



‘The Subaltern as Subject’ in Mahasweta Devi’s *Sri Sri Ganesh Mahima* and *The Book of the Hunter: Paradigms of Living*

Srirupa Mahalanabis

Abstract:

An integral part of what constitutes our folk culture includes the tribes of India. How far the Indian tribal communities have been incorporated in mainstream culture is subject to study. One of the most radical and revolutionary Indian writers in modern times, Mahasweta Devi has been fighting relentlessly for the cause of the tribes in India. Her writings pose both challenges and opportunities for interdisciplinary readings. They present local aura against a historical background, which is fictionally constructed but cannot be separated from history at the same time. Although Mahasweta Devi has refrained from being called a “feminist writer” arguing that she did not consider women folk as a separate identity, her deep felt considerations for the women in her texts clearly surprise the reader. My paper takes into discussion two fictional texts

translated into English—*The Book of the Hunter* and *Sri Sri Ganesh Mahima*—and reads into the lives of two women who in spite of their subaltern position succeed in challenging their environment. Only a thin line exists between fiction and reality. In such an environment “Phuli” and “Lacchima” display sheer strength and will-power and finally win their liberation—at whatever cost.

“I’ll teach the bhangis a lesson. They can make up their songs, paint their faces, and clown around but they shouldn’t bring the maliks into it. A malik is a malik” (Devi 76)

“the tribal world is like a continent handed over to us, and we never tried to explore it, know its mysteries, we only destroyed it. We did not respect them . . . it struck me then, I have to write about the tribals, I have to, because these things will vanish, there will be more industries . . .” (Devi xi-xii)

In a nation where the tribal community constitutes 8.3% of the total population, over 84 million people according to the March 2001 census, their fractional representation in literature is a thought provoking concern. Mahasweta Devi stands among the forerunners in contemporary Indian writing who has brought the life of the tribes to the mainstream, urbane, bourgeois society and culture. Her texts are not only of significance to a student of sociology but of paramount importance in inter-disciplinary studies for the betterment and uplifting of

humankind. In this Mahasweta Devi stands as the “prophet of the subalterns.” In this paper, I embark upon the task to read through the two texts, *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* and *The Book of the Hunter* to locate and contextualize the position of women in respect to gender, identity and folklore. Unlike her short stories such as “The Hunt,” “Douloti, the Bountiful” and “Breast-Giver” (translated from the original Bengali text “Stanadyani”) where the women are seen as objects of commodity, these two novels read through the same lines but in a smoother, subtler tone. It is evident that Devi’s fiction is the medium to articulate the agonies of this suppressed class. Although her preoccupation with the bane is evident in her writings, she never viewed women-folk as a separate entity—woman is perceived as just another victim undistinguished from the proletariat in general. Devi is a literary writer with a purpose. Her texts are activist writings directed to effect a change of mind in the urban intelligentsia and bring to mainstream consciousness an understanding of the pitiful state in which a section of the nation lives.

The question of subalternity and its accompanying implications in the understanding of what really comprises rural India has always been surrounded by doubts and unavailability of accurate facts and figures. Efforts taken by the respective authorities have most often than not served the purpose of the intelligentsia in recording accounts rather than serving the need of those most affected. Popular culture has primarily rejected subaltern ethnicity on the plea that it signifies a marginal and distanced society whose concerns fail to contribute to the spirit of nationalism or nationalist consciousness. It is only recently that an interest spree has risen to understand the subaltern face of rural India.

On 2 October 1985, The Anthropological Survey of India under the guiding editorship of K. S. Singh launched a project to identify the gap in the existing record of the numerous tribes and classes in India (Singh). In West Bengal 203 communities were studied out of which 49 communities belong to the Scheduled caste category and 28 belong to the scheduled Tribe community. The Lodhas of Medinipur and the Sobors also known as the Kheria tribe are the two de-notified tribes in West Bengal. The British Government had passed the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 that notified about 150 tribes across India as Criminal, giving the police wide powers to arrest them and monitor their movements. While in reality crime went largely unreported and unrecorded, the supposed criminality of these criminal tribes and castes were inextricably connected to their lineage and genealogy. In 1952, a newly independent India repealed the criminal Tribes Act and “de-notified” them but they were again classified as “habitual offenders” in 1959. This is the easiest way of a so to say ‘liberal’ society that allows that society to be seen as “good” and anything that lies outside it as “bad”. Herein lies the dualistic structure of the society.

