douloti is important in her own right in the text:

...she is more important as the site on which a whole variety of 'the Great Indian Meaning'- mythological, historical, sociocultural, class, casteist and gender-converges as a set of operative, oppressive forces. It is in their astonishing range that these forces turn "Douloti" into a national allegory, or, rather, an elaborate charge sheet against the nation. (88)

Another very cruel form of victimization that the tribal women in India have had to face for generations is related to the belief and practice of witchery and witch hunting. This is an instance where tribal women are victims of the traditions of their own cultures. Most tribal communities in India hold age-old traditions in the belief and practice of
witchcraft and witch hunting, and they have a strong hold on the minds of the people. Its origins are supposed to lie in the animistic tribal religious beliefs and practices that believe in the pervading presence of spirits, both good and evil. The Santhals have a myth regarding the origin of witchcraft that throws light on the social constructions behind this practice. The myth tells of how the Santhal women tricked their god Maran Buru and secretly learned witchcraft from him. In revenge, Maran Buru gives the men the power to witch hunt instead. The myth works as a gendered discourse, creating a cultural tradition that legitimizes the authority of men over women by designating women as witches and men as witch hunters. (Troisi 87-94; S.C.Roy i-xii; K.S.Singh “Hinduism and Tribal Religion” 1-16)

Witchcraft is also seen as a means by which women appropriated sacred spaces for themselves, as they were also excluded from ritual worship at the sacred groves of the community. Seemingly inexplicable happenings in the tribals' lives such as illnesses, misfortunes, untimely deaths, crop failure, vagaries of the weather and so on are attributed to vengeful and evil spirits (Bongas, in tribal parlance) who then have to be placated through rituals. These spirits are supposed to operate through a medium, usually identified as women, most often 'expendable' women like widows, old and other destitute women. These women are then "identified" as witches and are hunted down and either killed or
driven away. Such cultural traditions work in tandem with socio-economic factors of tribal life, especially in the present context of rapid change. As they lose their traditional habitats and occupations to rapid modernization and face increasing poverty and deprivation, they find their traditional knowledge base crumbling, and look for answers in their age-old beliefs and practices. Unable to comprehend their loss, they attribute it to evil spirits and witchcraft. As Bhowmick observes, "...the accusation of witchcraft is ...used as a means to cope with societal disharmony and crisis by designating a culprit ... restoring the social order." (390). The practice of witchcraft gets entangled in a myriad of factors that work adversely for the unfortunate women caught in its web. (Sarkar 49-57; Bhowmick 389-392)

Mahasweta's short story "The Witch", included in the collection *Bitter Soil* (57-122) embodies all the socio-cultural paradigms that make this practice one of the worst kinds of atrocities perpetrated on tribal women. The narrative centres on the happenings in a poverty-ridden village in Kuruda province in contemporary India, where the Oraon tribals and other poor villagers are frantically searching for a reason for the famine that is staring them in the face. Seeing vultures and kites circling the sky, and interpreting it as a harbinger of misfortune, they are planning to desert their village and go to the government relief camp. The village atmosphere abounds in superstition, rapidly degenerating
into a vicious situation where people mistrust each other. When the famine starts taking effect- children die from illness and contaminated relief food, cattle die, crops and trees wither – the rumour of the "daini" or "the witch" spreads like wild fire. The story is taken forward through the means of gossip and hearsay, which is a literary technique often used by Mahasweta, with every line and paragraph begins with phrases like “It seems...” or "Have you heard...", as in the following passage:

It seems that in Murhai, when an old Ganju woman struck a flint to light a beedi, the stones yielded blood instead of sparks.

It seems that somewhere a newborn infant walks down the road kicking a fire-bearing pot before him...

No one could figure out why these things were happening. Tura is a Munda village. The pahan there said his young daughter vanished into thin air as she was returning to Tura from Tahar. Total chaos. Terror everywhere. (58-59)

Reason and sense are sacrificed as all their present misfortunes are attributed to the daini and women of all communities and ages start falling victims to the nameless terror. Everything and everybody in the village are drawn into the story of the daini, from the Brahman priest to the visiting "Krishna Consciousness" foreigners. Women are kept under strict surveillance and many are chased away or killed at the slightest
suspicion. “All husbands-fathers -brothers -sons were compelled to keep watch upon the women.” (60). As more players join the fray, the narrative becomes charged with heavy irony and black humour, two of Mahasweta’s most effective narrative weapons. The voices of the various players vie with each other for maximum mileage, heightening the effect of irony. The spiritual angle is given a humorous twist through the "Krishna Consciousness" group represented by a white man:

If he finds a genuine Bharatiya daini, he'll take her to his own land. He also decreed that if the daini is to be found, it is essential for everyone to mistrust everyone else, wholesale.

He has said- if needs be, mistrust yourself as well. (64)

The police officer in charge of the area makes a token gesture of reporting the incidents and washes his hands of the affair, saying, "Sarkars come and go. But dainis are forever. Who wants to die of a daini's curse?" (68) The relief officers, mission workers, the local sadhus and the official of the Adivasi Welfare Ministry they all have their own interests and try to exploit the situation without doing anything substantial to change it for the better. The light-hearted banter of the various non-tribal groups is set in a dialogic engagement with the tribals' very real fear of their desperate situation. In a sudden and powerful change of tone that is another of her characteristic fictional technique, Mahasweta inserts the story of the "Kuruda belt daini" into the
sophisticated national and international arena of discourse, by referring to the "racy belles-lettrist essay published in an American magazine, complete with coloured pictures." (83) In a sharply ironic passage, she lampoons both the "Indianized" westerner and the modern "westernized" Indian for whom the poor Indian villager and tribal are just "exotic" objects, to be "studied" and discoursed upon. In the last stage, Sharan Mathur, the well-meaning school master, amateur journalist and researcher, joins in, having struck a deal with the white gentleman to "sell" his "story" to him, yet another ironic look at “mainstream” interests in tribal affairs. (83-87)

