

Power, Resistance, and Subaltern Voices in Mahasweta Devi's Short Stories

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Abstract

This paper examines the interrelated dynamics of power, resistance, and subaltern voices in the short stories of Mahasweta Devi, foregrounding her literary engagement with marginalised communities, particularly tribal, Dalit, and oppressed women subjects. Drawing on postcolonial, subaltern, and feminist theoretical frameworks, the study analyses how institutional power—manifested through the state, feudal authority, capitalism, and patriarchy—systematically produces exploitation, silencing, and dispossession. At the same time, the paper argues that Mahasweta Devi redefines resistance not merely as organised revolt but as everyday acts of defiance, bodily assertion, silence, and survival. Through stark realism, testimonial narration, and the strategic use of indigenous cultural idioms, her short stories function as counter-histories that challenge dominant narratives of nation, progress, and development. The study highlights how subaltern voices in her fiction are not passively represented but actively articulated, transforming literature into a space of ethical witnessing and political intervention within postcolonial Indian society.

Keywords: Power, Resistance, Subaltern Voices, Marginalisation, Postcolonial Indian Literature

Introduction

The short stories of Mahasweta Devi occupy a distinctive and politically charged

space within postcolonial Indian literature, where literary creation becomes inseparable from social intervention. Writing primarily about tribal, Dalit, landless, and marginalised communities, Mahasweta Devi persistently exposes the structural operations of power that sustain exploitation, dispossession, and historical erasure. Her short fiction interrogates the nexus between state authority, feudal land relations, capitalist development, and patriarchal domination, revealing how these forces converge to silence subaltern subjects. Rather than portraying marginalised communities as passive victims, her narratives foreground resistance as an intrinsic and continuous practice embedded in everyday life. Acts of defiance in her stories often take unconventional forms—silence, refusal, bodily endurance, and moral confrontation—thereby challenging dominant notions of political resistance that privilege organised revolt or institutional activism. Central to her narrative project is the ethical imperative of making subaltern voices audible within a literary tradition historically shaped by elite perspectives. Drawing upon oral histories, indigenous cultural memory, and testimonial realism, Mahasweta Devi constructs narratives that disrupt hegemonic historiography and expose the violence underlying nationalist and developmental discourses. Her short stories thus function as counter-narratives that contest official versions of progress,

law, and civilisation, while insisting on the lived realities of those excluded from these frameworks. From a critical standpoint, her work engages deeply with the concerns of Subaltern Studies, feminist theory, and Marxist critique, yet resists theoretical abstraction by remaining grounded in material suffering and lived experience. The representation of power in her fiction is neither monolithic nor abstract; it is embodied in bureaucratic procedures, police brutality, land ownership, and the regulation of women's bodies. Conversely, resistance emerges not only as political opposition but as a moral and existential stance that affirms subaltern agency in conditions of extreme oppression. This paper situates Mahasweta Devi's short stories as a vital site for examining how literature can recover suppressed voices, interrogate entrenched power structures, and reimagine resistance as both survival and political assertion within postcolonial Indian society.

Scope of the Study

The present study focuses on a critical examination of power relations, resistance practices, and the articulation of subaltern voices in selected short stories of Mahasweta Devi. The scope is limited to her short fiction in order to analyse how condensed narrative forms intensify political critique and foreground marginalised experiences with immediacy and ethical urgency. The study examines representations of tribal, Dalit, landless, and gendered subaltern subjects, with particular attention to the intersections of class, caste, gender, and state power. It engages with postcolonial, subaltern, feminist, and Marxist theoretical perspectives to interpret literary strategies, narrative voice, and thematic concerns. While the research situates Mahasweta

