Chapter I

Introduction

Dalit Literature is a post-Independence literary phenomenon in India. There were only a few dalit writers before independence. In ancient days, saints like Chokhamela and Rohidas conveyed the plight of the suppressed people but their voices were submissive. The loud voice of protest is heard in dalit writing today with reverberation and rage. The materialization of dalit literature has a great historical impact in India. It is common in the sense that all other marginalised and oppressed groups of people have been influenced by it. It has hit a crucial point which arouses their awareness for creating their individuality. It has given sufficient motivation and approach to the writers, elevating the characters from the nomadic and tribal communities.

Writers like Shankarrao Kharat, Anna Bhau Sathe, Mahatma Phule, Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal and Yashwant Manohar have captured the attention of the readers. Marathi dalit writers are the forerunners of a host of writers who began to write in other languages also. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's thoughts inspired early writers.

Few outstanding writers like Laxman Mane, Laxman Gaikwad, Kishore Kale and Waharu Sonvane ask the same questions as to ‘Who they are?’ ‘What is their place in Indian society and history?’ ‘Why is their situation so marginal and where are their roots to be found?’ Their protest is not a cry in the desert today. Their voices cannot be silenced. They sway the attention of the world seeking their identities and are creating their identities in the crucibles of their plays, poems, short stories and novels. They write autobiographies of their communities. This is an unusual fact which is established in the literature of the marginalised and oppressed group of people.
To respect, honour and treat everybody with brotherly love is of paramount concern in our society that ironically brands some as untouchables. To uphold humanity to the highest level, Mahasweta Devi poured out her longings in her works to awaken people from the bondage of meaningless old traditions and culture. Her aim and purpose in writing is to uplift the untouchable people to the equal status of the so called higher classes. In God’s eyes everybody is noble and equal. This author has taken extraordinary pains to give the most important message – that every individual should be treated with equal love and dignity.

The suffering of the tribals involves the individual suffering for the community of the tribal group and the community suffering for the individual. They are seen celebrating their inheritance in their own style. They have developed their own aesthetics in pastoral and simple forms. The adivasis have a very rich tradition of dance, music and folklore. By way of new elucidations, they could restructure their image and identity of this tradition. The Indian dalits are making an effort to build up their own aesthetics which reflects their insights of life and the world around them.

Dalit literature is an essential and distinctive part of Indian literature. Madara Chennaiah was one of the first dalit writers. He was a cobbler-saint of the 11th century and he lived in the region of Western Chalukyas. He was also honored as the ‘father of Vachana poetry’ by some scholars. Dohara Kakkaiah was another poet who was a dalit by birth. Dalit literature received its first impulse in the modern age with the arrival of leaders like Mahatma Phule and Ambedkar in Maharashtra, who showcased the problems of dalits through their writings and works. This established a new development in dalit writing and motivated many dalits to emerge with writings in Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Tamil and Punjabi.
Dalit literature saw a collection of new writers like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav and Shankarao Kharat by the 1960s although its formal form came into existence with the Little Magazine movement. A political magazine ‘Dalit Voice’ was started in 1981 and it was an important facet in the growth of dalit literature in India. In the late 1960s dalit writers like Dominic Jeeva acquired mainstream popularity in the neighbouring Sri Lanka. Dalit literature is an independent dalit intellectual tradition in India which exposed the drawbacks of casteist Indian society. Human Rights are the right of every citizen to be treated with dignity irrespective of caste, community, gender, and thus realize his or her own competence and ability. Admittance to education is a part to this right leading to a life of dignity.

The concept of a person being a dalit is a fault of the system. It is the system that humiliates him or her as an untouchable. Zakir Abedi quotes Eleanor Zelliot (1996) who says: “In the term and concept of Dalit itself there is an inherent denial of dignity, a sense of pollution and an acceptance of the karma theory that justifies the caste hierarchy.” (262) Dr Ambedkar writes in his book Ostracized Bharat: “Dalithood is a kind of life condition that characterises the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes’ Brahmanical ideology.” (262)

In India it is easy to detect who is a dalit. The description of R.K. Nayak in this regard is informative. Nayak writes:

Almost every fourth Indian is a Dalit, and is easily identified. He may be a beggar near a temple or a church, a permanent squatter, a prematurely old person in his forties, a child labourer in a factory, a pauper in a village, a child domestic help, a porter, a rickshaw puller in a city, a bonded labourer, a
migrant slum-dweller. And a Dalit woman is always ill clad, a bag of bones, often with a malnourished child in her arms, a temple Devadasi. Although they constitute a significant number of the country's population, they remain unseen and unnoticed since unseeability and untouchability are the hallmarks of their identification (262).

Nevertheless, they draw the attention of the supposed political leaders and mainstream writers only to become the subjects of their political and literary languages. Rape, mistreating and disrobing are an everyday incidence for dalit women. A Marathi social reformer and revolutionary, Mahatma Jotirao Phule used the term dalit to describe the outcastes and ex-untouchables as the oppressed and broken victims of the caste-ridden society in the nineteenth century. But in 1970s it was accepted by the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra.

Dr. S. K. Paul states: “Dalits are members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.” (378)

Although the caste system has been abolished under the Indian Constitution, even now there is inequality and injustice against dalits in South Asia. Major steps have been taken to provide opportunities in jobs and education since Indian Independence. To improve the conditions of dalits, many social organizations have promoted practical requirements through improved education, health and employment. Different names which are projected to define these people are ‘Panchamas’ (5th Varna), ‘Ashprush’ (untouchables), ‘Harijans’ (Children of God), ‘Dalits’ (Broken People) etc. They are recognized as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes by the constitution of India.
The status of the dalits is traditionally connected with occupations considered as ritually impure, for instance involving leatherwork, butchering or removal of rubbish, animal carcasses and waste in the background of traditional Hindu Society. Dalits worked and still work as physical labourers cleaning streets, latrines and sewers. Thus dalits are generally isolated and excluded from full involvement in Hindu social life.

In rural areas, discrimination against dalits are existent in the private sphere, in everyday matters such as admittance to eating places, schools, temples and water sources. Caste origins are more obvious and dalits often remain expelled from local religious life. But it has mostly disappeared in urban areas and in the public field. Through the acquisition of wealth and education a sizeable number of dalits have become empowered. Some dalits have effectively been incorporated into urban Indian Society, where births of the castes are less apparent and less important in public life.

In Uttar Pradesh, which is India’s most populous state, dalits had transformed politics and elected a popular dalit leader Mayawati as their Chief Minister. Majority of the dalits in India are Hindus, while in Maharashtra and other states some have been converted to Buddhism. A great example is Dr. Ambedkar. Jyoti Sharma states in the article “Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Modern Dalit Consciousness” that “Dr. B.R. Ambedkar wrote fearlessly against the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes. His fearless and fierce clash with Gandhi for separate electorate for the backward classes instilled in the Dalits a newfound confidence, which today has culminated in a full fledged literary movement and political clout.”(5)

Dalits were considered to be far from the light of Varna or Caste system. They were not permitted to allow their shadows to fall upon a non-dalit caste member. Dalits were
prohibited to worship in temples or draw water from the same wells where the caste Hindus
drew water. They usually lived in isolated areas outside the main village. But in the Indian
countryside, the dalit villages are mostly a separate, closed society which is at least a
kilometer away from the main village. The other Hindu castes live in the main village.

