
Activism and Social Engagement in the Works of Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract:

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) occupies a seminal position in modern Indian literature as a writer-activist whose works exemplify the convergence of literature and social justice. Her fiction functions as a site of political intervention where literary form meets lived experience. Through her representations of tribal struggles, gendered resistance, and systemic exploitation, Devi articulates a poetics of activism that transforms the written word into a vehicle of collective emancipation. This paper examines the interrelationship between activism and literary practice in Devi's oeuvre, with close reference to Draupadi (1978), Aranyer Adhikar (1977), and Hajar Churashir Maa (1974). It argues that Devi's literature operates as a counter-discursive strategy to challenge state hegemony and reclaim subaltern subjectivity within postcolonial India.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, activism, social justice, feminism, subaltern studies, Indian literature

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's literary and political trajectories are inseparably intertwined. Writing primarily in Bengali, she chronicled the lives of India's marginalized communities—adivasis, landless laborers, and oppressed women—while simultaneously participating in their struggles (Basu, 2010). Her narratives dismantle the ideological apparatus of postcolonial modernity, exposing contradictions inherent within democratic structures that perpetuate inequality.

Devi herself asserted, "The reason I write is to bear witness to the atrocities committed on the poor and the dispossessed" (as cited in Basu, 2010, p. 14). This articulation encapsulates her literary ethics: writing as witnessing, and witnessing as resistance. Her corpus transforms fiction into praxis—an extension of activism through aesthetic means.

Literature as Political Praxis

Mahasweta Devi's literary production resists the separation of art from politics. Instead, her fiction functions as an act of social intervention, blending creative narrative with

ideological critique (Sen, 2011). Drawing upon Marxist and feminist frameworks, Devi positions her writing as an instrument of social change and moral accountability.

Spivak (1988) situates Devi's work within a broader discourse of postcolonial feminism, arguing that her narratives perform a "strategic essentialism" that facilitates the articulation of subaltern voices (p. 285). Devi's fiction provides a space for the silenced to speak, without romanticizing their struggle.

Devi explained her process clearly: "I do not write out of imagination; I write out of anger, compassion, and real experiences of the people I meet" (Devi, 1997, p. xiii). This statement reflects her conviction that literature must emerge from lived realities, not abstract theorization. Her fiction thus becomes what Sen (2011) terms a "literature of resistance," where storytelling intersects with activism to challenge social hierarchies.

Reclaiming Indigenous Resistance: Aranyer Adhikar

Aranyer Adhikar (The Right to the Forest, 1977) is among Devi's most overtly political works, centered on Birsa Munda, a tribal revolutionary who led the Munda uprising (1895–1900) against British colonial authority and feudal landlords. Devi reconstructs Birsa's history not as folklore but as political memory, foregrounding the relationship between land, identity, and survival (Devi, 1977).

She declares, "The forest belongs to the adivasi. Without the forest, he is not himself" (Devi, 1977, p. 112). This line encapsulates both ecological consciousness and the politics of belonging. The forest, in Devi's narrative, represents not merely a geographical space but a moral right—an extension of tribal identity and sovereignty.

Through this work, Devi (1977) exposes how colonial and postcolonial systems alienate tribal populations from their natural and cultural heritage. Her literary reconstruction reclaims subaltern history, creating what Basu (2010) calls "a counter-historical narrative of resistance" (p. 45).

Devi's fieldwork among the Lodha and Sabar tribes in West Bengal, documented in *Bortika* and other publications, affirms the inseparability of her activism from her fiction (Sen, 2011). Aranyer Adhikar thus operates as both historical reconstruction and political manifesto.

The Gendered Body as Site of Resistance: Draupadi

Devi's short story *Draupadi* (1978), collected in *Breast Stories* (trans. Spivak, 1997), reimagines the mythological Draupadi as Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal Naxalite insurgent. Arrested and raped by state paramilitary forces, Dopdi transforms her violated body into a weapon of resistance. In one of the story's most defiant scenes, Devi writes:

"Dopdi stands before them, naked. Her mangled breasts drip blood. She says, 'What more can you do? Come on, counter me—how many of you can do it?'" (Devi, 1997, p. 38).

This passage exemplifies Devi's feminist politics. Dopdi's nudity, rather than symbolizing victimhood, becomes an assertion of agency. Her body, once objectified, now embodies rebellion.

Spivak (1988) interprets this act as “a reversal of objectification,” wherein the subaltern woman reclaims the power to define her body and her speech (p. 294). Devi’s narrative, therefore, not only critiques the state’s militarized control but also exposes patriarchal complicity in political violence.

As Basu (2010) observes, Dopdi’s defiance “transforms passive suffering into revolutionary subjectivity” (p. 77). Through her, Devi constructs a feminist paradigm of resistance that challenges both state authority and patriarchal ideology.

Maternal Activism and Political Awakening: Hajar Churashir Maa

In Hajar Churashir Maa (Mother of 1084, 1974), Devi explores activism through the emotional transformation of Sujata, a middle-class mother whose son, Brati, is killed for his involvement in the Naxalite movement. Initially alienated from her son’s political ideals, Sujata’s mourning evolves into awareness of systemic injustice.

Devi (1974) writes, “For the first time, Sujata saw the world through her son’s eyes, and she realized that silence is the greatest crime” (p. 213). Through this awakening, Sujata embodies the transformation of grief into consciousness—a private emotion becoming political.

Sen (2011) notes that Devi “locates resistance in the everyday moral courage of women who confront the violence of indifference” (p. 112). Hajar Churashir Maa critiques bourgeois apathy and reveals how complicity sustains structural oppression. Sujata’s journey represents the awakening of ethical responsibility, turning motherhood into a political act.

The Writer as Activist: Fieldwork and Social Engagement

Mahasweta Devi’s activism was not confined to her fiction; it extended into her lived practice. She founded the Journal of the People’s Little Magazine and worked with the Association for the Rights of the Tribals to secure education, wages, and legal justice for marginalized communities (Sen, 2011). Her activism, rooted in empathy, was grounded in experience rather than ideology.

Upon receiving the Ramon Magsaysay Award, Devi remarked:

“If you want to write about the poor, you must live with them, understand them, and fight with them” (as cited in Sen, 2011, p. 22).

This declaration reaffirms her belief that writing and activism are mutually sustaining. Devi’s praxis collapses the dichotomy between intellectual and activist, exemplifying what Spivak (1988) describes as “the ethical responsibility of representation” (p. 292).

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi’s contribution to Indian literature transcends the boundaries of fiction, functioning as both documentation and resistance. Her works—Aranyer Adhikar, Draupadi, and Hajar Churashir Maa—collectively construct a counter-discourse against systemic violence and erasure.

Through her narratives, Devi redefines authorship as solidarity and storytelling as social responsibility. As she affirmed, “I write for those who cannot write, whose voices are silenced. My work will continue as long as there is one person suffering injustice” (as cited in Basu, 2010, p. 32).

Her oeuvre remains a vital example of literature’s potential to enact change, demonstrating that writing, when rooted in truth and empathy, can become a form of activism—a weapon forged in words.

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