Devi's work within broader socio-historical and ideological contexts, it does not attempt a comprehensive survey of all her writings or a biographical study of the author. Instead, it aims to offer a focused literary analysis that highlights how her short stories function as sites of resistance and counter-historical narration within postcolonial Indian literature.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to critically analyse how power, resistance, and subaltern voices are represented and negotiated in the short stories of Mahasweta Devi. The study seeks to examine the ways in which institutional forces such as the state, feudal authority, capitalism, and patriarchy operate to marginalise tribal, Dalit, and economically oppressed communities. Simultaneously, it aims to explore how Mahasweta Devi conceptualises resistance not merely as organised political struggle but as everyday practices of defiance, survival, and moral assertion. Another key objective is to investigate the narrative strategies through which subaltern voices are articulated, including the use of testimonial realism, indigenous cultural idioms, and fragmented storytelling. By situating her short fiction within postcolonial, subaltern, and feminist critical frameworks, the study intends to highlight the transformative role of literature as a medium of ethical witnessing and social critique in postcolonial Indian society.

Mahasweta Devi: Life, Literature, and Activist Legacy

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) stands as one of the most formidable figures in post-independence Indian literature, distinguished by her uncompromising commitment to social justice and her sustained literary engagement with

oppressed and marginalised communities. Born on January 14, 1926, in Dhaka (then British India), Mahasweta Devi grew up in an intellectually vibrant environment. She was the daughter of the noted poet Manish Ghatak and the mother of the avant-garde novelist Nabarun Bhattacharya. Educated at Visva-Bharati University and the University of Calcutta, her formative years were deeply influenced by the Bengal Famine of 1943, an experience that sharpened her sensitivity to hunger, dispossession, and structural violence—concerns that would later dominate her literary and activist work.



Mahasweta Devi began her professional life as a teacher and journalist before turning decisively to writing. Her literary career, spanning several decades, includes over one hundred novels and more than twenty collections of short stories. Writing primarily in Bengali, she employed fiction as a means of social intervention, foregrounding the lives of tribal communities such as the Santhals, Lodhas, and Sabars. Her works repeatedly interrogate themes of land alienation, state violence, caste oppression, and gendered exploitation. Notable texts such as *Hajar Churashir Ma*, *Rudali*, *Aranyer Adhikar*, and the short story *Draupadi* exemplify her stark realism and moral intensity. Many of her works have been translated into English

and adapted into films, significantly extending their reach and impact.

Beyond literature, Mahasweta Devi was a relentless grassroots activist. She worked closely with tribal communities in West Bengal through organisations such as the Paschim Banga Kheriya Sabar Kalyan Samiti and edited the journal *Bortika* to raise awareness about indigenous rights. Often referred to as the “Mother of the Sabars,” she combined fieldwork, legal advocacy, and writing to challenge the criminalisation and marginalisation of tribal groups. Her contributions were widely recognised through major honours, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, Jnanpith Award, Ramon Magsaysay Award, and Padma Vibhushan. Mahasweta Devi’s enduring legacy lies in her fusion of literature and activism, redefining the role of the writer as an ethical witness and agent of resistance in Indian society.

Mahasweta Devi’s Position in Indian English and Regional Literature

Mahasweta Devi occupies a singular and authoritative position in both Indian English and regional literature due to her sustained commitment to social justice, political resistance, and the representation of marginalised communities. Writing primarily in Bengali and extensively translated into English, she bridges regional literary traditions and global readerships, ensuring that subaltern experiences rooted in specific local histories enter national and international literary discourse. Unlike many writers whose engagement with marginality remains symbolic or metaphorical, Mahasweta Devi’s literary practice is inseparable from her activism among tribal and dispossessed communities, lending her fiction an ethical urgency and political authenticity that

distinguishes her from her contemporaries. Within regional literature, she revitalised Bengali prose by integrating oral narratives, folk traditions, and lived testimonies of Adivasi life, thereby challenging elite literary aesthetics and redefining realism as a mode of political truth-telling. In Indian English literature, her translated works have played a crucial role in reshaping postcolonial literary canons, foregrounding issues of land dispossession, state violence, gendered oppression, and economic exploitation often marginalised in mainstream narratives. Her position is further reinforced by her alignment with, yet critical distance from, Subaltern Studies, as her fiction not only represents subaltern lives but also interrogates the conditions under which they are spoken for. As a result, Mahasweta Devi stands as a pivotal figure who collapses the divide between regional and English-language literatures, transforming literature into a sustained intervention against structural injustice in postcolonial India.