Now why this discussion is of importance in the study of the two central characters in this paper is to locate them in an essentially ‘developing’ society. The women in Devi’s novels do not belong to the mainstream society and are relegated as “*subaltern*” women. Devi writes:

The tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel. There has never a meeting point. . . . They have to beg for everything they need. They do not understand mainstream

machination, so although there are safeguarding laws against land grabbing, tribal land is being sold illegally everyday, and usurped by mainstream society all over India, especially West Bengal. . . . Nothing is done for them although so much money is allotted for them. They do not want money, they want facilities, they want to live the life of a honorable poor Indian. . . . The tribals of India are denied everything. (Devi ii-iii)

In her essay “Women in Difference: Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Douloti the Bountiful,’” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states that “Mahasweta Devi lingers in post coloniality in the space of difference.” In explaining what she means by this, Spivak writes:

the political goals of the new nation supposedly are determined by a regulative logic derived from the old colony, with its interest reversed: secularism, democracy, socialism, national identity and capitalist development. Whatever the fate of this supposition, it must be admitted that there is always a space that cannot share in the energy of this reversal. This space had no established agency of traffic with the culture of imperialism. Paradoxically this space is also outside of organized labour, below the attempted reversals of capital logic. Conventionally this space is described as the habitat of the ‘*sub proletariat*’ or the ‘*subaltern*.’ Mahasweta Devi focuses on it as the space of the displacement of the colonization-decolonization reversal. (106)

Within this space of displacement Devi writes the history of these dispossessed, marginalized, disinherited tribals who have been almost written out. The women in her novels therefore are born with two disadvantages: firstly, the disadvantage of being born a woman, seen both as a body (i.e. an object of desire with no independent existence) and as the “other” (i.e. inferior in class, station and as such seen as “subaltern”); secondly, the disadvantage of being born a “subaltern woman” with all its added disadvantages and disinheritances. The loss of identity and the search for voice which have been alter egos of women in particular from time immemorial is manifested in its more bitter aspects in the life of the tribal women.

Jim Masselos in “The Dis/appearance of Subalterns: A Reading of a Decade of Subaltern Studies” raises a central point in the definition of the subaltern: Who and what are the subalterns? Ranajit Guha explains the usage in two ways—positively by outlining what they are and negatively as a constituent of a binary opposition, by distinguishing what they are not. As an opposition they are not those who are dominant, the ruling and therefore not the elites. But the elite can be both foreign and indigenous and thus at regional or local levels either be part of the elite or according to circumstances and situation, be classified as subaltern. It is the independent existence which subaltern historians are concerned with delineating and confronting through the story of subaltern resistance. The subaltern mentality is the mentality of the subaltern at the time of opposition, at the moment of their action against domination. The subaltern is thus “the maker of his own destiny” (Guha vii). As Masselos notes,

The subaltern may be a historical subject but here also becomes a literary object, an objectification of the forces of the classic world working on human destiny...subalternity privileges the role of continued dissent and establishes a traditional, legitimated, genealogy of opposition. (210)

The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh exposes the hollowness of the economic, political and social background against which oppressors like Medini and Ganesh flourish. The maliks glorify lordship and identify the rural folks as his subjected, the . The novel answers the questions it raises and as a speculative sociologist Devi experiments with paths that can effectively bring reformation. For Devi, only protest can affect revolution and hence the insistence on the importance of resistance and rebellion. Although the title specifies the hovering figure of Sri Ganesh, finally it is Lacchima, the bonded labourer of the family who liberates Ganesh and inspires the suppressed to break into rebellion. Whether this change will be long lasting however, remains for history to unravel. Lacchima's bitterness and anger of a lifetime against Medini and Ganesh is liberated at the end of the novel when Lacchima decides to save him but on her own terms. In the very opening the novel locates the position of women as subaltern where women is viewed as an object of reproduction whose status in society depends upon the task of giving birth to a male child. The author notes satirically:

Another daughter and I turn you out. Terrified. No place to go if turned out. . . . Two co-wives, Badke and Majhli, sat like vultures just outside the door. They were also mothers of daughters and if the youngest wife birthed a son, it would be hard for them. (1)

And the satiric tone is audible when the author says that Ganesh was a generous man for he did not neglect “mothers of daughters” (12). When Medini’s son Ganesh gets married, Medini calls upon Lacchima to maintain the house: The woman have no choice “their role in this life had not been freely chosen by them” (28). As women, they were destined to obey, as subaltern women “the higher castes spoke while the lower castes listened.”

Lacchima cries foul in this stunted environment but with neither a route for escape nor for love. “I too was hoping to be free . . . Rotten old corpse! His son, his household, his daughter-in-law- anything that’s his, that’s all that’s important. God knows, I have never cheated him, I never will, but I feel like setting the house on fire and running away” (30-31). She says: “I’m mortgaged. When I’m sucked dry, useless as an old cow, then he’ll let me go” (32). Lacchima is aware of the socio-economic malaise: “All those who work as the malik’s servants today are descendents of those who took a loan from him. They can’t repay it. So they keep on working. For a share of the crop. That’s the system” (35). The text draws attention to the state of the bonded labours .(Bonded Labour Abolition Act(1976)freed all bonded labours with liquidation of their debts). But the Lacchimas have no identity, no voice.

In the novel, only a thin line exists between fiction and the real. Fiction is only history recreated. Devi’s use of language is at once colloquial and localized. Words such as ‘Bharat,’ ‘acchut,’ ‘ashauch,’ ‘Deota,’ ‘devangsi,’ ‘hortuki,’ ‘kharidi,’ ‘katcheri,’ etc place the novel against a specific spatial and geographical locale. In this regard, it should be mentioned that the

original Bengali books have been translated into English and the translators have performed the applaudable task of retaining the flavour and fervour of the original texts. Devi as a sensitive interrogator exposes the crude social structure and the need for immediate correction. “If one gives birth to a daughter, is it the mother’s fault?” (101) or ‘the mothers of Rukminis were acchuts (untouchables) but the Rukminis were not” (102). When Pallavi, a city born social activist arrives into the bhangi toil (the untouchables slum) her supposed sacrifice (of undertaking a task that is till unheard of among upper castes unless a religious rebel) is bluntly rejected as being only a “caricature of humanity.” Where Abhay, one of the enlightened untouchables finally succeeds in fostering a sense of solidarity with the tribals, Pallavi fails and returns. We are unable to fathom what Pallavi could have achieved because in a place where woman have no voice, only a body, Pallavi is forced to escape.

However, Devi does not lose faith in the power of women. Only a woman can bring strength into effect, through “endurance” her feminine consciousness is transformed into positive strength. Lacchima moves from strength to strength—she calmly bears her agony, loses her youth, shatters her dreams and yet moves on. At last, she succeeds in breaking the shackles of her guaranteed silence and leads the way to freedom. People like Ganesh may be wealthy but they were also savage, uneducated and feudal in outlook. They were impediments to the progress of the nation. And Lacchima brandishing the sickle cuts off the tie of bonded slavery and pays back Barha village the death of Ganesh. Ganesh is unabashed when he still teases Lacchima with dreams of a good living, of basic necessities of life which they are deprived of: “Why should you stay here, come with me, stay as you used to. A good house. A good food. I’ll throw out my

wife, marry again” (164). But this is a new Lacchima, a Lacchima who is ready to win her freedom at any cost: “Today I shall save you again. But not, Ganesh Singh, in the way you want me to. Today I shall do it my way” (164). And yes, this subaltern woman finally succeeds in getting back her own identity.

