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**Chotti Munda's Arrow: A Postcolonial Exploration of Tribal Empowerment and Resistance**

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**Abstract:** Through a special emphasis on the Adivasi (tribal) communities, this analysis examines the function of culture and resistance in postcolonial India. Using Mahasweta Devi's writings, particularly her novel *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*, it explores the fundamental connection between cultural identity and resistance to oppression. The study emphasises how important cultural symbols like archery are for strengthening under-represented groups and encouraging unity against hegemonic forces. It also highlights the Adivasi communities' continuous fight for justice and cultural preservation, highlighting their fortitude in the face of past and present exploitation.

**Introduction:** Culture plays a vital role in shaping the identity and life of the individual and his society. It is a specific, organized way of living or the collective behaviour of individuals in a society, evolved in order to understand and live harmoniously with their surroundings. Culture encompasses many aspects of a community's life such as religion, rituals, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals and language, and it involves the institutions that govern the individual's behavior, and the individual's communicative responses to living in society in various forms such as art and literature. Bakhtin asserts that culture is a dialogic activity. Cultural meanings arise where one addresses other people. Pointing out the enriching emotional and spiritual function of culture, Renato Rosaldo says, "culture lends significance to human experience by selecting from and organizing it. ...culture is all-pervasive."(qtd. in John Monaghan & Peter Just *Social and Cultural Anthropology* 42) It is the repository of the collective experience of a society, and thus forms its moral/spiritual basis. An individual's concepts of who and what he is with relation to the world are constructed by culture. The possibilities for the emergence and expression of the self are determined by it. An individual's identity is closely bound up with the norms and values of his culture. When an individual's culture is endangered, he feels his own identity is at stake and resists the encroachment on his culture. When the existence of a society is threatened and its members face loss of identity under alien domination, it is to their culture that they look to for the reconstruction and assertion of their identity, as seen in the resistance movements against colonialism in Indian history.

Colonialism, with its expansion of the European empires during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, deeply divided the world into the West and the non-West. To legitimize their rule, the colonists used anthropological theories of race and regarded White culture as the basis in the matters of government, law, economics, science, language, music, art and literature. All the colonized countries resisted the colonial domination in many forms throughout the period of the colonial rule and such resistance developed into coherent political movements and wrested independence from the colonial rule, achieving postcolonial status. However, their independence turned out to be only a shift from colonial rule to the nationalist rule of local elite groups that absorbed the colonial ideologies and followed the Eurocentric model of development, exploiting and dispossessing the poor and the marginalized in subtle and even direct forms.

**Culture and Resistance in Postcolonial Movements:** Against the background of such conditions, “postcolonialism” or “postcolonial studies” or “postcolonial theory” developed as a body of writing that attempts to shift the dominant ways in which the relations between western and non-western people and their world are viewed. According to Nayar, postcolonial studies refers to the “writing/culture of nations/peoples/cultures who were once colonized by European powers. Postcolonial theory is an attempt to uncover the colonial ideologies implicit in European texts about the Other.... It explores strategies of resistance and “independence” or a “counter discourse” in native texts against colonialism.” (*Literary Theory Today* 164) Robert Young asserts that “Postcolonialism names a politics and philosophy of activism that contests that disparity, and so continues in a new way the anti-colonial struggles of the past.” (*Postcolonialism* 4) It also addresses the people who are part of a culture and yet are excluded by its dominant voices. It offers a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics in which these people’s interests are foregrounded. It claims the right of all people to the same material and cultural well-being.

Postcolonial theory received impetus from various modes of political activism such as the non-violent methods of Gandhi and the revolutionary practices of Fanon and others. It developed out of diverse philosophical traditions ranging from Marxism, post-structuralism, subaltern studies. Its scope was widened by contributions from the postcolonial or ‘Third world literatures’ or ‘Fourth world literatures’ (Literature of the indigenous minorities throughout the earth, and Dalits/Tribals of India) and the critical frame works in which they were studied.