Even Christian communities followed the caste system across India. Many books
have been written by Christian dalit activists like Bama Faustina who writes using her pen
name. These books provide a firsthand description of discrimination by upper-caste Christian
community in South India.

Dalit Christians are not given the same status as their Hindu and neo-Hindu
counterparts in the social upliftment procedures originated by the government. With the
support of the church authorities and boards, the Dalit Christians demand that they should be
given the same benefits as other dalits.

Despite the fact that the Indian Constitution has suitably made special requirements
for the social and economic upliftment of the dalits, including the scheduled castes and tribes
in order to allow them to achieve upward social mobility, these allowances are limited to the
dalits who stay behind as Hindus.

The positive actions taken by the government towards the upliftment of dalits through
quotas in government jobs and university admissions is another political issue. In the
National and State Parliaments, about 8% of the seats are reserved for scheduled caste and
tribe candidates. This measure was sought by B. R. Ambedkar and other dalit activists in
order to make sure that the dalits get an impartial political voice. In the political scenario
there have been leaders from the dalit community who have been respected because of their
education and financial status. K. R. Narayanan, a learned economist became the first dalit
President of India in the year 1997 and Jagjivan Ram was a great, respected political leader in the pre and post independence periods.

Papiya Lahiri points out in the article “Silence to Eloquence: Emerging Trends in Dalit Literature”:

One cannot deny the fact that the Dalits are still subjected to extreme forms of social and economic exclusion, discrimination, violence, ridicule, physical and mental torture. Their attempts to assert their rights are often met with strong resistance from the higher castes, resulting in inhuman treatment, rapes, massacres, and other atrocities. Writing became a pertinent tool for the Dalits to give vent to their emotions, feelings and opinions. At the same time it also provided them with an opportunity of being useful members of the society by their contribution to it. Poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies written by Dalit writers provided useful insights on the question of dalit identity (39-41).

Although various developmental measures have been taken to improve the status of dalits, the transformation has not changed the Indian convention. Frequently, the Indian newspapers give an account of happenings when dalit women are exploited, dalit kids are ostracised from schools and so on. A new origination of dalit headship has also emerged on the other side. But, owing to the other problems of India, their agenda became perverted, misunderstood and even mocked at. For apparent reasons, many dalits do not wish to be identified as dalits; and the dalit community is in a position to lose important leaders to neo-brahmanism. A new type of literature has materialized in India which consists of dalit writers prose and poetry. They record stories of India, which have not been told until now. The main
aim of dalit literature is to highlight the difficulties and disabilities of the dalits and the
inhuman treatment meted out to the dalits. The important objective is to create social
awakening among the downtrodden people and the untouchables. Some of the prominent
writers who wrote about dalits are Jaibai Chaudhary, Tulsibai Bausode, Muktabai Sargore,
Kausalya Baisantri, Meenakshi Moon, Vimal Thorat, Sulekha Kumbhare and Meera Kishore.
Mahasweta Devi is one among the most important writers writing today.

The word ‘dalit’ was first used in the year 1930 to denote untouchables. It includes all
those who were called harijans. Dalit literature is a protest literature which is opposed to all
kinds of exploitation centred on caste, class, occupation or race. In earlier days, the dalits
were considered inferior than animals; they were forbidden entry into upper-class localities;
they were forced to hang clay pots from their necks with the intention that they may not
contaminate the streets of the honored by their spittle. But today a dalit is recognized duly
and has a literature of his own, the impact of which is now being felt throughout the world.

Men and women are the vital parts of God’s creation. They are the two sides of a
coin. Without a woman, a man’s life is merely like a body without spirit, a ship without a
rudder or a flower without fragrance. Woman is no longer considered a toy in man’s hands.
She is creating her individuality in all facets of life. Indian women novelists have given a
new dimension to Indian literature. In addition to making a mark in many fields, women have
also proclaimed a new awareness in the field of literature. They have contributed to Indian
Writing in English particularly to fiction and their contributions are impressive.

Surendra Narayan Jha remarks in the article “The Treatment of Modern Women in
Indian Novel and Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters”: “Since time immemorial man-woman
relationship has been a cherished goal for the creative writers all over the world.” He also
quotes Aristotle’s views on women: “the female is female by virtue of certain deficiency” and Saint Thomas Aquinas’ remarks on woman: “woman is an imperfect woman.” He also says about Sigmund Freud who surveys woman in multilevel angles and what Dale Splender states in his book *Male Made Language* that “Woman has been fundamentally oppressed by male-dominated language.” (210-211)

S. Prasanna Sree quotes Jawaharlal Nehru’s words in her article “An Introduction to Women and Women Writing in English”: “We talk of revolution – political and economic and yet the greatest revolution in a country is one that effects improvement in the status and living conditions of its women.” (121) Women comprise half of the world’s population. They are ironically not treated equally with men in all fields of human activity. Even though women work hard for their family, husband and children, they are marginalized, suppressed and oppressed and are not able to avail the opportunities for satisfying their own selves. This distressing picture of woman is not distinctive only to India but it is the same throughout the world.

In the article “The Feminist Perspective: The Indian Situation and its Literary Manifestations” Jasbir Jain comments on men’s role in patriarchal society:

Men in patriarchal societies have been deprived of a whole range of experience, of having to reach out to the other. They have looked only at themselves having reduced women to subordinate positions. Men – both socially and intellectually – can be a powerful medium of change. For instance, R.K. Narayan’s novels, to give an example, reveal an evergrowing awareness of the need to expand the area of a woman’s freedom (37).
A woman was believed to be an ultimate wife, a mother and an outstanding homemaker with different roles in the family, in a male-dominated society. Sacrifice, service, obedience and tolerance are to be her essential qualities. She evinces too much of patience and modifies her life faithfully and submissively. These are qualities for which she is appreciated. Her personal nature has very little acknowledgement in the patriarchal society and so behaving in a humble manner is her natural way of life.