The tribals are caught in this vortex and have to look to their own resources to resolve the situation. The Oraon and Munda tribals of the neighboring villages unite in the witch hunt. The tempo of the narrative is gradually built through the increasing fear and frenzy of the tribals as they near their target. They sight a naked woman with a distended belly, and chase her into a cave, and as they prepare to set fire to the mouth of the cave and smoke her out, a strange, thin cry is heard from inside the cave. In a tragic moment of realization, the pahan of Tura runs into the cave and when the people follow him, they see a young woman lying with a new-born infant. In a finale replete with tragic irony, the daini turns out to be Somri, the deaf-and-dumb daughter of the tribal priest who had been sent to work in the landlord Hanuman Mishra's house. His
son had raped her and when she got pregnant, was sent packing. Fearing ostracisation from her community for bearing an outsider's child, she had wandered alone, surviving on raw flesh of birds and dogs. In a rare show of solidarity, the tribals save her and the child, and bear her back to the village. They realize that they have been tricked and abused, their own beliefs being used against them. When the cloud of superstition is removed from their eyes, they realize that nothing has changed in the age-old cycle of exploitation. The outsider and observer Sharan Mathur also realises realizes the damage that the interference of the so-called civilized society can do in the name of academic interest to the tribal community.

Mahasweta's narrative brings alive the complexities and contradictions that are involved in situations of this kind, where tribal beliefs and mainstream exploitation intersect. Sociologists observe that one of the functions of witchery and witch hunting is to get rid of unwanted women. "The unwanted females are chiefly widows, but may also include women who have become pregnant, but whom the men concerned do not want to marry." (Sharma and Mittal Tribal Women 167) The incident of the Pahan's daughter going missing was casually mentioned early in the narrative, and is later recovered, embodying the multi-layered socio-economic-cultural tangle in which the doubly marginalized tribal woman is caught. The short story "Bayen" is another
powerful portrayal of a low-caste woman at the receiving end of a society's taboos, torn between her love for her son and her interiorization of her own role as a witch. In her article on the practice of witchcraft among tribals, Mahasweta warns against the tendency to uphold these practices in the name of preserving tribal traditions, while turning a blind eye to the blatant injustice of the situation, vis-a-vis tribal women. She also observes that the situation can be combated through the proper implementation of education and healthcare programmes for the tribals as well as through the enactment of laws. (Dust on the Road 48-57, 166-180).

The short story "Behind the Bodice: Choli ke Peeche", translated by Gayatri Chakravarthy Spivak and included in the collection Breast Stories (138-157), is a masterly and sharply ironic tale of how entrenched attitudes to tribal women perpetrated through the medium of academic discourse and popular culture expose them to sexual exploitation and violence. The story is a spoof on the discourse of commercial Hindi films that very often set the trends in popular culture in India. The narrative plays upon a line from a song from the popular Hindi film of the nineties, called Khalnayak (1993), that goes “Choli ke peeche kya hai, choli ke peche? Choli mein dil hai mera...” (this can be roughly translated as "What's behind the bodice, behind the bodice? Behind the bodice is my heart..."). In the film, however, the camera is
focused on the lead female actor, Madhuri Dixit's ample, heaving bosom, so that the sub text shouts loud and clear that behind the bodice lies her breasts, “heart” being a sanitized and censored replacement for "breast". Thus the focus of the narrative quickly pans onto two images, namely, ‘what lies behind' and 'breasts'. The narrative is woven around these two images as Mahasweta exposes the harsh reality behind the sexual exploitation of a poor tribal woman. The opening sentence is an ironic comment on the hold that the song had on the popular imagination of the nation at that time:

What is there was the national problem that year. When it became a national issue, the other fuckups of that time- e.g. crop failure-earthquake, the unreasonable demands of Medha Patkar.... hundreds of rape-murder -lockup torture... all this remained non-issues. Much more important than this was choil-ke peche- behind the bodice. (“Behind the Bodice” 138)

Upin, a freelance journalist and photographer who is equally at home in the villages of Bihar and Orissa and in a posh Delhi hotel, enters the narrative. He takes a photograph of Gangor, a poor tribal migrant labourer breastfeeding her baby, and publishes it along with a banner which says “The halfnaked amplebreasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped. Save them! Save the breast!” (142). She is
a tough woman, hardened by a poverty-stricken life, and who has learned all the tricks needed to survive, which includes asking Upin money for her picture.

The colonial practice of constructing “other” cultures and peoples through the discourses of anthropology, using descriptive monographs and photographs has been referred to earlier in this thesis. In colonial discourses, female bodies were used as symbols for the conquered lands, pointing to the close overlaps between colonial and sexual domination. The native, aboriginal women of Asia, Africa and America were always depicted in artistic as well as scientific discourses, as wild, naked, savage, and sexually uncontrolled, thereby constructing images of race and gender that has percolated down into the mindset of most postcolonial countries. Almost every ethnographic monograph describing a tribe would include photographs of scantily clad tribal men and women, with "scientific" descriptions of their anatomical features, as if they were a separate species of human being itself. As Ania Loomba points out, one thing that was common to both colonial and anti-colonial men was their shared perspectives on gender. (151-172) Women of the subaltern classes were constructed through images not very different from those created through the practice of colonial discourse.
In the story, Upin, the educated and liberated modern Indian male, seems to replicate many of these colonial attitudes and practices. His photographs of the half-naked tribal woman and his "Save the Breast" campaign embody the modern patronizing attitudes towards the "endangered" tribal cultures. Just as tribal cultures are represented by selected "parts" of their culture, like objects, songs, customs, or dress, while the people themselves are left to rot, the breast here becomes for Upin a symbol for the "natural beauty" of the tribal woman. He contrasts this "natural" breast with the silicon-implanted ones of his wife Shital. Upin hides his sexual fascination for Gangor's breasts in his pseudo-scientific/aesthetic discourse, providing it with a moral rationale:

Learn to praise and respect a beautiful thing. Why Gangor and her natural, most complex sweat glands or bosom had turned Upin's head he didn't know. The breast can be called a complex sweat gland. There is plenty of fat in it. This glandular collective is most charming.