Culture and literature played an important role during the colonial resistance movements. The postcolonial thinker, Frantz Fanon, stressed the revitalization of the national culture through a revolutionary arts and literature movement to mobilize the masses against colonial domination. Resistance movements and freedom struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all over the world bear witness to it. Indian National Movement (1920-1947) evoked many cultural symbols to unite and fight against British domination such as using everything *swadeshi* (homemade), rejecting everything British and adopting traditional ways of living

and education, songs and literature modeled on Indian cultural traditions. Black Consciousness movements (1960s-70s) exploited traditional resources for rebuilding their identity and used literature to spread the movement. In the tribal history of India, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Millenarian Movement of Birsa Munda, which was led against the mainstream moneylenders and colonial exploitation, advocated going back to the cultural forms of worship to unite his people.

Culture and resistance are inseparable entities in preserving one's identity and self-esteem. When an individual's beliefs are disregarded, his way of life is belittled, and his very survival is threatened, he puts up resistance to protect his life, identity and values. Indian adivasis have been continuously threatened by exploitation and dispossession under colonial, and later, native domination. Yet, they have always resisted subjugation, even though they are minorities, because of the strength they draw from their culture. Even after centuries of domination, adivasis have been able to preserve some of the finest aspects of their culture like their loyalty to their community, their organic relation to nature and its celebration.

The history of the tribal India demonstrates that resistance against oppression never dies and people raise their voice in many forms, as can be witnessed in uprisings stretching from Tamar Revolts of 1789, Kherwar movement, Shantal, Kol movements, Tebhaga and so on to the present day anti- POSCO struggles and the Niyamgiri agitation. The tribals have always put up resistance against the colonizer or the oppressor. A constant striving for justice and cultural identity is the driving force behind the struggles and resistance of these communities.

**Mahasweta Devi and the Documentation of Tribal Resistance:** The Bengali writer and activist Mahasweta Devi, who assiduously recorded in minute detail the everyday struggles of these tribal people in her fiction, strongly believed that none of the tribal uprisings was a failure. Their tenacious resistance has paved the way for many reforms. In her fiction, she shows how the tribals are being dispossessed and repeatedly displaced in the name of national development, leading to the disintegration of their culture and threatening their very survival. She shows the harsh reality of the lives of the tribals, who are perpetually threatened with bonded labour and exploitation.

Mahasweta Devi documents tribal history in her novel *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977, *The Right of the Forest*). It deals with the disintegration of the Munda society, Birsa's *Ulgulan* or rebellion and his efforts to bring back the traditional order. Following the historical continuity of events after Birsa Munda's *Ulgulan*, *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* forms a fictive continuity from *Aranyer Adhikar*. Mahasweta Devi strongly feels that Indian historiography ignored the tribal history. To set the record straight and show that the tribal history has continuity, she has written this novel. In both novels it is Dhani Munda, a revolutionary, who fought alongside Birsa Munda, who enlightens them to the reality of tribal oppression. The text shows continuity of tribal struggles and their resistance. Mahasweta Devi's inspiration for a character like Chotti came from her encounters with

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impressive tribal figures. The novel, her seminal work, is crafted by her to celebrate her 'lovingly stored' tribal experience. With a thorough understanding of history and exigency, with balance and restraint, she has drawn the portrait of Chotti Munda, the protagonist.

At the beginning of the novel, Chotti, the protagonist, is a fourteen-year-old Munda tribal boy. He leads a typical tribal life, a life of deprivation and poverty. He wishes to learn archery to win at Chotti fair. He happens to meet the revolutionary Dhani and learns archery from him. Chotti does not fully understand Dhani, but he (Dhani) remains in his mind. He is happy winning competition after competition and gets some money and makes his name. The jealous landlord cannot tolerate the growing independence of the adivasi family and picks up a quarrel, which results in the humiliation of Chotti's father by the police. It drives the father crazy and he commits suicide. This incident upsets the calm young man and makes him realize his real place as a tribal in the mainstream society, despite his fame as a sure archer among his own people. From then on, with the deaths of some people of the tribal communities and the obstacles encountered in their daily life, he begins to understand their oppressive conditions and develops a deep insight. He unites all his people and the untouchables and negotiates small changes in their lives. They collectively stand up against the oppressive forces.