In “Reading Resistance” Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh avers, “Women participate, too, in various oppressions. And with the instability that characterizes the paradigm of gender (because of its entanglements with caste, class or religion), it is quite conceivable that a woman may in varying situations move between positions of powerlessness and power.” (74)

Women were treated with dignity and respect in all matters – religious, social, political and economical - during the Vedic period. Women were permitted to attend important assemblies, state functions, perform religious duties and rituals and take up profession as priests. Women distinguished themselves in arts, science and in political events. Woman was given a status equal to that of man. Shakuntala Rao’s views on the status of women in the Vedic age is quoted by Prasanna Sree in the article “An Introduction to Women and Women Writing in English”: “Woman was regarded with due respect in every sphere of life, and she was not subject to any of the miraculous laws of an unsympathetic society.” (125)

In subsequent periods, there has been a gradual decline in the status of women. The status and position of women became degraded with the passage of time. Jauhar, sati, purdah came into being, further impinging on the social liberties of women. When Islam came into India, the status of women moved downwards. The purdah system proclaimed by Islam prohibited women from participating in public affairs or entertaining activities. Muslim
women were restricted to work for the family and to provide pleasure and recreation to men. The Vedic liberations which women enjoyed had lapsed. English missionaries occupied themselves in social reforms during this period. They vigorously put an end to social evils like sati, infanticide, forced labour and slavery.

The two movements namely Social Reform Movement and the Nationalist Movement had deep impression on the status of women. In the 19th century, women’s education received a fillip and education instilled necessary confidence in women. Almost immediately a huge number of women entered many fields of social service and fought against alcoholism, slavery, cruelty to children and worked for prison reforms and reforms in marriage and divorce laws. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhiji, the Indian Nationalist Movement was directed towards the liberation of Indian women in the 20th century by involving them in the fight for political liberty of the country.

When the educational and vocational opportunities grew, the educated middle and upper-class women, particularly in urban areas had become conscious of their rights. More educational opportunities and employment avenues were thrown open to women. Exposure to reformist movements helped women to go a long way in bringing about drastic changes in their position and attitudes. Women began to voice their feelings freely, impelled by a desire to realize their aspiration for a new way of life.

On the other side, women were encouraged to emulate the epic archetypes of Sita and Draupadi, who were symbolic of absolute fidelity. There was an anxiety to preserve the image of woman as the epitome of all that was pure and chaste. Most of the Indian women stuck to the traditional values even if they were highly educated and were exposed to modern ideas. They tried to assimilate modern ideas without casting away their traditional values.
Inspite of all these changes, the condition of the tribal women has not yet changed.

Tribal women are oppressed on several levels. Firstly because they are women in patriarchal and patrilineal society. Although in most tribal societies in India, women’s position is relatively better than in Hindu caste society, property is still transmitted through the male line, and in general, women do not have access to political power. Moreover, the sanscritization process, whereby lower castes, dalits and adivasis adopt some of the customs and practices of the upper-caste such as dowry, purdah, restrictions on re-marriage and on relations between men and women, has severely eroded the tribal women’s social and economic status. In an interview to Satarupa Ray, Mahasweta Devi talks about the treatment of women in tribal communities and it is quoted in “A tete-e tete with our Queen of Hearts”:

The tribes are very civilized people. Men and women are treated as equals in their society. Widow Remarriage is common. Girls and boys interact with each other freely. The woman presides over all the major ceremonies. In our society, these are considered to be modern but these are actually the traditional values of tribal communities. You won’t find such progressive values in today’s mainstream societies also.

Women are also oppressed because they belong to a group considered inferior because of its ethnic or caste position. In the Santhal Parganas, tribals are considered sub-human creatures by the non-tribals. Their land can be usurped, their possessions can be looted and they can with impunity be laughed at and pushed aside. And they are oppressed because as women they are used by those who have the power to oppress. Rape, torture and forced prostitution are the means landowners and police employ to humiliate, punish and establish control over an entire community which is economically and materially dependent.
The rape and sexual exploitation of adivasi women by Hindus and Muslims are a violation and humiliation for the entire social group. The rape of adivasi women by non-adivasi men can also be seen as an attempt to control female sexuality. Women do not comprise a minority or marginal cluster in India.

Women do not have the benefit of equivalent position and individual self-respect in the male-dominated world either in India or in other countries, which makes them insignificant—socially, politically, sexually and culturally. Hence, their sexual abuse leads to social, political and economic abuse. Women who fit into the weaker sectors of society, for instance dalits and adivasis cope with twofold exploitation, twofold inequality and twofold injustice and thus theirs is a dual risk. Gender being the source of their marginality, they face dehumanization and humiliation in their household also.

In family life, husbands and wives are uneven partners. The relation or relationship that exists among mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, husband, wife and in-laws is one of the finest creations of man. Though the relationship gives certain protection to women, they suffer at the hands of men. They go under the dark phallic shade of man's desire. All these problems are dealt with in feminism. Women's empowerment is talked about by everyone and that can be attained only through equality, employment and education.

The apprehension of women writers is woman’s bare body and naked soul. In order to oppress women, the male-dominated world has used religion, culture and social order. In fact, all marginalised and oppressed groups of people face the problems of human rights abuse which finally leads to dehumanisation, if it is not opposed and fought vociferously. Meera Bai in “Women’s Voices: The Novels of Indian Women Writers” writes about the state of women:
Most of the Indian women stick to the traditional values even if they are highly educated and are exposed to modern ideas. They try to assimilate modern ideas without casting away their traditional values. Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novels portray women facing the crisis of value adaptation in the process of transition from the old to the new. Though he seems to be more concerned with the problems that new India is facing in the process of progress, his novels show an awareness of the Indian woman’s capacity for adaptability and suffering as well as her power to sublimate. Babani Bhattacharya writes, “I think the women of India have more depth, more richness than men. The transition from the old to the new, the crisis of value adaptation strikes deeper into the lives of our women than our men folk (132).

The status and high position which was detained by the Indian women during the Vedic period have descended to a very humiliating position in the medieval period and in the previous decades of the modern period. The open-minded Indians who were educated in the western tradition and culture saw a change in the attitude of the Indian males and females concerning their mutual relationship. The movement for female emancipation was led in the beginning by the male members of the society in India. Progressive women like Pandita Rama Bai and others spearheaded the movement and hundreds of women joined this movement. Gandhiji launched the freedom movement which moved women into the central area of tussle. Women struggled for the freedom of the country and their own liberation. According to the kind of relationship a woman had with a man, her status was established.

In order to improve the conditions of the downtrodden and deserted sections of the society like women of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, the freedom struggle produced
an impulse in the Indian male and female. Thus when the constitution for an independent India was illustrated, the importance was put on the development of a democratic society. Maya Majumdar has quoted the articles which are meant for human rights in his book *Social Status of Women in India*. Articles 14, 150, 16, 39(e) and 51 were introduced for the abolition of discriminatory and offensive practices against women. These articles gave assurance to the equality and special protection for women. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was implemented on 10th December, 1948 and its Article I offered that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Article 2 meant for equality of sexes states that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedom without distinction of sex.” Article 3 of this document highlights that covenant States should agree to make sure of equal rights of men and women. In 1979 the resolution on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women restated:

that discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for women’s dignity and is an obstacle to the participation of women on equal terms with men in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of prosperity of society and the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity and urges that change in the traditional role of women as well as role of women in society and in the family is needed to achieve full equality between men and women (30).

