



# Mahashweta Devi-The Mouthpiece of Indigenous Crave for Identity and Existence

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**Abstract**— Mahashweta Devi has explored the unexplored world of subjugated Adivasis. She was a legend in the regional Adivasis literature, explaining the causes of tribal displacement, resistance and marginality. In a true sense, she had taken the responsibility to give the voices to the marginalized Adivasis who were suppressed for centuries by the imperialist mentalities. Devi's translated novels *Chotti Munda* and *His Arrow* and *Arenyer Adhikar* were path-breaking novels in the Indian English Novel Writing. For the first time *Birsa Munda*, the legendary martyr and icon of whole Adivasis in India was known through her magnificent novel to all. The present research paper peeps into mainstream literary writing and representation of the realism of the Adivasis struggle and survival issues including the demeaning of tribal life. The research paper tries to examine the issues of displacement, acculturation and disparity of Adivasi life came out from the writings of Mahashweta Devi and regrets that hundreds of Adivasi revolts took place in colonial India but hardly those revolts could not become the subjects of literary, social and political discourses in India.

**Keywords**— Hegemony, Imperialism, Postcoloniality, Literary Nepotism, Existence, Indigeneity

Colonial exploitation and disparity of the Indian masses have been depicted so acutely by novelists like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Chaman Nahal, Raja Rao and Mulkraj Anand. Literature of the subaltern also took its shape during the postcolonial literature of India. Dalit literature has spontaneously roared against all the malpractices and dehumanization experienced by the lower cast communities by the Indian social hierarchy. The female situation in Indian society was also depicted by feminist novelists like Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande.

Tribals were facing the situation of displacement and subjugation in colonial and post-independence India itself. They were harassed and broken by the feudal society of India, even after independence still cast centric mentalities are exploiting them ruthlessly. They are looked at by the elite class as savage and unresponsive to, mainstream Indian society. Whatever the novel writings we have in Indian English novels about the representation of India seem unreal, irrelevant and romantic finds no rebellious voice against their displacement. But

Mahashweta Devi was a real voice of the unspeakable Adivasi community of India. For the first time, Adivasi became the central character in her novels and short stories and the issue of tribal marginalization, and subjugation was discussed in mainstream literature.

Mahashweta Devi has written a vast literature on Adivasis and marginal communities. Some of her famous novels *Sal Girar Dake (In the Name of Birthday, Arnyer Adhikar (Rights on the Forest) and Chotti Munda Ebang Tar Tir (Choti Munda and His Arrow)* are the truthful portrayal of Adivasis life and their history from many centuries. But apart from her tremendous novel writing, she has written a significant world of stories, among which *After Kurukshetra: Three Stories* is translated by Arjun Katyal, *The American Champa Tree* translated by Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharya, *Bait – Four stories* translated by Sumanta Bannerjee, *Bitter Soil* By Ipshita Chanda, *Dhowli* translated as *Women, Outcast, Peasants and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories* By Kalpana Bardhan, *In the name of Mother: Four Stories* translated by Radha Chakravarty, *Outcast Four Stories* translated by Sharmishta Gupta, *Old*

*Women* translated by Gayatri Spivak, *Droupadi* translated by Gayatri Spivak, *Mandira Sengupta and Ramtha translate the Queen of Jhansi: The Selected Work of Mahasweta Devi* translated by Pinaki Bhattacharya. The translated or regional literary works are the doors of the real representation of the broken community through which every mainstream novelist must once peep in.

*Chotti Munda Ebang Tar Tir (Choti Munda and His Arrow)* is a truthful document of Adivasis exploitation and their marginalization for many centuries published in 2002. Mahasweta Devi wrote this novel which was the manifesto of the Adivasis tradition of revolts. This is the story of Munda archer Chotti, a symbol of resistance of Adivasis ancestor. Regarding the theme of this novel, we remind Gayatri Spivak's statement about the subaltern study. In Mahasweta Devi's translated work *Imaginary Maps*, she blames mainstream literary canon for its negligence towards adivasis exploitation. Pterodactyl wants to show what has been doing not the entire adivasis world on India. We did not try to know it. Each tribe is like a continent. Nevertheless, we never tried to know them. Never tried to respect them. This is true of every adivasis. Furthermore, we destroyed them." (Mahasweta Devi: 1995: 56).