Upin knew all this, he knew. Not a breast blessed by liquid silicone, but natural, hence unique. He felt that Gangor and her chest were endangered. ("Behind the Bodice" 145-150)

The relevance of such academic discourse in the lives of the modern tribals is suspect and very dangerous, as events prove. Upin's
attitude towards Gangor also mimics the colonial love-hate relationship. He is both attracted to her primal beauty and repelled by the filth and ugliness of her life:

Under the dirty red cloth the cleavage of her Konark chest, resplendent.

A train passing, Gangor's crowd looking at it. Her breasts like the cave paintings of Ajanta, against the backdrop of the sky.

Dirty choli. Dirty red cloth, hair full of lice, filth...filth...(145)

When this discourse of "exotic" tribal beauty is transferred to a contemporary Indian scene, it seems strangely out of place. In modern India, tribals like Gangor do not live in pristine "natural" surroundings, but in underprivileged and impoverished conditions. As Spivak rightly observes, "Upin made Gangor self-conscious about the unique beauty of her breasts, without any thought of the social repercussions" (Introduction Breast Stories xiii). The false sense of power that her photographs give her ends in Gangor's run-in with the police, who soon put her in her "proper place", by booking her under false charges and gang-raping her in custody. Upin's photographs and the popular songs like "choli ke peeche" bounce off each other, together bringing to the surface the undercurrents of sexual violence that always threaten the lives of women like Gangor. The open, visual display of her breasts in Upin's
photograph and the hide-and-seek titillation of the song "choli ke peeche" prove disastrous for Gangor. "You ruined her with your pictures, Sir, otherwise, how would she dare?" ("Behind the Bodice" 152), says a local to Upin.

Like an anthropologist who visits the site of his work years later only to find his "object of study" in ruins, Upin returns to find Gangor living the wretched life of a low prostitute, gyrating to the lines of "choi ke peeche...". In a powerful final scene reminiscent of the ending of "Draupadi", Gangor removes her bodice and shows Upin "what is there, behind the bodice"- the mangled remains of her once-proud breasts, torn and destroyed by the lust of men, now padded up with straw and chaff. She accuses Upin of exposing her to this violence, and inviting ruin on her through his pictures of her breasts:

Gangor breathes hard. Says in a voice ragged with anger,

Don't you hear? Constantly playing it, singing it, setting the boys on me...behind the bodice...the bodice...choli ke peeche...choli ke... No Gangor...

You are a bastard too sir...you took photos of my chest, eh?

OK...I'll show ... but I'll take everything from your pocket, a-11... (156)

Gangor's ruined breasts seem to be "two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava" at Upin. (156) It is not a victorious resistance for the
disempowered tribal woman, but merely her angry registering of her reality. Unable to bear the guilt, Upin rushes out onto the railway tracks at night and his dead body is found later. Both his death and Gangor's plight go unnoticed in India and does not make it to the "national" news. In typical fashion, Mahasweta refuses to romanticize either Gangor's fate or Upin's, the plain style being itself an ironic comment on the events. The story is a trenchant look at the effects of mainstream discourses and interventions (through news items, photographs, ethnography, etc.) on the lives of the tribals, which is one of the major concerns in Mahasweta's fiction. The narrative underlines the fact that all the hype and hoopla about 'tribal upliftment' and 'cultural uniqueness' only obscures the very real issues that affect their lives, namely poverty and deprivation reflecting Mahasweta's concern with the dialogic movement between discourse and its actual, real subject, here the tribal in modern India. Mahasweta herself has answered the question she raises in the beginning of the narrative: "behind the bodice, what is there...?". What is there is "ganadarshan" or "the rape of the people". (qtd. in Introduction Breast Stories x-xv) It is the terrible rape of democratic and human values in free and modern India that is the object of her critique.

If Gangor's resistance is articulated through defiant gestures and angry words, Mahasweta articulates the resistance of the eponymous
protagonist of "Draupadi" in a much more layered and complex manner. One of her most celebrated short stories, "Draupadi" (Breast Stories 19-38) is a powerful articulation of the resistance of the silenced subaltern woman against the hegemonic structures of class, race and gender imposed upon her. It is a narrative whose multiple layers are drawn from the mythological story of Draupadi and from the tribal involvement in the Naxal insurgency in West Bengal in the 1970s. Shobha Ghosh remarks that Mahasweta "wrenches the character out of myth and inserts her into history", thereby rewriting both the myth as well the "official" history of the Naxal movement. ("Refiguring Myth" 97).