In the novel, Mahasweta Devi demonstrates, in a unique fashion, how the solidarity of the tribal and non-tribal peoples opens up numerous spaces and counter possibilities for subaltern resistance in the power-dominated world. The novel portrays tribal resistance, upholding the tribal way of life and wisdom.

Throughout the novel one can feel the pervasive presence of archery, the unique symbol of tribal identity and resistance—right from the proud assertion of Dhani “Where did t’ Hindu gods learn to shoot those arrers? ... from us folks.” (15) Dhani and later Chotti regret when their symbol of identity becomes toys and tools of providing enjoyment in fairs. However, both of them empower their community through archery, which brings the marginalized tribals together. It has brought Chotti and Dhani together. It gives Chotti a chance to discover himself and get recognition in the face of terrible oppression. Archery is not simply winning at the fairs for Chotti and his people. Mastering the skill gives joy to them, “the joy under his heart at the triumphant glee of the audience after he hit the target ... A roaring in the blood. It was as if his heart had burst with joy. As if a whole field of red flowers in the trackless fields from Chotti village to Tohri had blossomed in his chest.” (64)

Archery provides the tribals the right to feel like men, which is denied to them by the unjust exploitative system. It brings back the identity, which has been thwarted and crushed under the hegemonic order. It empowers the tribal not just with the prize money and gifts he receives at the time of winning, but also with the sense of achievement he feels, and this makes him perceive the existing order in a different way.

Dhani Munda participated in the tribal movements of his day. “(A)t the time of the Santhal Hul, Dhani was a lad of twenty. The Kherwar revolt, the Mulkoï revolt of the Sardars, and then Birsa’s revolt.” (14) “He went to all the revolts in the hope that Mundas would establish villages in forest and arable land and farm rightfully and in peace”. (14) He is respected by everyone in the village. After the *Ulgulan*, he was expelled from Chaibasha to Murudi. Though he is under police surveillance, and told not to touch the bow and arrow, he uses them hiding them in the jungle. and is not controlled by them. He says defiantly, “T’day I feel like it, I’ll cast a spell, become invisible and take off!” (7)

Such a free-spirited Dhani is fervently waiting for Birsa’s reappearance to continue the Munda resistance. He keeps Birsa Munda’s aspirations alive. His deep faith in armed resistance kindles hope in him even in the most hostile conditions. His heart is wrenched on seeing his people in bonded labour. Dhani remains a militant all through his life and wants to see other Mundas also like that and he finds that fire in young Chotti, who is charmed by his archery and drawn to him to learn. Dhani takes Chotti as his disciple and teaches him tribal history, making him feel proud of his history and culture. Besides archery, he teaches understanding the jungle and making poison as part of his revolutionary training. As a true tribal, he makes Chotti love and respect the jungle and says : "With jungle learnin' ye won' die starvin'. What isn't there in t' jungl'e?"(14) Dhani gives Chotti an arrow saying it is spell-bound, thus symbolically passing the baton of the revolution, and as if making Chotti pledge, “(w)e won’ eat mealie, won’ obey t’ terrorizin’ moneylender, Diku, polis, will occupy arable and settled rural land, will take t’right to t’ forest.”(19) At the end,he teaches shooting humans. Chotti asks his teacher why one must kill people. Dhani says, as if speaking from his soul, that one has to kill the oppressor “(i)f need be”, (19) “one must, from time to time.” (18) Though the tribals trained to use various weapons, Mahasweta Devi makes it very clear that they never mean to use weapons to kill people. In an interview with Gayathri Spivak, she says, “They use weapons, but they are not bloodthirsty. They are basically gentle, polite, highly civilized, and this innate blood civilization runs back thousands of years. ... If we think what Gandhi means, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, tribals have it.” (xxii) In every incident in the novel the tribals come out as peace-loving, and Chotti’s way of resistance is non-violent, Gandhian and collective.