Maya Majumdar also states the condition of dalit women and the women of minority community:
The Dalit women and the women of the minority communities have by and large miserable existence. The Dalit women are exploited not only by the higher caste people but also by their own male relatives. Similar is the case with the women of the minority communities, especially in the case of lower class Muslim women. The reason for their exploitation seems to lie in their ignorance. Most of them are illiterate and so have neither the means nor the will to fight against their exploitation. Hence their education is a matter which has to be given top priority (39).

A new standard of living of women has emerged slowly. Some women willingly decided against marriage in order to dedicate their life to the national cause or social service in pre-independence days. A number of successful unmarried women enjoy high status today in the professions, services and in the field of social work. Some women unite housework and job and others take up a job after their children grow up.

The rate of change in the point of view of women working outside home or participating in public life has been slow and unequal. These approaches are related to perceptions about women’s natural attitudes and abilities, her proper field of work and man-woman relationships. Hence, education is considered her field of employment because the hours of work are more or less fixed, works at home and outside can be suitably combined, and the work requires less contact with men.

When women first entered the films or the professional theatre, the very idea had been scowled by almost all sections of the community. Only particular castes and communities were allowed to participate in domestic performances in many regions. The women who belonged to that community were professional dancers and singers. Although
the discrimination still continues, the situation has improved now. Long ago, dancing and singing were associated with courtesans only, but slowly with the cultural reawakening they have become more acceptable to society. Women are doing well in administrative jobs also. But the difficulties in this field are of different nature. At the maximum, men are prepared to accept a woman as an equal, but still they do not like working under a woman superior.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the greatest literary personalities among Indian women writers who have given a dimension to the Indian literature through their works. She voiced the voice of the voiceless. Her works are the conglomeration of various thoughts, opinions, ideas and ideals that are prevailing in the society. And in every work she very cleverly and at the same time artistically advocates the philosophy of love and equality. The essence of her work reveals the meaning, spelling and spirit of individual magnanimity. Mahasweta Devi very carefully and diligently echoes her inner urge that the malady of untouchability should be abolished from the society. With hope in the axim that pen is mightier than the sword; the author has chosen writing as her weapon. Her works are very poignant in chiseling a modern brave new world in which every citizen can walk and breathe majestically.

Mahasweta Devi, an Indian social activist and writer was born on January 14, 1926 in Dhaka to literary parents in a Hindu Brahmin family. Her father Manish Ghatak was a well known poet and novelist. He was the elder brother of the noted filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak. Her mother Dharitri Devi was also a writer and a social worker whose brothers were renowned in various fields, such as the noted sculptor Sankha Chaudhury and the founder-editor of the Economic and Political Weekly of India, Sachin Chaudhury. It is no wonder that Mahasweta Devi born to such parents combines in her the creative writer and social activist and is much concerned about the people around her. She had her schooling in Dhaka, but
after the separation of India she moved to West Bengal in India. She joined the Vishvabharati University which was founded by Rabindranath Tagore in Santiniketan and completed B.A. (Hons) in English and then finished M.A. in English at Calcutta University. Then she married the famous playwright Bijon Bhattacharya who was one of the founding fathers of the IPTA movement. In the year 1948, she gave birth to Nabarun Bhattacharya, one of Bengal’s and India’s leading intellectual novelists at present. She divorced Bijon Bhattacharya in the year 1959.

Mahasweta Devi is a writer with a social mission. Her inclination towards humanitarian work and her revolutionary spirit imbibed right from her childhood are apparent through her works. Her parentage and her upbringing have contributed to her becoming a writer and a social activist. Her family’s participation in nationalistic movements has built her tendency to rise up against subversion. A biographical reading of Mahasweta Devi conveys that she embraced communist ideologies and refused to renounce them even when she was to choose between her job and her beliefs.

Mahasweta Devi’s audacity as a writer is also the result of her personal tragedy which instead of pulling her down has bestowed on her an indomitable will and fearless spirit. Her divorce and the aftermath emotional breakdown transformed her into a woman of incredible fortitude. Her tours of tribal areas inspire her to write and fight for them. She sees herself as a part of the world which is not perfect. This imperfection and failing are expressed in her writing so as to rouse the tribals and also to bring about a change in the attitude of others towards them.

In a literary career spanning over 40 years, Mahasweta Devi has produced 20 collections of short stories and nearly 100 novels in Bengali. Her works have been translated
into major Indian languages like Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi and Oriya, and foreign languages like English, Italian, Japanese and French. Some of her works are Titu Mir, The Queen of Jhansi, Chotti Munda and his Arrow, The Armenian Champa Tree, After Kurukshetra, Aranyer Adhikar, Rudali, Mother of 1084, Imaginary Maps, Breast Stories, Outcast-four stories etc.

Mahasweta Devi was bestowed with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979 for the novel Aranyer Adhikar. Padma Shri was awarded to her in 1986, the Jnanpith Award, the highest literary Award in India from the Bharatiya Jnanpith in 1996, the Ramon Magsaysay Award, considered the Asian equivalent to the Nobel Prize for Journalism, Literature and the Creative Communication Arts in 1997; she was conferred Honoris Causa by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1999, Padma Vibhushan Award, the second highest civilian award from the Government of India in 2006, Yashwantrao Chavan National Award in 2010, Bangabibhushan - the highest civilian award from the Government of West Bengal in 2011 and Hall of Fame Lifetime Achievement Sahityabramha - the first Lifetime Achievement award in Bengali Literature from 4thScreen-IFJW in 2012. Mahasweta Devi has donated the entire prize money from the Jnanpith and Magsaysay awards to the organizations working for the upliftment of the tribal communities.

The Bengali activist, Mahasweta Devi is an exclusive writer among Indian writers. She portrays the tussles of the subalterns, particularly the untouchables who fight for their basic human rights. She regards women as one amongst the oppressed and in her writings she deals with women’s suppression related to the terms of caste and class. Women bearing the impact of social and political subjugation and who struggle with a strong will are portrayed in Mahasweta Devi’s works.
Ganesh N. Devy avers about the nature of Mahasweta Devi in “The Adivasi Mahasveta”:

Mahasveta [Mahasweta], more a woman of film songs than of raagas, of laughter than long-faced pontificating, is closer to that which reveals than that which decorates and conceals. And yet she is completely detached from everything. You cannot please her by praise or by providing her with creature comforts. She is almost not there when one thinks she is very much there . . . Mahasveta [Mahasweta] brought to those poor and harassed people a boundless compassion, which they instantly understood, though they could neither speak her language, nor she theirs. She has a strange ability to communicate with the silenced, her best speech reserved for those to whom no one has spoken (172-173).

Today tribals are estimated as eighty million and they are found in several regions of the country. Mahasweta Devi has explored in her novels the history of the tribals like Santhals, Hos, Oraons, Kurunis, Mundas and other tribal communities. Mahasweta Devi has been involving herself in the struggles of tribals and also underprivileged communities in the border areas of the states of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal since 1976.