The story centres around the "apprehending" and "encounters" against a group of Naxal rebels of whom Dopdi Mehjen, a woman of the Santhal tribe, is a key link. The narrative begins in a typically ironic tone, with the "official" version of the tribal rebellion and Dopdi being identified as a "...most notorious female" (“Draupadi” Breast Stories 19) who is wanted in many crimes. The central male character, Mr. Senanayak, is "the elderly Bengali specialist in combat and extreme Left politics", representing the state. (21) He is a powerful thinker and military strategist who has tried and tested his "theories" on how to defeat the enemy by learning their language, using tribal informants and "kountering" techniques:
In order to destroy the enemy, become one. Thus he understood them by (theoretically) becoming one of them. He hopes to write on all this in the future. He has also decided that in his written work he will demolish the gentlemen and highlight the message of the harvest workers. (22-23)

Like all Mahasweta' women characters, Dopdi is also rooted in her particular social milieu and historical period and her story forms part of the larger class struggle (here the Naxal movement) that frames the narrative. She is aware of her tribal identity and proud of her "pure and unadulterated black blood of Champabhumi" that makes her a fearless fighter like her forefathers. (31) The narrative follows Dopdi as she moves through the forest on her mission. She accepts with equanimity the fact that she will have to give her life for the cause and so when she is "apprehended", she fulfills her duty by giving the signal before she is arrested. She is taken to the camp and Senanayak begins the next leg of his combat tactics as he orders his men to "counter" Dopdi. In a passage that is starkly realistic, yet deeply tragic, Mahasweta pictures Dopdi suffering the worst form of violence as she is tied up and brutally gang-raped several times through the night. In the morning when Senanayak asks for Dopdi to be brought to his tent, she goes to him, naked, with her body matted with blood and dirt. She refuses to cover herself and challenges the terrified men to clothe her if they can:
There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, kounter me- come on, kounter me-?

Dopdi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terrible afraid. (36-37)

If the narrative is compelling in the subversive power of its ending, it is no less challenging in the way it evokes multiple layers of discourse related to the sexual violence unleashed on women in India. All critics agree in pointing out that it is not by accident, but by deliberate aesthetic design that Mahasweta chooses to name her heroine "Dopdi", a dialectal version of "Draupadi" of the *Mahabharata*. Significantly, although "Dopdi" is used in the text as such, the title is "Draupadi", and the character is not portrayed as being aware of the parallels of her story with that of the epic character. The scene of the public disrobing of Draupadi in the "Sabha Parva" of the *Mahabharata* is one that is embedded in the consciousness of every Indian, male or female, and has been interpreted in many ways. Feminist scholarship unitedly refers to the incident as the illustration of the ways in which such discourses have constructed and perpetuated the idea of the woman's body being the site on which male hegemonic structures operate. A woman's honour is presumed to reside in her inviolate body
and its violation through public stripping or rape leads to loss of honour both for the woman and the group/family/nation to which she belongs. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's disrobing is the culmination of the dishonouring of the Pandavas.

When Mahasweta relocates this epic scene in her story, she echoes, and thereby subverts, many of these discursive structures. The polyandrous marital relations of Draupadi are hideously parodied through the gang-rape of Dopdi. Elsewhere, Mahasweta has hinted that the dark-skinned, beautiful Draupadi of the epic could have been a tribal woman historically, since many tribes in India practiced polyandry. (Author in Conversation *IM i*). The men who raped her to dishonour and subdue her do not know how to react when she refuses to act on predictable lines and clothe herself. As Spivak observes, Dopdi "acts in not acting" thereby upsetting her oppressor's carefully laid plans for her subjugation. (*In Other Worlds* 195) By refusing to acknowledge her "dishonour", she also refuses to acknowledge their "manhood". She thus turns the male discourse of power on its head by transforming it into the weapon with which she confronts her rapists.

In invoking the Draupadi of the epic, Mahasweta engages with the age-old discursive structures of patriarchy that have defined women's subjectivities in India. Her resistance lies in subverting the male construct of equating feminine honour and purity with the inviolate
female body. This is done by making Dopdi's mutilated black body the central narrative focus and the instrument of subversion. With one stroke she also achieves the insertion of the subaltern woman's contemporary history into the male-dominant discourses of epic and history. Unlike the Draupadi of the epic, Dopdi is not a privileged woman, but of a marginalized tribe and class and her violation is equal to the violation of her group, who receive no protection from the authorities or the state. But the narrative offers a small but affirmative gesture of resistance to these hegemonic structures through Dopdi's defiance in the last scene. Although Spivak opines that as "an agent of resistant rage", the character of Gangor is more powerful than Dopdi, "Draupadi" articulates the narrative of resistance on many levels and is therefore much more powerful and complex. (Introduction Breast Stories xv)

In the short story "The Hunt", (IM 1-17), Mahasweta articulates the idea of resistance in a more explicit and assertive manner. In this story Mahasweta invokes tribal mythology, weaving her narrative around the myth of the origin of the ritual called the "Jani Parab" or "Jani Shikar", when the women of the Oraon tribe go hunting once in twelve years. The myth is reactivated in a contemporary situation by the female protagonist who subverts the myth and uses it to revenge herself on her potential rapist. Mary Oraon, the protagonist of the story is a half-Oraon, half-white woman, her Oraon mother being a victim of colonial
violence in the form of rape. Her hybrid status confers on her a unique and paradoxical position vis-a-vis her tribe:

Because she is the illegitimate daughter of a white father the Oraons don’t think of her as their blood and do not place the harsh injunctions of their own society upon her. She would have rebelled if they had. She is unhappy that they don’t. (5)

Mary is thus a truly "hybrid" post-colonial citizen, torn between her sense of alienation and her need for belonging. But paradoxically, it also allows her the space to exercise her freedom that is denied her fellow tribeswomen. She is a fearless, independent woman who lives life on her own terms. Trouble starts when the contractor Tehsildar Singh sets up his timber-felling business at Tohri and starts to pursue Mary. The story of Mary's persecution by Tehsildar Singh is framed within the larger story of the destruction of the traditional forest lands where the tribals have lived for centuries. When Tehsildar's advances become increasingly intolerable, Mary begins to see him as an animal rather than the hunter. "Mary thought he was an animal. A- ni- mal. The syllables beat on her mind. Suddenly Mary smiled." (12). She makes a tryst with him, agreeing to submit to him in the forest, on the day of the Jani Parab, the women's hunting festival. She leads the women in the hunt, singing and dancing with abandon:
In her coloured sari and red blouse Mary is now like the flambouyant tree in motion...A great thirst dances in her blood....Today a small thing cannot please her. She wants to hunt the big beast. A man, Tehsildar. (15).