Critical Responses to Mahasweta Devi's Short Fiction

Critical engagement with the short fiction of Mahasweta Devi has been extensive and multidisciplinary, reflecting the political urgency and ethical complexity of her work. Scholars have consistently foregrounded her role as a writer-activist, emphasising how her stories challenge dominant literary aesthetics by prioritising social responsibility over formal experimentation. Early criticism often approached her fiction through a Marxist lens, highlighting themes of class struggle, land dispossession, and the exploitative logic of feudalism and capitalism. With the emergence of Subaltern Studies, critics increasingly positioned her work as a literary counterpart to subaltern

historiography, noting how her narratives recover marginalised voices excluded from official histories. Feminist scholars have drawn attention to her portrayal of tribal and lower-caste women, analysing how gendered violence, bodily suffering, and sexual exploitation function as instruments of power while also becoming sites of resistance. At the same time, some critics have raised ethical questions regarding authorial mediation, debating whether the representation of subaltern voices risks reinscribing power hierarchies between the writer and the marginalised subject. Others, however, argue that Mahasweta Devi's self-reflexive narrative strategies and activist engagement complicate such critiques by foregrounding the limits of representation itself. Postcolonial critics have further examined her challenge to nationalist and developmental discourses, reading her short fiction as counter-narratives that expose the violence underlying state policies and modernisation projects. Overall, critical responses acknowledge her short stories as politically disruptive texts that blur the boundaries between literature, history, and activism, solidifying her position as a central figure in debates on resistance, representation, and ethical writing in postcolonial Indian literature.

Theoretical Framework

The present study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to examine power, resistance, and subaltern voices in the short stories of Mahasweta Devi, drawing upon postcolonial theory, Subaltern Studies, feminist criticism, and Marxist political economy. Power is conceptualised as a dispersed yet materially grounded force operating through the state, caste hierarchy, class relations, patriarchy,

and capitalist modes of extraction, all of which shape the lived realities of marginalised communities in postcolonial India. Rather than functioning as an abstract structure, power in this framework is understood as embodied in bureaucratic procedures, land ownership patterns, policing, legal discourse, and the regulation of labour and women's bodies.

Subalternity is approached not merely as social marginalisation but as a condition marked by enforced silence, historical erasure, and mediated articulation, where the subaltern subject is denied autonomous access to dominant modes of representation. Drawing from Subaltern Studies debates, the framework remains attentive to the ethical problem of voice, recognising that literary representation often occurs through narrative mediation while simultaneously foregrounding silence, fragmentation, and narrative rupture as meaningful signs of exclusion. Resistance theory further informs this study by expanding the concept of resistance beyond organised rebellion to include everyday acts of refusal, endurance, and survival, as well as insurgent consciousness that emerges in moments of moral confrontation with authority.

Cultural dissent, expressed through oral traditions, bodily assertion, and symbolic defiance, is treated as a significant mode of political agency within oppressive conditions. Finally, the framework adopts an intersectional perspective to analyse how gender, class, and tribal identity intersect to produce layered forms of domination and resistance. This approach enables a nuanced reading of how tribal women in Mahasweta Devi's short stories experience power differently from their male or non-tribal counterparts, while also articulating distinct forms of resistance shaped by their

social location. Collectively, this theoretical framework allows the study to analyse literature as a site where structures of domination are exposed and subaltern agency is critically reimagined.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with the writings of Mahasweta Devi has consistently foregrounded the intersection of literature, power, and social justice, situating her work within broader feminist, postcolonial, and subaltern critical traditions. Uma Chakravarti's *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2003) provides an essential framework for understanding how caste and gender function as interlocking systems of domination in Indian society. Although Chakravarti does not focus exclusively on Mahasweta Devi, her feminist-caste analysis is crucial for interpreting the lived realities of women in Devi's short stories, particularly tribal and lower-caste women whose oppression is shaped by both social hierarchy and patriarchal control. Chakravarti's work enables critics to move beyond universalist feminist models and instead read Mahasweta Devi's female characters as subjects located within historically specific power structures. This approach has informed later feminist readings that emphasise embodied suffering, labour exploitation, and sexual violence as systemic rather than incidental features of subaltern life.