In the novel, an underlying meta-narrative is concerned with the organization of knowledge and its exercise in caste struggle. Abhay reinstates that even parties with a declared policy of liberation did not particularly care about tortured and tyrannized rural India. The SDO believes that law can only be implemented if the people put pressure in the right place. A new order will remove the old only if the oppressed turn around and retaliate. The fall of Ganesh heralds this change in the village of Barha and here lies the irony of the title.

In *Sri Sri Ganesh*, the bhangis are seen composing songs; their right to compose songs on the village scandals was recognized. In the malik controlled Barha village the only history of exploitation and oppression of the poor was found in their songs. But the maliks tried to suppress even this simple right which is also a part of the traditional ritual: “I’ll teach the bhangis a lesson. They can make up their songs, paint their faces and clown around but they shouldn’t bring the maliks into it” (76). Mahasweta Devi in her preface to *The Book of the Hunter* acknowledges that the materials for knowing the history of any adivasi community are in their traditions of oral lore, songs and folk tales handed down by memory and preserved. In this book Devi draws upon such materials to identify the shabar-kheria tribes (the forest-dwellers). She explores the cultural values of the Shabars and how they cope with the slow erosion of their way of life, as more and

more forest land gets cleared to make way for settlements. She affirms her assistance to kabikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarti (ix).

Phuli is a daughter of the forest. In the story, Phuli obtains her liberation but here too on her own terms. For Mukunda, the Brahmin priest of Ararha village, Phuli is to beware of as “she holds her husbands hand in public and on top of that addresses him as tui. A shameless!” (1), “tui’ being a very informal way of calling one’s husband without respect. Jagadeshwari thinks otherwise “why just because she uses tui? Can she help it if that is their custom?” (1) but Jagadeshwari is superstitious at the same time. When Mukunda calls her name aloud she says “God forbid, you’re saying my name out loud so long after dark! Again I’ve used *tumi* instead of *apni* because you asked me to. But who knows how much I’ve sinned” (23). The woman’s subaltern position restricted her from showing her face—to a maternal uncle-in-law and this was a possible reason for a bride to be ousted from her bridal home as happens with Damini in the story. The story draws from the epic *Chandimangal* written by the poet Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakraborty. The story describes the lives of the Shabars, a tribe who lived by hunting.

Mukunda is aghast at the thought of Kalya, the Shabar youth killing the innocent birds. But as Kalya rebukes, they are the shabars, the forest is their *Abhayachandi* and they are the children of the forest. Kalya fights it out in the jungle with his bows and arrows and Phuli sells it in the market. In the modern times, the shabars are part of the market economy. Phuli is

representative of the jungle at once vibrant and colourful. The legend among the sabars run that whoever catches the golden monitor lizard on the eighth day of Durga puja (the most important religious festival of the people living in West Bengal) will become the king and Abhayachandi (Goddess of the Forest) will reside in his city. Kalketu and Phullora were born of her. In the modern time Kalya and Phuli become emblematic of Kalketu and Phullora.

In the Shabar community both men and women toiled for their daily victuals. They married whomever they wanted. They built separate huts after marriage. When the husband and the wife quarrelled, the husband thrashed his wife; she in turn struck a blow or two. It wasn't the sort of society in which the wife had to take it all lying down. (83)

The positional difference between Jagadeshwari and Phuli at once re-instates the ideological focus. A deconstruction of the tribal women's position affirms the superiority of their foundation where men and women are at par and considered equals, an aspect that is unapproved of among the non-tribals. But with dwindling forest, the shabar community was slowly vanishing. Kalya unable to accept the fact that with the changing times the shabars would also be part of the market economy and need the market to continue their existence lived bitterly "a shabar is corrupted by living near a town," Phuli in contrast kept the household going.