As the hunt reaches it climax, Mary activates the ancient ritual, gives it a macabre twist and the hunted becomes the hunter. She kills Tehsildar, throws his carcass into the ravine, and escapes with her Muslim lover, Jalim. In a conversation with Gayatri Spivak, Mahasweta Devi observes that the Santhals celebrated the ritual hunting festival as the Festival of Justice, when wrong doers were brought to book after the hunt. (The Author in Conversation IM xi). K.S.Singh relates the myth that tells the story of how women were forced to defend their territory against the enemy, a myth which was first recorded by S.C.Roy in his book The Oraons of Chotanagpur. ("Gender Roles in History: Women as Hunters" Kelkar et al 57-58). He observes that the Jani Parab of the Oraons has its origin "in the long forgotten tradition of women being hunters... in which women not only participated but also led the hunting; a role they gave up later; a grudging acceptance of the male role." (58)

The honour of a woman is respected in all tribal communities. When Mary accesses the power of her tribe's ancient ritual, is an act of justice that vindicates the pride and honour of Mary and the whole tribe. "The rhetoric of Devi's story projects Mary Oraon's murder of Tehsildar as an
act of justice performed on behalf of the whole tribal community," according to Radha Chakravarty. (“Visionary Cartography” *An Anthology* 194) Mary's acting out of the myth is also her way of subverting the stereotyped gender role prescribed to her in the myth itself, and thereby resisting the patriarch structures of her own society.

Notwithstanding the critical debate over whether it is Mary's hybrid status that gives her the courage to reverse her position as victim and reinterpret the myth of the hunt, it is a powerful and highly subversive narrative that Mahasweta Devi unfolds. Mary's sense of alienation from her cultural roots probably gives her the necessary aesthetic distancing that enables her to reinterpret the myth from her own perspective. Studies have revealed that tribal art is rooted in concrete situations, and is not given to generalized abstractions. As Walter J. Ong says, it is "empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced". (45) Mahasweta Devi here uses an important feature of oral art, especially seen in the narration of myths, which is that it is at once traditional and creative. Each narrator recalls the received story but also adds new elements according to the contemporary situation and a new audience. (41-42) As Spivak comments, "...unlike the ethnographic account of tribal identity in rituals, Mahasweta shows an individual activating ritual into contemporary resistance." (Appendix IM 202) Thus tradition and history
are preserved while changes are also recorded. If the ritual was an almost happy occasion for the Oraon women to relive their more empowered past, it takes on a different hue in post-colonial India, where the native kings of pre-colonial times and the white colonial masters are replaced by the equally rapacious middle-men and contractors. The tribal community has a deep seated awareness of these partly historical and partly mythical accounts of their encounters with other communities, through their oral lore and rituals. The historical and the mythical coalesce once again as a fictional technique, as Mahasweta narrates the doubly disadvantaged tribal woman's situation in modern India. (Nair “Subversion and Resistance” Litterit 111-119)

In "Behind the Bodice", "Draupadi" and "The Hunt", Mahasweta locates the resistance of the tribal women on the sites of myth, tribal history and contemporary life. "Draupadi" achieves a subversion of the mythical Draupadi's story while at the same time endangering the stabilities of the gender/class/state hegemonies. If Dopdi is presumably unconscious of the fact of her subversion, Mary Oraon is deliberate in her actions. "The Hunt" is probably the only story of Mahasweta's that articulates a clear and unambiguous ending that even justifies its violent conclusion. Shobha Venkatesh Ghosh observes that it is through such powerful yet unstable endings that Mahasweta effects the articulation of subaltern resistance. The endings of both "Behind the Bodice" and
"Draupadi" are quite similar. Although both Gangor and Dopdi resist their oppressors through defiance, anger and courage, they have both suffered outrageous attacks on their bodies and spirits. Through the powerful yet indeterminate endings of these stories, Mahasweta links them to "...a larger discourse of resistance that knows no resolutions or closures but only a persistent problematization of gender and politics." ("Reading Resistance" New Quest 73)

Another aspect of womanhood that Mahasweta has repeatedly narrativized is that of motherhood. The representation of woman as mother has had a long and arduous journey in the history of Indian literature. Sociological and literary critics have pointed out that the biological role of women as mothers (natural) has been overlaid with and even overcome by the sociological construction (cultural) of Indian motherhood. From the early Hindu scriptures onwards, woman has been identified with nature in her role as the begetter and nurturer of children. In this role she has been deified and revered, and the numerous deities and cults of the "mother goddess" in India are testimony to this. The most common figure of the Indian mother is thus that of the self-sacrificing, self-effacing, loving, woman whose existence is synonymous with the existence and interests of her family. During the nationalist period in Indian history, this figure of the Indian mother came to be identified with that of the Indian nation, whose honour had to
be protected by her patriotic sons. Such images, perpetrated through literature and popular culture, have led to much stereotyping with regard to motherhood in Indian society. At the same time these constructions have been used as instruments of subordination against women for centuries in India and elsewhere. "Maternal responsibility is used as an alibi to exclude a woman from power, authority, decision and a participatory role in public life”, observes Maithreyi Krishnaraj. (34) Contemporary feminist studies in India have engaged with these stereotypical images of Indian motherhood, uncovering in the process the social structures in Indian society that have led to the exploitation of women.