In much of her realistic writing, Mahashweta Devi confesses that mainstream and their money-centric mentality have created a threat to whole civilization and it goes beyond irreparable loss. She wants the adivasis world should be given respect and recognition. It should be explored more through literature because they are the ancient inhabitant of this land. She was an activist and a writer par excellence who lived adivasis life and wrote about adivasis life. She was familiar with adivasis dialect, phrases, ceremonies, music and used them in her writing. The most important thing is that she was very much aware of the constitutional adivasis rights, several adivasis schemes, programmers, and projects for adivasis upliftment from a local to the global perspective. Therefore we noticed, that hardly she left anything about adivasis life to introduce and depict on real ground base. Her fictions are full of authentic touch relatively mainstream Indian English fiction. She was in a real sense, "*An Adivasis Mahasweta Devi*".

The novel, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is suggestive on various accounts. Her arrows are the symbol of their society, the culture that is threatened by an outsider. It is a symbol of their ancestral faith, pride, and honor. This novel shows the continuation of the adivasis movement of land, forest and water. The leadership of Chotti, who is the evidence and observer of the suffering of decolonization from the perspective of aboriginal tribes. Her struggle was against those who came and tried to rob, their culture and

erase their identity. The novel is an excellent example of the double colonization of internal colonization of Adivasis in India. Adivasis wants to free themselves from colonial rule, but sometimes they wanted to be free from internal colonization of dikus and landlords:

The August movement did not even touch the life of Chotti's community. It was as if that was the Diku's struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the Adivasis as an Indian. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle. In war and independence, the life Chotti and his cohorts remained unchanged. They stand at a distance and watch it all. (Devi: 2003: 122)

*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, present different shades of adivasis life. Adivasi resistance was very spontaneous against the British forces in India during colonization. Because of the illegal forest policies of British rule, tribals survival was in danger and they became the victims of deforestation during colonial rule in India but the situation has not changed for them in independent India also. They are still the most displaced people without any rehabilitation in India. Bonded labour was the most threatening problem for the adivasis from independence. Double treachery of landlords, politicians and government are satirized by the critic G.A. Ghanshyam in his critical responses, *The Voices of the Other Post Independence Indian English Fiction*, he explores:

There was a change from all around. Some of which they saw in the form of industrialization which benefited only the dikus. There was no difference or change in the way others treated the Adivasis people or any improvement in their ways of living. They could not understand the double-dealing of the Indian administrator who gave them freedom from bonded labour on paper, yet would not let them be free. (Ghanshyam: 2013:122)

Mahasweta Devi's other comprehensive and realistic novel is *Arenyer Adhikar* (1977) shows adivasis icon Birsa Munda and his Ulgulan for the emancipation of adivasis territory as its central theme. *Ulgulan* was the simultaneous revolt against the social, economic and political exploitation of adivasis by British power and local landlords. The novel is narrated by an ancient Munda to tell the story of the movement of adivasis revolt to the youngster adivasis Munda. Anand Mahanand has commented on Mahasweta Devi's narration power in the following words:

Mahasweta Devi exposes the exploitation of adivasis and its mental and physical effects on adivasis. She shows the crookedness, exploitativeness and callousness of the British Government and the ruthless nature of nonaboriginal landlords and petty officials. She does not present a romantic or exaggerated picture of adivasis but the poverty-stricken and insecure life of adivasis people for whose rice remained an external dream. (Mahanand: 2011:170)

The character of Birsa Munda is inspiring in the novel, which arose awareness among other adivasis about the exploited machinery of the British Government. He is the commander of the revolt. To win the faith of his people, he calls himself God, but in reality, he knows the solution of adivasis problems is not in religious dogmas still to create enthusiasm in others he says himself, as “*Bhagwan*”. The regional novel is rich with the literary representation of Munda Revolt, Koal Revolt, Santhal Hul, Sardari Revolt and many regional novels in Hindi were written by regional adivasis writers. Writing for adivasis rights is like a legacy, was a dignity of the regional writer but postcolonial Indian English writers, mainly Indian English novelist neglected their adivasis past and sought refuge in romanticization. They could not create a larger life of adivasis culture and revolts through English literature. In this regard, Anand Mahanand points out:

Unlike writers who were stimulated by adivasis exotica and choose to romanticize idealized adivasis societies, Mahashweta Devi does not present a romanticized picture of adivasis. Instead, she portrays the poverty-stricken and insecure lives of the adivasis people for whom rice remained an external dream, where life meant wandering from one village to another due to ongoing eviction by “dikus” for whom land reclaimed the forest was the basis of adivasis life. (Mahanand: 2011: 171)

Indian English novelists have shown the adivasis as bare-footed in the novels who are the native son of the soil. Through their broad literary canvass, the mainstream has demeaned the adivasis suffering where Billy Biswas looks to adivasis life as free from all worldly activities, Bilasia, the adivasis girl as goddesses, and the old Dhunia as a more mature adivasis chief of the village. He praises everything about adivasis life in the novel, but the drought-

like situation, the problem of hunger and the miserable situation of adivasis comes to know us from the local adivasis chief Dhunia. Marginalization is not a new phenomenon, as it in literature. S. N. Choudhary has made a profound comment in the introduction of the book *Social Movements in India* where he opines,

“Thousands of tribes have been displaced from their native place without any proper rehabilitation. It is neither just humanistic from a adivasis point of view. Due to the absence of voice against displacement and silence on various issues, including exploitation, industrial houses prefer to install their project in adivasis areas” (Choudhary: 2010:05).