The king's elephant runs into the forest and Kalya and the shabar men desire to hunt it down least comprehending that the hour of its death had come. Kalya enters deep into the

forest and is killed by another elephant. Phuli is unable to bear this sudden demise of Kalya. Her strength and balance gives way and she obtains her moment of escape. Phuli commits suicide. Herein she manifests a radical opposition to Lacchima. Phuli is the balance between Jagadiswari and Tejota (the all-supreme tribal God-mother and also the mother-in-law to Phuli). She is rejected by none and is accepted by all. Even in her death, Phuli fights it alone, tying up her own hands “who knows exactly how.” While the shabars now hastily prepare themselves for another episode of migration—another virgin forest—“a place where there existed no city, no market, no king or any other caste or tribe, where there were only the forest, water and hills.” Phuli is liberated. Phuli’s death is symbolic of the erosion of the forest and the forest dwelling way of life. She becomes part of the earth that constitute Abhyachandi and the very essence of the Sabar tribe.

Devi has often been criticized as being merely a chronicler of social reality but in fact she stands as a prophet of the marginal transcending the limitations of material concerns and highlighting the value of a universal consciousness of exploitation against the marginals and the strength to protest against it. As Homi K. Bhabha observed, it is in the addition of the “supplements” that the “minuses” become conspicuous (Bagchi 43). This paper reads into the identity and position of the tribal woman who is at the same time a subaltern woman and also a woman seen as subaltern. The Subaltern is the subject and the women further disadvantaged because of their relative position as objects of sexual and economic exploitation. Devi is one writer inimitably concerned with the welfare of the landless, dispossessed, and marginalized—the so-called “subaltern” the voiceless and inarticulate survivors of an internalized new nation

state. The subaltern is not merely a problematic field of knowing and issues raised in the study of tribal history in India have only opened wider discourse on oppression, displacement, violence and alienation that are an integral part of this historical actuality.

Works cited:

Bagchi, Aloknanada. "Conflicting Nationalisms: The Voice of the Subaltern in Mahasweta Devi's 'Bashai Tudu'". *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 15:1 (1996): 41-50. Web. 27 May 2008.

Bhowmick, Tapas. *Mahasweta*. Calcutta: Korok, 2003. Print.

Chatterjee, Partha and Pradeep Jagannathan, eds. *Subaltern Studies XI: Community, Gender and Violence*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000. Print.

Devi, Mahasweta. *The Book of the Hunter*. Trans. Mandira Sengupta and Sagaree Sengupta. Calcutta: Seagull, 2002. Print.

---. *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*. Calcutta: Seagull, 2003. Print.

---. *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*. Trans. Ipsita Chanda. Calcutta: Seagull, 2003. Print.

---. *Imaginary Maps*. Trans. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. Calcutta: Thema, 2001. Print.

D'Souza, Dilip. "Declared Criminal at Birth: India's 'De-notified Tribes'" *Manushi: A Journal About Women and Society* 123. *India Together*. Web. 1 Nov. 2008.

Guha, Ranajit. *Subaltern Studies I*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1982. Print.

Hardiman, David. "Adivasi Assertion in South Gujarat: The Devi Movement of 1922-23." *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2007. 196-230. Print.

Masselos, Jim. "The Dis/appearance of Subalterns: A Reading of a Decade of Subaltern Studies." Ed. David Ludden. *Reading Subaltern Studies*. New Delhi: Permanent Black. 2008. 187-211. Print.

Omvedt, Gail. "Are Adivasis Subaltern." *Economic and Political Weekly* 23.39 (1988): 2001-02. Print.

Sengupta, Nitish. *History of the Bengali-Speaking People*. New Delhi: Sage, 1990. Print.

Singh, K. S. *People of India*. Anthropological Survey of India. Calcutta: Seagull, 2008. Print.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Women in Difference: Mahasweta Devi's 'Douloti the Bountiful'" *Cultural Critique* 14 (1989-90): 105-28. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 May 2008.