Mahasweta has also engaged with the varied discourses of motherhood prevalent in India in her fiction. Her portrayals of mothers are drawn from history, myth and contemporary life. In the famous story "Stanadayini" she uses the maternal breast as the metaphor, dramatizing the commodification of motherhood. In *Mother of 1084*, she portrays a middle-class working mother, Sujatha, who slowly and painfully awakens to the political and social reality of the Naxalite movement that deprives her of her son. Her short story "Bayen" is another powerful portrayal of a mother torn between her love for her son and society's taboos. *After Kurukshetra* engages with the story of mothers from mythology and epic- Kunti, Gandhari Souvali- to interrogate and even
rewrite the tales that contributed to the construction of motherhood in India. The stories in the collection *In the Name of the Mother* are heart-rending portrayals of mothers who are forced to sell their girl children or watch them die in their miserable struggles for survival in modern India. With a deep understanding of the norms of tribal societies, Mahasweta has articulated the aspect of motherhood in relation to the larger aspects of tribal culture and identity in her texts. The portrayal of tribal women as mothers in three of Mahasweta Devi's texts, namely the novel *The Book of the Hunter*, the short stories "Ma, From Dawn to Dusk" and "Kunti and the Nishadin" uncovers aspects of motherhood hitherto unseen in "mainstream" fiction as well as in her own fiction dealing with non-tribal life. The portrayals of mother-figures in these works range from the figures in mythology and epic to the poorest of the modern day tribal mothers.

In *The Book of the Hunter*, Mahasweta depicts the life of the reclusive forest-dwelling hunting tribe, the Shabars and offers the reader an unforgettable portrayal of Tejota, the matriarch of the tribe. Mahasweta's typically sparse description of Tejota belies the towering personality that she is. "Tejota was an elderly woman possessing a rock-hard, dark body with broad shoulders, broad hips, and no signs of aging around the neck or under the chin." (56). She is a woman highly respected for her wisdom by the whole village society, both tribals and
non-tribals. Tejota is not just mother to her son Kalya and his wife Phuli, but to the whole tribe whose welfare is her concern. She is the proud bearer of the cultural heritage of the tribe, possessing the secret wisdom about the mythology and oral lore of the tribe. She is also a healer, with deep knowledge about the forest, medicinal plants, the cycles of nature and the weather. Going against the traditions of patriarchy prevalent in the tribe, her father Danko Shabar, the patriarch of the tribe had passed his knowledge onto his daughter, rather than to a male who had disobeyed the hunting rules of the tribe.

When it is time for Tejota to pass on her inheritance to her son Kalya, however, she hesitates, as she finds him angry, hasty and too immature to receive this knowledge. She sees in her son the conflict arising out of the changes overtaking the distinct cultural identity of the tribe and she understands his anger, but is unable to cure him of it. When Kalya dies in the hunt and Phuli kills herself, she is dignified in her grief. She puts aside her own grief and leads the tribe to their next settlement after the tragedy of the hunt. "Tejota's absence made everyone feel a little helpless, from the king's palace to the shops in the market, from the prostitute's house to the Muslim settlement..." (130). It a measure of her stature in the village and speaks volumes of the level of respect that tribal communities once enjoyed in their interactions with other groups in India's villages.
Tejota's role as a mother extends beyond the constraints of her immediate family and encompasses the fate of the whole tribe and its future. She upholds her responsibility towards the larger interests of her tribe, to the nature that sustains their life, to the forest and to Abhaya, their protector. She understands that this heavy responsibility ought to outweigh her affection for her son and she finds the strength of character to deny Kalya his patriarchal inheritance, namely the responsibility of bearing the knowledge of the tribe. Aware of the need to preserve the oral wisdom of their tribe that is the key to their cultural survival, Tejota exerts her choice and imparts her wisdom to Mukundaram, a non-tribal and Brahmin scholar-priest to boot. In taking this decision, Tejota is not only asserting her independence, but is also going against the tradition in the tribe to mistrust Brahmins. By defying the conventions of her tribe and passing on their oral lore onto Mukundaram, she facilitates the interpolation of the tribal narrative into the dominant literary conventions of the day. She is impelled in this decision by the realization that the unique identity of the Shabars is being eroded under the onslaught of more dominant and powerful societies, and ought to be preserved at least in narrative. Mahasweta recovers the figure of Tejota from Mukundaram's mangalakavya Chandimangal and invests her with agency and power.
The novel also offers portraits of mother characters from the non-tribal communities in the village who would compare and contrast with that of the figure of Tejota. Mukunda's mother Daibaki never appears in the novel, but her spirit pervades it. Mahasweta's portrayal of Daibaki, a traditional Brahmin woman and widow, is refreshingly different and non-typical. She is portrayed as a strong-minded and strong-willed woman whose practical brain rescues her household when they fall into difficult times. It is she who instills in Mukunda the need to value equally the traditions of arming and learning. She goes against the family's tradition of the men becoming scholars and instead initiates her son into farming. She tells him, "Mukunda, my boy, don't ever take rice for granted! There may always be rice in your home, but everyone else isn't that fortunate." (26) After her death, she appears in Mukunda's dreams, offering him practical advice, comfort and inspiring him to write his epic. Mukunda of course replicates the discourse of divine motherhood by identifying the tribals' Goddess Abhaya with his own mother. At the end of the novel, when he sits down to compose his "Abhayamangal", his paean to the forest Goddess and her people, the goddess appears to him in the form of his mother, "Mukunda closed his eyes. It must have been Abhayachandi herself who had appeared in Daibaki's for at that time." (132)
Mukunda's wife is also a mother and it is through her interactions with the tribal woman Phuli that Mukunda looses his prejudice about the tribals. Although she is portrayed as a traditional, meek and docile Brahman wife, Mahasweta works subtle strands of individuality and assertiveness into these two women characters (both the wife and the mother), investing them with an agency that is instrumental in bringing about Mukunda's mental transformation and the consequent inclusion of the Shabar's tale in the epic. It is his wife who befriends the tribal girl Phuli and when Mukunda finds her ways "shameless", she gently corrects him, saying that that is their way, and just because it is different from theirs doesn't make it bad. She prays to the Goddess Abhaya, adopting her as her own. The novel highlights the give and take between the women in the village who belong to all castes and classes, from the queen to the tribal women. Tejota's medicines and Abhaya's blessings are sought by all women at the time of childbirth and for the welfare of their families. Above all, there is Abhaya, embodying the power of nature itself, the mother of all living creatures, giving everyone his /her due, whose benevolent spirit pervades the village and unites the villagers in spite of their differences of caste, class and gender. In fact although it is Mukunda who writes the epic, it is Mahasweta's women characters, both tribal and non-tribal, who are the instigators and the inspiration behind it.
Mahasweta Devi's short story "Ma, From Dawn to Dusk" (In the Name of the Mother 1-32) is the story of Jati, a woman of a nomadic gypsy tribe, called the "pakhmaras" or bird-hunters. They claim their ancestry to Jara the hunter of tribal mythology and lived by trapping and selling birds. In the present day world, however, they do additional work in the salt mines and cashew orchards of Medinipur. The narrative relates the "amazing story" of how the tribal woman Jati becomes Sadhan's (her son) dawn-to-dusk mother. Jateshwari is now a poor widow struggling to feed her retarded son Sadhan and keep herself from sexual predatory. Mahasweta once again looks at the complex web of relations that a poor tribal woman has to negotiate -both within and outside her community- to survive in contemporary India. Jati had married a man from outside her community, and therefore she is ostracized. When her husband dies, she could not go back to her own community and struggles to preserve the lives of herself and her son.

