

The Voice of the Unheard: Tribal Literature as Counter-Discourse in Indian English Literature

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Abstract— *The tribal literature in Indian English literature acts as an apt tool of counter-discourse on the mainstream discourses on history, culture, development, identity, etc. It exposes the deprived, wretched and the downtrodden. Oral voices make their place to communicate their anguish. Tribal writing in Indian English literature is also a strong discourse of contestation of the dominant discourse of history, development, culture and identity by giving an authentic experience to native discourse to voice the excluded, misunderstood and ignored people. Through writings highlighting the experience of resistance, identity, displacement, ecological understanding, the safeguarding of culture, or the retelling of oral stories, the tribal literature undermines the constructions of colonialism, capitalism and the state apparatus. It aims to understand how tribal narratives contest hegemonic representations and establish indigenous authority through analysing the writings of Mahasweta Devi, Gopinath Mohanty, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Tamsila Ao, and Mamang Dai within the framework of Subaltern Studies and Ecocriticism. The essay focuses on how tribal literature remembers collective history, reinforces cultural integrity and builds up a sensitive rapport with nature. The utilisation of the English language as a means of literary representation is beneficial for the accessibility and propagation of indigenous voices and thus opens debates on authenticity and misrepresentation.*



Keywords— *Tribal Literature, Counter-Discourse, Indigenous Identity, Resistance, Subaltern Studies, Ecocriticism, Cultural Preservation, Oral Tradition, Displacement, Marginalisation, Indian English Literature.*

Introduction

The proposed research paper refers to the voices of marginalised and vulnerable people and seeks to examine how tribal culture interacts with Indian literature to create a new literary framework. The researcher will attempt to explore how tribal culture, with its rich knowledge systems, oral traditions, life philosophy and nature-centric values, contributes to reshaping Indian English literature. The paper will examine how the incorporation of tribal experiences, cultural narratives, indigenous wisdom and struggle against marginalisation provides Indian English literature with new themes, perspectives and aesthetic dimensions. Furthermore, it will investigate how the interaction between tribal culture and Indian English literature leads to a new literary perspective that is more authentic, inclusive

different, diverse and representative Indian multicultural aura.

Tribal Literature and Counter-Discourse

Counter-discourse refers to stories that oppose the systems of knowledge and representation. Michel Foucault's theories of power and discourse suggest that knowledge systems are closely connected to structures of authority. Dominant discourses often silence marginalised voices by defining what is considered knowledge or culture. Tribal literature resists these structures by highlighting indigenous experiences that mainstream literature has historically ignored.

In India, tribal communities have faced centuries of displacement, land alienation, exploitation and socio-economic exclusion. Colonial forest laws, mining

industries, industrial projects and developmental policies have disrupted lifestyles and weakened tribal autonomy. Mainstream narratives have often portrayed communities as primitive, uncivilized or backward. Tribal literature challenges these stereotypes by presenting portrayals of indigenous life that are rooted in dignity, community and ecological harmony.

As a counter-discourse tribal literature exposes the violence of modernization and capitalist expansion. It critiques projects that destroy forests, rivers and indigenous livelihoods in the name of progress. At the time it preserves oral traditions, myths, songs and collective memory that are central to tribal identity. Thus tribal literature becomes both an act of resistance and a process of preservation.

Major Tribal Voices in Indian English Literature

1. Mahasweta Devi: Resistance and Marginalisation. Mahasweta Devi's work concentrates on the oppression and resistance of tribals. In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (1979), she demonstrates the effects of modernisation, industrialisation and state power on tribal lives. The arrow stands for their identity, culture and the weapon of protest against oppression.

2. Gopinath Mohanty: Indigenous Identity and Exploitation In *Paraja* (1961), Gopinath Mohanty depicts the life of the Paraja tribe of Orissa. The novel is concerned with their poverty, displacement and economic exploitation. Through the story of Sukru Jani, he reveals the unjust social and economic system and their subsequent marginalisation.

3. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar: Contemporary Tribal Realities Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's collection of stories, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2017) depicts contemporary realities of tribal life. They deal with topics of migration, displacement, and cultural commodification. The title story, "The Adivasi Will Not Dance," is a commentary on how tribal identity is used and sold in the contemporary world.

4. Tamsula Ao: Memory, Trauma and Cultural Preservation Tamsula Ao, in *These Hills Called Home* (2006) records the lived experiences of Naga tribals of the North East of India, subjected to conflict, violence and insurgency. Her narrative highlights the power of memory, oral storytelling and tradition in retaining cultural and historical identities.

5. Mamang Dai: Ecology and Indigenous Consciousness *The Black Hill* (2012) by Mamang Dai showcases the intricate relationship between tribals and ecology. The narrative of indigenous consciousness, its deep reverence for land, rivers and forests, shows the significance of ecology to indigenous existence and survival, and a rejection of an insensitive model of development. Language, Identity and Representation

One of the debates within tribal literature concerns the use of English as a medium of expression. English provides writers with access to national and global readerships, enabling marginalised voices to gain visibility within mainstream literary discourse. At the time, questions arise regarding linguistic authenticity and cultural translation.

Tribal experiences are really rooted in the stories that are passed down and the languages that are used by people. When we try to translate these experiences into English, we might lose some of the meanings and cultural details.. Tribal writers are very creative with English, and they often use indigenous expressions, myths and rhythms in their stories.