What Sandeep Bhatnagar says about Mahasweta Devi’s concern for the tribal people in the review of *Bitter Soil* is quoted in “Literature with a Mission”:

Having worked amongst tribals for the greater part of her life, she is in a position to articulate the concerns of the dispossessed in the manner of a concerned insider, rather than that of a condescending outsider. She writes in the introduction to *Bitter Soil*: ‘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 (41).

Mahasweta Devi points out that the most important reason for the exploitation of the
supposed lower classes is the unequal distribution of land. She avers, “The upper caste
landowners are still feudal as they were (prior to independence), abiding by values which are
against women and the so-called lower castes.” (4)

Apart from stories and novels, Mahasweta Devi has written plays and stories for
children. In all her writings, she tries to depict the life of tribal men and women. She also
writes about Adivasi people like the Sandhals, Lodhas and Shabars etc. as she is extremely
dedicated and devoted to these tribes. In her meetings, conferences and writings, she urges
the people to stand up for their rights and resist abuse. She demands equality of human rights
and encourages these people, especially girls, to educate themselves.

Mahasweta Devi started writing stories at a very young age and her writings were
published in various literary journals. She has been a regular contributor to Bortika, a journal
dedicated to the cause of the oppressed and the downtrodden. She selects the plots of her
stories from ordinary life around her. The downtrodden, the untouchables and the landless
tribals who are oppressed and exploited by the upperclass landlords and moneylenders are
the heroes and heroines of her stories. In some of her stories, she has also dealt with the
misrule of the British government and the freedom movement. She also says that the Naxalite
Movement of the 1960s and 1970s in Bengal has been a great inspiration for her. Dr. Sharada
Iyer quotes in her article “Mahasweta Devi: Mother of 1084 Naxalbari and After” Mahasweta
Devi’s interview to Samik Bandopadhyay:
Once I became a professional writer I felt increasingly that a writer should document his own time and history. The socio-economic history of human development has always fascinated me . . . The Naxalite movement between the late sixties and nearly seventies with its urban phase climaxing in 1970-71, was the first major event after I became a writer that I felt an urge and an obligation to document (204-205).

Mahasweta Devi’s writings are indeed an expression of her personality and they enable one to form and formulate the autobiography of Mahasweta Devi. In short, her works give expression to her life and reveal her deep dedication for the upliftment of the tribals, downtrodden and untouchables. Mahasweta Devi states in “I am interested in History”:

I have had to sell my writing and thus I could live and eat and provide for others. So I have written plenty of trash. If you count all my books, I don’t think you will find many of them should have been written but I am not ashamed of them either, because I am a professional writer. In Bengal, I am the only professional writer who lives by writing and I am proud of that fact (95).

In the year 1964, Mahasweta Devi began her teaching career at Bijoygarh College, which is an affiliated college of the University of Calcutta. In those days, Bijoygarh College was an institution for working class women students. She also worked as a journalist and as a creative writer during that period. In recent times, she is more famous for her work related to the study of the Lodhas and Shabars, the tribal communities of West Bengal, women and dalits. She is also an activist and she dedicated herself to the struggles of tribal people in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh. She often depicts the brutal oppression of tribal
people and the untouchables by potent, authoritarian upper-caste landlords, lenders, and venal government officials in her elaborate Bengali fiction. Her belief in the ordinary people and the inspiration she got from them made her write about the exploited and suffering people.

Mahasweta Devi made a passionate inaugural speech at the Frankfurt Book Fair in the year 2006, in which she moved the audience to tears with her lines taken from the famous film song by Raj Kapoor (the English equivalent is in brackets): “This is truly the age where the Joota (shoe) is Japani (Japanese), Patloon (pants) is Englistani (British), the Topi (hat) is Roosi (Russian), But the Dil... Dil (heart) is always Hindustani (Indian) . . . My country, Torn, Tattered, Proud, Beautiful, Hot, Humid, Cold, Sandy, Shining India. My country.”

Mahasweta Devi has recently been leading the movement against the industrial policy of the Government of West Bengal, the state of her home. In particular, she has harshly criticized the taking away of large tracts of fertile agricultural land from farmers by the government and giving up the land at throwaway prices to industrial houses. She has linked the policy to the commercialization of Santiniketan of Rabindranath Tagore, where she spent her formative years. Because of her, a number of intellectuals, artists, writers and theatre workers joined together in protesting the controversial policy of the government particularly its implementation in Singur and Nandigram.

Anup Beniwal remarks in “Subaltern Historiography and Literary Aesthetics: A Reading of Mahasweta Devi’s Fiction”: “Disrupting the elitist historical presupposition that the unlettered low-life lack in cultural- historical consciousness, Mahasweta has exclusively published the writings of tribals and non-tribal low-literacy peasants, khetmajdoors, rickshaw pullers, factory workers, village women in the Bengali quarterly Bortika that she edits.” (36)


Minoli Salgado remarks about Mahasweta Devi and her writing in her article “Tribal Stories, Scribal Worlds: Mahasweta Devi and the Unreliable Translator”:
Mahasweta Devi is probably the most widely translated Indian writer of an indigenous language today. Now recognized as the foremost living writer in Bengali, she has taken up the case of the tribal people of India through political activism and writing. She has spent over thirty years working with and for the tribal people of West Bengal and the southeast of Bihar as a political anthropologist, investigative journalist and editor of a ‘people’s magazine (131).

Beyond the year 1980, Mahasweta Devi has been dynamically linked with many social movements which question about the bonded labour, leading feudalism in rural society, state negligence and forceful acquirement of agricultural land. She was the vanguard of many movements, particularly those which deal with tribal mobilization, the matter that is near her heart. Her literary works have been recognized with various state and national level credits, and rightfully she was awarded the Padma Vibhushan and the Magasaysay award for her social activism. She believes her writing to be an expansion of her dedication to social work.

The endeavor of the subaltern historians was to focus on the history and tradition of the dalits, tribals and other marginalized people. Mahasweta Devi does nothing less. The name of Mahasweta Devi strikes one’s mind as one gazes at the hard work of the Indian writers who dedicate themselves to help the indigenous people to revitalize their past and procure them a place of honour in society. Mahasweta Devi also endeavored to highlight the customs and history of the tribals of Chhotanagpur region, which the mainstream society knows only to some extent, despite the sacrifice and liability of the tribals. For example, the tribals took part in several resistance movements and rebellions against the colonial masters
and sacrificed their lives for the country. But, these movements and their leaders were not noticed by the mainstream writers. The endeavour of Mahasweta Devi was to channelize their history into the mainstream society and the aim of her advocacy was to acknowledge the importance and prominence of tribal life.

Anand in the article, “Re-visioning History: Mahasveta Devi’s Aranya Adhikar” writes about Mahasweta Devi:

As a writer, Mahasveta has a deep sense of history and is a firm believer in documentation and her fiction is based on extensive reading of history. She says, “History fascinates me. Whenever possible I study dates, statistics, government gazetteers, human rights laws, laws regarding tribals.” . . .

However, her writings on tribal history draw one’s attention because they enable one to look at history in a different way (156).