As a means of survival, she transforms herself into a mystic supposedly possessing divine powers of prediction and healing, calling herself Thakurni in this new avatar. In order to keep up her divine mystique in front of the public, she is Thakurni to all during the day, even her son, while she reverts to being his mother only after dark. Thus she becomes a "dawn-to-dusk mother" to her son and the spiritual mother to the rest of the world. This is the only way she can manage to
feed her imbecile son who does not recognize anything except his need for food and his love for his mother. Her circumstances thus force her to deny her own son maternal affection to sustain her role as spiritual mother to the whole society. But ironically, she is exploited in both these roles- as a holy mother she caters to the "spiritual needs of society, while as her imbecile son's mother, she struggles to satisfy his insatiable hunger. Poverty never escapes them and even after her death her son has to beg and borrow for her funeral. Through the realistic portrayal of Jati's poverty-ridden life, the author justifies the strategy she evolves for her survival.

The narrative is pervaded with irony and dark humour while portraying the hypocrisy and opportunism that accompanies the peddling of "spirituality". Mahasweta indicts the collective stereotyping in society that perpetuates the myth of divine motherhood through this story. The same society that was closing in on the helpless woman readily accepts her in her divine form, but for her, it is only another way of survival and of fulfilling her responsibility towards her offspring. The "divine mother" is a concept that is associated with mainstream hindu society and the narrative shows the tribal woman subverting this discourse as a strategy for her own survival. It is an ironic comment on the idea of "sthree shakti" or female power embodied by the divine
mother ideal. The supposedly divine mother, the "empowered" Thakurni is, in her dual role, a powerless, marginalized tribal woman, struggling to feed her child and preserve her self from sexual violation.

The story achieves a subversion of the idea of divine motherhood, while upholding the value of genuine maternal love and responsibility. The narrative also achieves a debunking of the "divine mother" image through the association that Sadhan makes between his mother and the smell of rice- it is a very physical association that negates any spiritual overtones. "The smell of rice, such a lovely smell. The smell brings his mother close, once again." (32) Mahasweta also exposes the hypocrisy behind the divine motherhood ideal through the ironic portrayal of the way Jati's son has to beg and borrow to conduct her funeral. The "divine mother", having exhausted her utility to the society, is once again consigned to marginalized oblivion.

In the short story "Kunti and the Nishadin" (After Kurukshtetra 27-44) we find two contrasting discourses of motherhood, from the tribal and the non-tribal world, encountering each other. Mahasweta revisions the story of Kunti in the Mahabharatha, where she plays out the last scenes of her life in the forest in the company of Gandhari and Dhritarashtra. As she wanders through the forest in search of water and firewood, Kunti reflects on her past life. She is tormented by a sense of sin and guilt at her treatment of Kama, her first-born son, whom she had
to abandon in the interests of her honour in society. She is aware that as a woman of the royal clan, her role as a mother is subservient to and circumscribed by the dictates of the rajavritta. Nevertheless, she is wracked by guilt for not having fulfilled her responsibility as a mother. She compares herself unfavourably with Gandhari who has accepted the loss of a hundred sons with emotional poise. Kunti realizes that this is because Gandhari has never sinned and has always acted in accordance with her "dharma", her duty as a royal woman.

She is overcome by an unbearable urge to confess and thereby lighten her burden of sorrow and guilt. She begins a poignant confession, more like a dialogue with her own self, with only "Mother Earth, protector of the forests- hills- waters-and all living things" as mute witness. (31). As she talks aloud to the trees of the forest as she would to an indulgent mother, she becomes aware that a group of Nishada tribals are watching her all the time. But, in keeping with her royal upbringing, she is not unduly worried or curious about them, they seem to her to blend in with the trees and the black forest around her:

Talking before the Nishadins was the same as talking to the rocks and stones. To the earth.