This way of using language challenges the ideas that were forced on people during times about what language is pure and what writing is good. Tribal writers are changing English to make it a tool for resistance by adding thoughts and feelings to it. Because of this, Indian English literature is now including voices from people who were previously left out, and it is not just about the experiences of rich people in cities.

Subaltern Studies and Tribal Discourse

Subaltern Studies is an important idea that helps us understand tribal literature. Scholars like Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak said that we need to find and tell the stories of people who have been left out of the stories.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked an important question, "Can the subaltern speak?" which shows how hard it is for people who are marginalised to express themselves in a system that is controlled by others. Tribal literature is a way for indigenous communities to tell their stories and resist being represented by others.

Tribal discourse also raises important questions about who gets to tell the stories. Non-tribal writers like Mahasweta Devi helped to make tribal people more visible. Now indigenous authors are saying that they should be the ones to tell their own stories and have control over their own narratives. This is part of a discussion about who is authentic who has power and who gets to decide what is important in literature.

Tribal literature in Indian English is a powerful movement that challenges the main stories that we are told about society and culture. It is a way for tribal writers to resist being marginalized and to reconstruct their identities through stories of resistance, memory and cultural survival.

Through the works of writers like Mahasweta Devi, Gopinath Mohanty Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Tamsula Ao and Mamang Dai tribal literature shows the lives of indigenous communities and challenges the people who are in power. These stories show how tribal communities deal

with being forced to leave their homes being poor and having their culture erased while also keeping their identities and being strong.

This study also shows that tribal literature is very important, in Subaltern Studies and postcolonial discourse because it challenges the stories that we are told and gives a voice to people who were previously left out. Tribal writers use their connection to the earth their traditions and their indigenous knowledge to critique the way that modern society values

money and growth above all else and to propose alternative ways of living together.

In the end tribal literature makes Indian English literature richer by adding different perspectives that were previously left out. It not makes the voices of marginalized people louder but it also makes readers think again about what they believe about civilization, development, identity and power. By doing this tribal literature is. A form of artistic expression and a way to challenge the status quo and fight for justice.

Comparative Matrix: Epistemological & Literary Shifts

The table below maps out the core conflicts, methodologies, and shifts in representation highlighted within the discourse.

Analytical Dimension	Dominant / Mainstream Narrative	Subaltern Mediation (Non-Tribal Allies)	Indigenous Self-Representation (Tribal Authors)
Primary Voices	State, Corporate Capital, Colonial/Postcolonial Elites	Mahasweta Devi, Gopinath Mohanty	Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Tamsula Ao, Mamang Dai
Core Ideology / Focus	"Development," urbanization, resource extraction, and capitalist growth.	Visibility of marginalization, structural violence, displacement, and poverty.	Cultural survival, ancestral memory, ecological interconnectedness, and autonomy.
Strategic Medium	Hegemonic institutional records, mainstream media, state history.	Social-realist fiction, external advocacy, political critique.	Native oral traditions translated to English, subversion of standard syntax, indigenous knowledge systems.
The "Voice" Mechanism	Spoken for or entirely erased from history.	Spoken about with empathy; structural critique from a position of relative privilege.	The Subaltern speaking directly;unmediated self-narrative and reclaimed agency.
Primary Artistic Goal	Maintenance of the status quo and assimilation of the tribal subject.	Challenging the conscience of the powerful; exposing state/feudal atrocities.	Reconstructing identity, resisting cultural erasure, and validating alternative modes of civilization.

CONCLUSION

The Janjatiye literature in Indian English has emerged as a transformative literary movement that challenges dominant socio-cultural conflicts and traditions, and oral literary narratives, and redefines the boundaries of Indian literature. As a counter-discourse, tribal writing resists historical marginalisation, exposes systemic exploitation, and reconstructs indigenous identity through narratives of resistance, memory, ecology, and cultural survival.

Through the lenses of works of Mahasweta Devi, Gopinath Mohanty, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Tamsula Ao, and Mamang Dai, tribal literature foregrounds the lived realities of indigenous communities and contests hegemonic structures of power. These narratives reveal how tribal communities negotiate displacement, poverty,

environmental destruction, and cultural erasure while simultaneously preserving collective identity and resilience.

DOMINANT PARADIGM OF "CIVILIZATION.

Progress = Capital accumulation, industrialisation, resource mastery.

Subaltern View: Tribal land is merely raw material waiting for profit

Challenged by:

TRIBAL PARADIGM OF "CO-EXISTENCE"

Progress = Preservation of ecological equilibrium, ancestral memory.

Subaltern View: The Earth is a repository of history and survival.

The study further demonstrates that tribal literature occupies an important position within Subaltern Studies and postcolonial discourse by challenging mainstream representations and enabling marginalised voices to speak for themselves. Ecological consciousness, oral tradition, and indigenous epistemology become central elements through which tribal writers critique capitalist modernity and propose alternative ways of understanding community and coexistence.

Ultimately, tribal literature enriches Indian English literature by introducing diverse perspectives that were historically excluded from canonical discourse. It not only amplifies the voices of the marginalised but also compels readers to reconsider dominant assumptions regarding civilisation, development, identity, and power. In doing so, tribal literature functions as both literary expression and political intervention, transforming literature into a space of resistance, dialogue, and social justice

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