Critical anthologies and collections have further consolidated Mahasweta Devi's position within Indian literary discourse. Chaudhuri's *Mahasweta Devi: An Anthology of Recent Criticism* (2011) brings together diverse scholarly responses that highlight the political urgency and ethical complexity of her fiction. Critics represented in this volume explore her narrative strategies, activist commitments,

and challenge to dominant literary aesthetics, arguing that her short stories resist both romanticisation and sentimentalism. The anthology reflects a broader critical consensus that Mahasweta Devi's fiction cannot be read purely as literary artefact but must be approached as a form of cultural and political intervention. This body of criticism also engages with debates on representation, questioning the role of the intellectual in speaking for marginalised communities while acknowledging Devi's self-reflexive awareness of this dilemma. Such discussions are central to understanding how her work navigates the tension between advocacy and authorial mediation. Mahasweta Devi's own translated writings have played a pivotal role in shaping critical interpretations of power and subalternity. *Imaginary Maps* (2002), translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, has been particularly influential in international scholarship. Spivak's translation and critical apparatus frame Devi's short stories within Subaltern Studies debates, especially the problem of whether the subaltern can speak within dominant discursive structures. The stories in this collection foreground state violence, tribal resistance, and gendered oppression, making them key texts for analyses of resistance and voice. Similarly, *Dust on the Road* (2010) extends critical understanding of Devi by presenting her non-fiction and activist writings, thereby collapsing the boundary between literature and political action. Scholars frequently draw on this text to argue that her fiction must be read in conjunction with her activism, reinforcing the view that narrative in her work functions as ethical witnessing rather than detached representation.

The broader theoretical context for reading Mahasweta Devi is shaped by postcolonial and subaltern scholarship. Ranajit Guha's *Dominance without Hegemony* (2000) provides a foundational analysis of power that explains how coercion and consent operate unevenly in colonial and postcolonial societies, a framework often applied to Devi's depiction of state authority and rural domination. Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) raises critical concerns about the consumption and commodification of marginality, prompting scholars to examine how Mahasweta Devi's work resists exoticisation by foregrounding discomfort and ethical responsibility. Leela Gandhi (2019) and Ania Loomba (2015) further contribute theoretical tools for situating Devi within postcolonial discourse, particularly in relation to nationalism, resistance, and cultural politics. Together, these studies form a critical foundation for analysing how Mahasweta Devi's short stories articulate power, resistance, and subaltern voices while challenging dominant literary and ideological frameworks.

Power Structures in Mahasweta Devi's Short Stories

In the short stories of Mahasweta Devi, power is represented as a pervasive and embodied force that structures everyday life for marginalised communities. Rather than treating domination as an abstract political concept, her narratives reveal how power operates through material relations, social institutions, and cultural norms. Feudal authority, state machinery, capitalist development, and patriarchy do not function independently; instead, they intersect to sustain exploitation and silence subaltern voices. By foregrounding lived experiences of oppression, her short fiction

exposes the continuity of colonial and pre-colonial hierarchies within postcolonial India.

1. Feudal Exploitation and Landlordism

Feudal exploitation remains a dominant structure in Mahasweta Devi's short stories, particularly in rural and tribal settings where land ownership determines social power. Landlords exercise control through bonded labour, debt, and customary authority, reducing tribal and lower-caste communities to perpetual dependency. Despite the formal abolition of feudal systems, her narratives demonstrate how these relations persist through informal coercion and violence. Land thus becomes not only an economic resource but a tool of domination that denies autonomy and dignity to the dispossessed.