They did not know her language, and she did not know theirs. (33)
This goes on until one day an old woman among the Nishada tribals, "a dark-skinned woman carved of black stone" speaks to her in her own language and asks her, "No confessing of sins today?" She then asks her if she has yet confessed her "gravest sin". (39). She tells an astonished Kunti that she and her companions are the daughters-in-law of the Nishada woman whom the Pandavas had burnt in the lac-house, along with her five sons. She asks Kunti if it were not a sin to kill innocent people, even if she did it to save her own sons from death. The duty of a mother to her children is not above every human being's duty to life itself:

Causing six innocent forest tribals to be burnt to death to serve your own interests. That was not even a crime in your book. In our eyes, by the laws of Mother Nature, you, your sons, your allies, are all held guilty. (43)

As the tribals leave the forest, sensing an approaching forest fire, they remind Kunti that nature has its own means of justice. Pointing to the lac and resin oozing from the trees, they leave Kunti waiting calmly for a cleansing and maybe just death by fire. Kunti cannot recognize the signs of a forest fire, while the tribals can. Mahasweta weaves this interpretation of the rift between humans and their environment in India's dominant civilizations into the story as an aesthetic ploy. In the Mahabharata, Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarashta had died in a forest fire.
Mahasweta here invokes two differing perspectives on life and sets them into dialogue. On the one side is Kunti, burdened and divided within herself by the contrasting claims on her motherhood and tied down by received notions of duty and justice. On the other hand are the Nishadins, who live a free and full life. All the widows of the men who had died have now remarried and their tribe has prospered. They tell Kunti that if a woman of their tribe had a child from a man of her choice, it would be celebrated, not condemned. "Nature's law. Nature abhors waste. We honour life." (41) The old Nishadin reminds Kunti that the rajavrittas never respected the lives of the tribals who lived in the forest and came into the towns and villages to sell their wares of honey and other forest produce. They were just made human pawns in the cruel power-games devised in the palaces. "Only the rajavritts can do such a thing," she declares. (41)

The Nishadin tells Kunti that "to the people of the lokavritta, to sacrifice or harm innocents in one's own self-interest is the most unpardonable sin" (41). In the tribal's discourse, a mother's duty is not confined to the preservation of the life and interests of her own children, but is linked to the preserving of life in any form. It is also not above the general human laws of justice, both for man and nature. Here too she engages with the discourses of epic and myth, recovering the untold, silenced narratives of the tribals from them.
Without condemning or privileging either discourse, Mahasweta keeps them in a dialogic mode, thereby creating a narrative alive with possibilities and choices. By allowing a discourse between the Nishadin's narrative and Kunti's, Mahasweta provides a space for the insertion of alternative cultural codes into the dominant ones. And by bringing in the tribal women into the narrative, she opens up the question of motherhood, linking it to issues of tribal exploitation, ecology and of social, political and natural justice.

Mahasweta frees motherhood from its traditional biological as well as social parameters of definition through these mother-figures, both tribal and non-tribal. In her works motherhood is not merely confined to the concerns of family, nor is it bound by the constraints of patriarchal hegemony. It works itself out of both these associations, by effecting a dialectical relationship with these confining discourses. At the same time she does not reject the values of love, care, and responsibility that are traditionally associated with motherhood. The traditional association of mothering with nature and its nurturing function is not totally eschewed, but Mahasweta articulates it without the deification and romanticization that usually accompanies it in mainstream Indian fiction. As Radha Chakravarthy notes, she "...reappropriates these values for her radical project, locating them in a moral 'core' that contains the
possibility of female self-empowerment". (Introduction In the Name of the Mother ix). At the same time Mahasweta reminds us that women like Josmina, Douloti, the dumb Budhni, Jashoda, Chandidasi and Gangor are also mothers, who have no control over their bodies or their lives. For them motherhood is a reminder of their subjugation and a mundane reality that requires them to provide food and shelter for their equally deprived children.

Through such powerful and subversive narratives, Mahasweta reminds the reader that motherhood is an ambivalent concept with the potential for both restriction and emancipation. Her maternal figures embody the ambiguities that arise when they negotiate the various discourses of motherhood prevalent in Indian society. In each of these works she situates the question of motherhood in the larger socio-historical milieu of the tribe and links it to related issues of tribe, class and ecology. As Maithreyi Krishnaraj points out, "The feminist dilemma is how to retrieve motherhood as a source of liberation, not by eliminating it as an obstacle but redefining appropriating terms and conditions, recreating the social structure that can make motherhood conceivably a creative experience..." (Bagchi 35). Mahasweta seems to have achieved this in no small measure through her portrayal of tribal mothers, especially through the figures of the Nishadin and Tejota through whom she upholds the values of an earlier tribal society that
stands in stark contrast to those of the modern world. Her narratives of tribal mothers, from the empowered tribal matriarch and mythological mothers to the poorest of the modern day tribal mothers, thus offer an alternative vision of motherhood that is not commonly evoked in Indian fiction and is worth noting for its realistic, empowering as well as visionary qualities.

Mahasweta Devi's women-centered texts embody the struggles that women of tribal communities face in post-colonial India, they being the most exploited among the women of India. Mahasweta's fictions portray a range of injustices committed on tribal and other women of subaltern groups, in the process critiquing, among other things, the structures of patriarchy in family and society, caste/class/tribe hierarchies, nationalistic rhetoric, development policies and the administrative and legal machinery of the state. Her texts narrate their positions as victims of the most cruel violence and exploitation as tribal communities lose their traditional habitats and are forced to join the unorganized labouring classes of India in a humiliating and grim struggle for survival. They also engage critically with the discursive structures of myth, history and contemporary reality to identify sites of female resistance, which she then articulates in order to disrupt these hegemonic structures. Mahasweta also engages with the discourse of motherhood within the larger framework of tribal identity and articulates
it as an ambivalent concept with the potential for both restriction and liberation. The women's discourse in her narratives resonate against the many male-centered dominant discourses that structure the particular socio-historic moments in the narrative. Her texts thus engage with the various discourses and practices that define and perpetuate gendered subjectivities operating in the socio-cultural and political structures of society in relation to tribal life and culture.