Mahasweta Devi’s observation, her energetic fieldwork, her journalism, her personal life and her creative writing are well balanced. She visits the tribal huts regularly and maintains an open house for the poor and the deprived people. She engages herself keenly in protecting and extending the people’s culture embedded in the soil, which is exposed by the violence of a disgraced mainstream society.

Unlike many Indian writers who prefer to observe the chaos of existence from a lofty high distance, Mahasweta Devi actively involves herself with human lives. She has worked with Kheria-Shabar tribes in Purulia, West Bengal, for over a quarter of a century and speaks of them with passion.

In Maharashtra, Mahasweta Devi has met the Pardhis, Wardars, Bhamtes, Bairagis and Kaikadis. She has been to police stations to lodge complaints of rape, torture and
humiliation, often against those whose job it was to protect people. She has also visited sites of old and fresh violence. She brings to those poor and harassed people a boundless compassion, which they instantly understood even though they could neither speak her language nor she theirs.

The pioneering truths of Mahasweta Devi's stories through the classes and traditions portrayed in a mixture of tribal, folk and Urban Bengali lift up her stories from the area of rare and evil practicality to that of art-emotion that looks for deliverance as a constant mission. Agony consists of torture and pain. It is a sign of disaster. But experiences of disaster and suffering can irritate the sufferer to rebel and resist. Opposition is an agency of christening and defining the sufferer’s identity. The salvation of the sufferer lies in such christening and defining moments. It is hightime for the activists and the privileged, who rarely see that there is a redemptive price in the pain of the sufferer to learn from the subaltern whose designation, is suffering.

During her exploration for her novel Jhansi Rani, Mahasweta Devi has collected the residents who stayed in the area, families who are habitually reliant on the previous upper classes and Bundelkhandi poets who sang of the Queen’s bravery even now. This contradictory tale moves together with Mahasweta Devi’s faith in the prospect of innovative action and she later went on to end other anti-colonial uprisings as depicted in novels like Aranyer Adhikar and Titu Mir. In the first two decades of Mahasweta Devi’s writing career, Aranyer Adhikar is regarded as a significant milestone.

Mahasweta Devi’s active political dedication directed her to journey deep into the tribal areas of Bihar and West Bengal. Throughout this period she retired from her more literary activities and her teaching, and in their place produced creative volumes of
domineering journalism. This period reached a termination in her starting the essential working - class periodical Bortika in which she was incharge of editorial column representing marginal writing that consists of tribals, rural peasants and factory workers. Her acquaintance and affection for tribals rapidly increased during the time she lived in areas like Palamau, Murshidabad, Medinipur, and Purulia.

Mahasweta Devi wishes to stress to these people that the outcome of these revolutions is not as important as the need to restore belief in one’s own tribal identity. These tribes, who are today an oppressed, disinheritad lot, were once fiercely independent, jealously guarding the cultural purity of their race.

With regard to her focus on the tribals and their way of life what Mahasweta Devi stated at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1986 is quoted by Anjum Katyal in “The Metamorphosis of Rudali”:

As a writer I feel a commitment to my times, to mankind and to myself . . . for the last fourteen years I have written almost exclusively about the bonded labourers and the tribals, and about repression and protest, about their heroic endeavour for survival and their rights. I must have written a few hundred stories and twenty-five novels around these themes . . . (30).

Mahasweta Devi writes about the experiences she had with the people in her novels and stories. She describes the time spent with her people which were a ‘preparation’ for writing. Mahasweta Devi is one of those rare writers who always aspire to find and explore something challenging without accepting the existing ideals. Established as a leading novelist with the publication of Aranyer Adhikar (The Rights over the Forest) in 1977, Mahasweta Devi has affected a new trend of writing in the Bengali language.
Mahasweta Devi was alluded to for her ‘compassionate crusade through art and activism to claim for tribal people a just and honorable place in India’s national life.’ Mahasweta Devi travelled extensively in the rural areas of West Bengal during the seventies and wrote articles in a Bengali daily against the oppression of the tribal people. Mahasweta Devi says that she would continue to work for the tribals, non-tribal poor and people in distress and write for them.

Though there are prominent writers who wrote about dalits and the downtrodden like Jaibai Chaudhary, Tulsibai Bansode, Muktabai Sargore, Kausalya Baisantri, Meenakshi Moon, Vimal Thorat, Sulekha Kumbhare and Meera Kishore what distinguishes Mahasweta Devi from others is that the major part of her creative writing is characterized by an unflinching commitment and passion for the underdog. As Ania Loomba says, “Mahasweta Devi” in her works “describes how tribal peoples have been literally and figuratively crippled in post-independence India. National ‘development’ has no space for tribal cultures or beliefs” (14) and the system that is to safeguard their interest turn against them. The writer’s concern for and her identification with the tribals championing their cause and the contemporary relevance of her themes made the researcher select a few of her works available in English translation for her study. Even though translation has its own limitations, the problems, concerns and the feelings of the people that are behind them speak more than what words could convey. All these are clearly brought out in the translations which could be clearly understood when compared with the aim, purpose and social consciousness of the writer. The proposed research will concentrate on the struggle of the downtrodden and the way in which the writer champions the political, social and economic advancement of these people through her writings.
Mahasweta Devi’s works are constantly analysed and interpreted by critics and reviewers taking notice of the reality of her creative writing. Her works have been reviewed in several well-known journals and intellectual study on her works has been published in many critical compilations. Her work is considered worth mentioning as it strives to establish a place and thereby a space for the tribals.

Bindu Nair in “Subversion and Resistance: The Uses of Myth in Mahasweta Devi’s “Hunt” and The Book of the Hunter analyses how Mahasweta Devi uses myths and symbols for the recovery of the oral traditions and for the rehabilitation of the tribals.

M. Asaduddin comments on the social consciousness of Mahasweta Devi and wonders about the rare combination of the activist and the writer crusading against the social injustice meted out to these disenfranchised and the dispossessed in “Of Rape and Marginalization.”

Radha Chakravarty in her article “Visionary Cartography: Imaginary Maps by Mahasweta Devi” analyses how she has focused on the visionary or utopian repercussion of the idea of imaginary maps and how the relationship between the two aspects – her writing and activism are connected.

Jennifer Wenzel’s essay “Grim fairy tales: Taking a risk, Reading Imaginary Maps” appraises Devi’s satirically positive resolutions by focusing her attention on the fairy-tale aspect of her work – both as fantasy and as unattainable fiction.

Sujatha Vijayaraghavan’s article “Indian Women Writing / Righting the Nation in and through Fiction: Postcolonial Perspective” analyses how Imaginary Maps, through a literary remapping of the nation’s image is done in a radical way.
Waseem Anwar’s article “Transcribing Resistance: Cartographies of Struggling Bodies and Minds in Mahasweta Devi’s Imaginary Maps” deals with the way the political and economic factors shape human relationships in the underdeveloped regions of the subcontinent.