Mahasweta Devi’s most celebrated novel about tribal life is *Arnyer Adhikar* (The Rights of The Forest) is the manifesto of Birsa Munda's struggle for land, forest and river. He does not want that British power and alien diku’s ruled the tribal territory. He wants to fight them and recover all the ancient heritage of their ancestor. Indirectly Mahasweta Devi presented the Birsa Munda and his Ulgulan (Comprehensive Uprising from 1895 to 1900). Before the writing of this novel, Birsa Munda and other tribal revolts were entirely ignored by the mainstream novelist, but Birsa’s movement was fought against both the British and local landlords. He was demanding the complete freedom of tribals on their territories. K. S. Sigh’s opinion about Birsa’s movement is very suggestive. “He spoke of a new millennium for his distress people of freedom and salvation, status and power, opportunity and fulfillment in the new world in place of the old one which lay shattered within a few decades of colonialism” (Singh: 1972:01). Dhani is the main narrator of the novel *Aranyer Adhikar* who tells the young Mundas, the story of their ancestor. Mahasweta Devi has minutely captured the psyche of Birsa Munda, his rebellion, and various changes in thought processes of Munda. She has captured Birsa’s state of mind in the following words:

Today’s Mundari would be tomorrow's Christian again Mundari and Christian, But whatever your name was Suguna, Komta, Bharami, Dhani, Daud, Mothy, Yahan or Abraham tomorrow in your blood the lord Singabonga will always hold sway. Birsa knew that it was a great sin even to think a life different from the Mundari life lived by lakhs of Mundas. Nevertheless, Birsa had committed that great sin. Somewhere in his blood

protest and indignation had gathered day by day. (Mahanand: 2011: 173)

Mahasweta Devi has introduced the movement of Birsa on a different scale of political, agrarian and religious parameters. In style and idiom, the use of the Mundari language is a superb one. When we compare Mahasweta's outlook towards tribal life, Indian English writer seems to be away from tribal revolt, Birsa movement and the martyrdom of Tilka Manzi. Regarding her presentation of tribe in this novel critic Anand Mahanand foregrounds:

The novel, as a form is unparalleled in documenting human lives. Tribal societies, however, as classified and documented by writers can be represented more vividly in fiction and hence, they become more accessible through novels like *Arnyer Adhikar*. In this regard, *Arnyer Adhikar* and her other works have played a significant role in documenting authentic aboriginal lives.” (Mahanand: 2011:178)

This must be admitted that Mahashweta Devi was writing in the same decade where Indian English writing and writers were taking an interest in the global world and its humdrum. They were busy in proving themselves more advance and cosmopolitan. They were far away from the marginal and subaltern group and significant subjugated population of India. A regional writer like Mahasweta Devi was much closer to the ground reality of downtrodden communities. Regarding her ageless writing, Dinesh Misra in his research article, *Marginalization of Tribals: Literature as Resistance* comments,

“When Mahasweta Devi wrote *Aranyer Adhikar*, She recreated the Character of Birsa Munda, who led the tribal revolt. In her narrative, history folklore and fiction are all mixed up, to create a state of emotional high. This affects the reader's coincidence. It highlights the spirit and passion of the time. She does not indulge in sentimental romanticization” (Misra: 2015: 148).

After the realistic writings of Mahashweta Devi there is big responsibility and challenge before the adivasi and non-adviasa writers to speak truth to power about the dehumanization of the aboriginal people of this nation. A revolutionary approach is needed of the fiction writer who dares to scold crony capitalism in India who works against the adivasis displacement with the blessings and political patronages of the celebrity leaders. About the historical background of adivasis which could be the most inspiring

episode of writing for all Indians, Gladson Dungdung, in his celebrated volume *Whose Country Is This Anyway*, opines:

In Ancient times, the Adivasis had ownership rights over natural resources, and they judicially used these resources for their survival. Consequently, the Adivasis were living with autonomy, peace and prosperity. The situation changed after the Aryan invasion and became worse during the British Rul. On the one hand, the Aryans destroyed the Adivasi civilization, denied their indigenous identity and did not accept them as fellow human beings and on the other the British imposed violence on the Adivasis by grabbing their land, territory and resources and even naming few of them as criminal tribes. (Dungdung: 2013:16)

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