Though Chotti is the protagonist and center of all the activities, Mahasweta Devi does not portray him as a hero. He or his actions become the thread tying together the responses of the many individuals or groups to threatening conditions. Like Dhani, Chotti becomes instrumental in the tribals knowing themselves and negotiating their conditions. This plurality makes the novel truly tribal, reflecting its communitarian spirit. Inspired by Chotti’s skill at archery and his winnings at various fairs, three Munda youth, Dukhia, Bikhna and Sukha from Kurmi village come to him to learn archery. They are bonded labourers of the Nakata King’s manager and want to use bow like Chotti. Among them, Dukhia is inscrutable but single-minded and skillful. Two generations ago, Dukhia’s great grandfather borrowed ‘a quarter worth of paddy’ from the manager. As a result, their whole line became bonded slaves to him. Dukhia is a farmer and like any other tribal he wants to lead his life

with dignity. He lives alone, growing pepper, garlic and onion on his small plot. Not only does the manager take the best produce of Dukhia, but Dukhia has to live a subhuman life under him. Empowered with archery, Dukhia experiences joy and freedom while practising and winning. He becomes a man again. When the manager's insults becomes unbearable, Dukhia kills him and surrenders himself to the police.

Like Dukhia, Puran too learns archery from Chotti, and he uses his skill to get justice which that was denied to him by the oppressive landlord. In Narsingarh the landlord's agent Tasildar Singh uses vicious means of harassing his tribal tenants. Puran borrowed money from Tasildar Singh to pay taxes and has become his bonded labourer, but Tasildar Singh is not pleased with him and drives him out of his land and village, though Puran has papers of the land. When every means fails to get his land back, Puran kills Tasildar Singh by shooting a poisonous arrow while the latter is on a visit to the forest.

Somru and Bharat, who learn archery from Chotti, use their skill to unbind the entire community from their exploitative landlords. The Daroga of Chotti village always tries to find a link between any such incident and Chotti and his archery and perceives it as another site of danger. As a result, the Daroga (inspector) orders Chotti not to participate in archery competitions. Then Chotti decides to teach archery to his brother Koel and all the Munda youth to win in the competitions.

Chotti fights the injustice of banning his participation in the archery competitions by teaching and making many Chottis. The whole community resists the ban in another way. Chotti's students surprise him not only with their skill in archery but with the display of solidarity in a unique way. In the easy contests Chotti's students take first and second places and in two harder contests Rupa and Koel take second place.

“Then began the hardest contest. It's as if it was preordained. Sixteen contestants from five villages shot arrows in an expert fashion. Everyone screamed as if in triumph, when Collector said ‘No one won.’ Gaya Munda from Tohri called out, Me children only Chotti can do that. Don' worry if ye couldn' do it.” (82)

The Daroga does not expected this and cannot take it. He says to himself, “Bastards! They scream at defeat, and he says not to worry. No doubt they tease us because Chotti didn't compete.” (82)Not hitting the final, hardest target is a symbol of tribal solidarity, which is a characteristic feature of their society. It is an act of defiance against the unjust imposition of the ban on their leader by the police.

Archery empowers many people in the novel, like Chotti, Dukhia, Puran, Sukha and Somru to take active decisions with responsibility, and to be true to themselves. It helps the tribal discover his true self. It brings all people together. At another level, it gives hope to the whole community for a positive change. The ‘magic’ arrow symbolizes the spirit of resistance Dhani passes on to Chotti. Chotti in his turn passes it on to many tribal youth.

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Mahasweta Devi shows that whatever happens in and around Chotti village, in some way they are connected to Chotti and his skill of archery. In the hands of Chotti and his people, archery itself becomes a symbol of resistance against tribal subjugation. And for the oppressor, archery signals rebellion.

**Conclusion:** Chotti Munda and his Arrow by Mahasweta Devi eloquently captures the Adivasi communities' ongoing struggle against structural oppression in India. She uses archery as a symbol to show how cultural customs can be effective means of fostering unity and self-determination. The book emphasises the close connection between resistance and cultural identity, showing how Adivasi communities resist unrelenting exploitation and carry on with their fight for justice and autonomy. Chotti, Dhani, and other people's stories bear witness to the continuous struggle for cultural preservation and the recovery of agency in the face of hegemonic forces.

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