Gagan Gill in “The Business of Mourning” brings out how mourning becomes a great moment in time, in history, in the text when a woman at last discovers the price of her tears.

The short story *Rudali* has been translated into two versions - short story and play. The short story is translated by Anjum Katyal and the play is translated by Usha Ganguli. Malavika Karlekar points out in the review that “The storyline in both the versions is clear in the portraiture of the unempowered Sanichari’s emergence as a woman vital to the lives of the *malik-mahajans* – the exploitative landowners: capitalizing on the suggestion made by Dulan, also a Ganju by caste, she becomes a *rudali*, a professional mourner for the rich.” (138)

Uma Parameswaran’s review of “Five Plays, Mother of 1084 and Breast Stories” reveals how Mahasweta Devi re-creates a span of history, imbuing her narration with trenchant satire against government and city people and soul-stirring poignancy for the peasants, tribals and student idealists . . . While Naxalites can be seen by historians as ruthless terrorists, Devi’s focus is on the young intellectuals who were drawn to the cause because of their idealism, and on peasants and tribals who were drawn to it because they were victims of centuries-old oppression (457).
Savita Goel in “A Journey of Discovery: Mahasweta Devi’s Mother of 1084” analyses how the novel explores the complex relationships between the personal and political, evoking and recreating the killings of the Naxalites.

S. Nirai Mathi remarks in her article “Mahasweta Devi, The Rebel Playwright of Mother of 1084” how Mahasweta Devi in her play Mother of 1084 projects the excruciating agonies of many sensitive mothers whose beloved sons whom they have failed to understand have been reduced to mere numbers in the government morgue.

E. Satyanarayana’s article “Mothers in Mahasweta Devi’s Plays Mother of 1084 and Bayen” analyses how these plays are a fine study of the effects of the political, social and economic exploitation and how the action of both the plays portrays defiance against the prevalent immoral social values.

A. Ramadevi analyses in “Awakening of an Apolitical Mother: Mahasweta Devi’s Mother of 1084” how Mother of 1084 “Though set against the backdrop of the climactic phase of the annihilation of the urban Naxalites and its aftermath,” turns out to be “a moving story of a mother, apathetic, apolitical and pathetically ignorant of her own son and his ideals. The protagonist Sujata is a witness to the suppression of the Naxalite Movement in which her own son, Brati, the corpse No. 1084 had taken part and become a martyr.” (86)

Urmila Chakraborty’s “Art as Protest: Social Commitment in the Novels of Mahasweta Devi” deals with the way “the story unfolds around the solitary grief of an upper middle-class mother, Sujata, whose son Brati has been murdered by hooligans actively supported by the police because of his involvement with the Naxalites.” and also of “the repressive measures taken by the Calcutta police against this middle-class leadership.” (163)
“Draupadi” is one of the stories in the collection *Breast Stories* G. Srilatha’s

“Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Draupadi’: A Critical Study” analyses the title of the story and the way the title character protests against male superiority:

In Draupadi breast is transformed from an erotic object into an object of torture and revenge. It is obvious that the name is derived from the epic Mahabharata, where she is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly stripped. This Draupadi of our story is an aboriginal, is easily stripped by men. She is gang raped by police and refused to be clothed. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. The story signifies that this is the place where male leadership stops (100).

Brinda Bose in “The Intimacy of Translation: The case of Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Draupadi’” says how Dopdi is meant to parody her epic namesake Draupadi, wife of the five Pandavas.

Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh, while analyzing the works of Irawati Karve, Pratibha Rai and Mahasweta Devi in “Refiguring Myth - Draupadi and Three Indian Women Writers” asserts: “By locating Dopdi’s appropriation of subjecthood at a point immediately following her rape, the story works with the force of a truly liberatory text that erupts through an imperceptible fissure in the seemingly inviolable estate of patriarchy.” (98)

Usha Bande in “Women Writers with Fire in their Pen” states that “Mahasweta Devi, the recipient of Jnanpith Award has been taking up issues concerning the tribals, her story ‘Draupadi’ deals with the question of political rape. The narrative traces the persecution of Dopdi, a tribal Santhal Naxalite woman, who is gang raped at the order of an army officer, called Senanayak.” (23)
Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh analyses in her article “Reading Resistance” how

“Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Draupadi’ is a calculated act of violence upon the received myth of
Draupadi in the manner that it displaces the mythical character out of myth and class to insert
her into history in the figure of the Naxal tribal Dopdi.” (73)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern:
Mahasweta Devi’s “Stanadayini” (Breast-giver)” states: “By Mahasweta Devi’s own account
‘Stanadayini’ is a parable of India after decolonization. Like the protagonist Jashoda, India is
a mother-by-hire. All classes of people, the post-war rich, the ideologues, the indigenous
bureaucracy, the diasporics, people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit
her.” (107)

Debasish Chattopadhyay in “Frames of Marginalisation in Mahasweta Devi’s
Outcast: Four Stories” analyses the plight of women characters in the four stories, whereby
the writer attacks the virtual slave trade and “clearly indicates the plight of these women who
usually have no one to turn to, nothing to look forward to, and have only a few to lend them a
voice - women who are regarded as sub-human and treated as commodities both without and
within their own communities.”(106)

Anup Beniwal and Vandana in “Writing the Subaltern at the Interface of Fiction and
Ideology: an engagement with the works of Mahasweta Devi” explain how “the hegemonic
discourse of power in all its details . . . oppresses Dhouli.” (86)

V.P.Singh’s concern in “The Crisis of the Girl-Child: A Study of Selected Indian
Short-stories in English Translation” is about Shanichari’s sexual exploitation and about her
poverty and its compulsions.
In the article “Voicing Self-Determination and Creating Self-Identity in Mahasweta Devi’s *Mother of 1084* and Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*,” Raju Parghi expresses the opinion that Mahasweta Devi is a versatile, prolific and radical women writer reverberating the painful echoes of her community and surroundings. She is known for her fiction, short stories and plays which echo the voice of the voiceless of the downtrodden of the naxalite regions of West Bengal and North - Eastern states of India.

Mukhtar Ahmad Dar in his article “Representing the post colonial subaltern: A Study of Mahasweta Devi’s *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*” discusses how Mahasweta Devi highlights the fact that even with the passage of time nothing concrete has been done to ameliorate the tribal’s lot. However, the only change that can be easily noticed has taken place in the domain of tribals’ consciousness. They have started perceiving things more clearly and also their interconnections-that oppression and exploitation are the fruits of the system rooted in evil. Under such exploitative circumstances violent resistance seems to be the only option for these desperate voiceless tribals.

Swathi, Chikkala in the article “Agency and Motherhood: A Study of Mahasweta Devi’s *In the Name of the Mother*” examines the portrayal of the deification of motherhood and agency of women in Indian writer Mahasweta Devi’s collection of stories entitled *In the Name of the Mother*. It explores how Mahasweta Devi has encapsulated the strategies of women to survive and circumvent repression inflicted on them in the patriarchal society.

Vinayak Chaturvedi in his article “A Critical Theory of Subalternity: Rethinking class in Indian Historiography” states the views of Ranajit Guhan who claimed that subaltern classes were forced to resist the conditions of elite domination and extra-economic coercion in their everyday lives.
David Ludden in his article “Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia” traces the intellectual history of subalternity and analyses trends in the globalization of academic discourse that account for the changing character of Subaltern Studies as well as for the shifting debates around it. Frantz Fanon in his book “The Wretched of the Earth” analyses the psychology of the colonized and their path to liberation.


Silima Nanda in the article, “Women as the Oppressed in The God of Small Things” says that Arundhati Roy has a sensitive understanding of her women characters who are not emancipated and how they suffer oppression in the patriarchal world order. She also talks about the efforts taken by these characters to interrogate the structures of caste, clan and gender and try to bring about a change through resistance.

The above given reviews of literature epitomize what Mahasweta Devi’s works have gone through during various interpretations and critical analyses. Mahasweta Devi brings alive her experience with the tribal community in her works. The following statement by the author in an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak which is quoted in “The Plays of Mahasweta Devi” arouses the interest and curiosity of the researcher to explore deep into the
tribal community. Mahasweta Devi asserts: “Tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel . . . The mainstream simply doesn’t understand the parallel . . . They can’t keep their land; there is no education for them, no health facilities . . . they are denied everything . . . That is why I started writing about the tribal movements and the tribal world . . . I repay them their honor.” (19)

Taking into consideration, all these observations, analyses and critical interpretations of Mahasweta Devi’s writings and relevant resources - the researcher proposes to make a close reading of Mahasweta Devi’s select works and explore into the community dealt with. The focal point of the dissertation will be to execute a critical survey into the gradual history of the tribal community with particular focus on the downtrodden women. The aim of the study is to analyse and elucidate Mahasweta Devi’s tribal community as brought out in her works.

The objectives of the dissertation are:

- to make the voice of the voiceless heard upholding the value of human dignity and equality
- to create an awareness in the society regarding the rights of the downtrodden women
- to educate the downtrodden to stand up for their rights and to gain their place in society resisting abuse.
- to realize the need to empower women.

In present times when globalization is the buzzword adding meaning to things to make sense in every walk of life, there are issues which blur the vision of social integration. One such concern is the marginalized tribal community of India in general, and women
belonging to this community in particular. Even after so many years of independence, India is still unable to liberate the tribal communities from the bonds of class and caste discrimination and inhuman treatment. It is imperative to create awareness and inculcate courage among every one about the challenges faced by these ill-treated and insulted section of our society. The present study is a humble stride in the direction of building social consciousness among people and inspires the downtrodden to realize their condition and rise against the forces that oppress and exploit them and to stand for their equality and dignity, whereby positive changes will be brought about in the society.

The research methodology proposed for the present study is an attempt to carry out an analysis of selected fictional works of Mahasweta Devi with the aid of a few tenets of postcolonial theory namely oppression, exploitation, affliction and resistance. Homi Bhabha’s views on postcolonial reading of world literature is that it is the study about the personal experience of people whom history has ignored—the disenfranchised, the marginalized. The researcher has taken up a study of the marginalized, the subaltern for a better understanding of the plight of the tribal women of India. The selected works of the social activist writer are analysed in terms of the above mentioned aspects as they are thematically employed to demarcate the predicament of downtrodden women characters.

The dissertation consists of five chapters including introduction and conclusion. The works taken for the study are The Imaginary Maps, Rudali, Mother of 1084, Breast stories and Outcast: Four stories. Among the available English translations, the researcher has chosen these five works because these works deal more with the exploitation and suffering of the downtrodden women.
The first chapter – “Introduction” provides a brief review of dalit literature with particular focus on dalit writers and deals with the condition of women. It places Mahasweta Devi perceptively among these writers and imparts an extensive report of her literary excellence. The chapter furnishes a detailed review of literature, objectives, research methodology, the thesis statement and structure.

The second chapter deals with oppression and exploitation of women. The three stories in the book *Imaginary Maps* namely “The Hunt”, “Douloti the Bountiful”, “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha” focus on the issues of oppression and exploitation in the third world’s colonial and postcolonial situation. According to Waseem Anwar, “The title suggests that *Imaginary Maps* is about imagining maps as well as about mapping imagination. It is not only about dividing lines or drawing maps and signs on the face of the earth, but also about the invisible yet indelible marks of socio-economic transitions affecting human minds.”(83) Mahasweta Devi’s *Imaginary Maps* focuses on the issue of gender-based discrimination. While the first two stories focus on women, their work through their bodies and their minds, the third story “Pterodactyl” talks very little about women’s condition; it talks about other forms of tribal exploitations referring to the counterfeit governmental plans for banishing poverty, illiteracy and corruption.

*Rudali* is a powerful story of a poor low-caste village woman Sanichari and also a tale of exploitation, struggle and survival. Sanichari struggles in the beginning and finally faces emancipation against her poverty in the oppressive landlord system. *Mother of 1084* deals with the psychological and emotional suffering of the mother Sujata who arose one morning to the shocking news that her beloved son was lying dead in the police morgue, reduced to a simple number: corpse no. 1084. The three stories in *Breast Stories* namely “Draupadi”,


“Breast-giver” (Stanadayini) and “Behind the Bodice” (Choli ke Pichhe) also deal with exploitation. The stories have a common theme, the breast. The translator points out in her introduction that the breast is far more than a symbol in these stories. It becomes a means of harsh comment on an unfair social system. The first story “Draupadi” is about Dopdi and her Naxalite career and the second story “Breast giver” gives a picture of the non-planned family of Jashoda and Kangalicharan, who were living in poverty and hunger while the third story “Behind the Bodice” is a least exciting story highlighting the professional photographer Upin who is enthralled by the lovely breasts of a tribal woman Gangor. Outcast: Four Stories is an exposition on the sad state of four marginalized women characters - Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina and Chinta who are particularly victimized by being marginalized even by the people who are believed to be marginalized in society.

The third chapter deals with the sufferings of women. The stories highlight the society’s inhuman treatment meted out to people of the lower caste and also the sexual violence which recurs quite often. The stories happen not only in tribal communities living at the edges of the forest but also in upper middle class urban society, within the larger frame of the Naxalite movement. The police, who are supposed to protect law and order, unite with the system instead to commit violence on sensitive people.

The fourth chapter deals with the resistance of women. Mahasweta Devi analyses many ways of internalizing resistance against power. She provides methods of resistance and the way to survive. Mahasweta Devi’s oppressed women find their own distinctive areas, hidden strategies in a merciless framework of violence, oppression and deception. The researcher has described how the women characters of Mahasweta Devi resist exploitation.
The fifth chapter “Conclusion” ends the study with the review of the remarks, results, suggestions and attempts to describe the possible sources of the findings. The researcher has brought out the discrimination of women and the violence against women whereby she insists on the empowerment of women and the need to make the society aware of human rights of women in the final chapter.