2. State Violence, Bureaucracy, and Legal Oppression

The state appears in her fiction as a coercive apparatus that reinforces rather than dismantles injustice. Bureaucratic indifference, police brutality, and legal manipulation systematically criminalise subaltern populations. Laws meant to ensure protection often serve as instruments of repression, legitimising violence through procedural authority. Mahasweta Devi portrays the state as deeply complicit in sustaining inequality, exposing the gap between constitutional ideals and lived realities.

3. Capitalist Extraction and Tribal Displacement

Capitalist development intensifies existing power structures by commodifying land, forests, and labour. Mining projects, industrial expansion, and infrastructural development displace tribal communities in the name of national progress. Her stories reveal how capitalism collaborates with state and feudal power, erasing indigenous

cultures while presenting dispossession as economic necessity. Displacement thus emerges as both material loss and cultural annihilation.

4. Patriarchal Control over Women's Bodies and Labour

Patriarchy cuts across all other structures of power, regulating women's bodies and labour through sexual violence, reproductive control, and economic exploitation. Tribal and lower-caste women experience layered oppression, as their bodies become sites where feudal authority, state violence, and capitalist interests converge. Mahasweta Devi's narratives expose how gendered violence is not incidental but central to the maintenance of power, while also revealing moments of resistance embedded in women's endurance and defiance.

Resistance as Survival and Protest

In the short stories of Mahasweta Devi, resistance is not confined to overt political movements or organised rebellion; instead, it is deeply embedded in the everyday practices of survival adopted by marginalised communities. Her narratives challenge conventional political frameworks that equate resistance solely with collective uprisings, foregrounding subtle, fragmented, and often unrecognised forms of dissent that emerge under conditions of extreme oppression. Resistance thus becomes a continuous negotiation with power rather than a singular revolutionary event.

• Everyday Resistance versus Organised Rebellion

Mahasweta Devi's fiction frequently contrasts everyday resistance with organised rebellion, privileging the former as more sustainable and pervasive in

subaltern life. Acts such as refusal to comply, strategic silence, or quiet withdrawal from exploitative systems represent forms of resistance that do not rely on institutional recognition. These practices enable survival while undermining the moral authority of dominant power structures, even in the absence of collective mobilisation.

- **The Body as a Site of Resistance and Political Inscription**

The body occupies a central position in her representation of resistance, functioning as a site where power inscribes violence and where counter-assertion emerges. Physical endurance, scars, hunger, and sexual violation are not merely depictions of suffering but become political texts that expose the brutality of oppressive systems. Through bodily presence and endurance, subaltern subjects confront authority and transform corporeal vulnerability into symbolic defiance.

- **Refusal, Silence, Defiance, and Martyrdom**

Resistance in her short stories often takes the form of refusal and silence, challenging the assumption that resistance must be articulated verbally or through action. Silence operates as a powerful counter-discourse, disrupting dominant narratives and denying power the validation of consent. In extreme cases, defiance culminates in martyrdom, where death itself becomes an indictment of systemic injustice.

- **From Victimhood to Agency**

Crucially, Mahasweta Devi reconfigures victimhood as a potential site of agency. Her characters are not redeemed by escape from oppression but by their capacity to assert moral and political autonomy within it. Through endurance, confrontation, and

symbolic resistance, victimhood is transformed into an active stance that exposes the fragility and violence of dominant power, reaffirming subaltern agency in hostile conditions.

Subaltern Voices and Narrative Strategies

In the short stories of Mahasweta Devi, subaltern voices are articulated through distinctive narrative strategies that challenge dominant literary forms and epistemologies. Her fiction is not concerned with ventriloquising marginalised subjects into elite idioms; instead, it seeks to unsettle conventional narrative authority and foreground the difficulty, fragmentation, and ethical risk involved in representing silenced lives. Narrative form thus becomes inseparable from political intent, enabling literature to function as a counter-discursive space.

1. Speaking from the Margins

Mahasweta Devi draws extensively on oral traditions, folk idioms, and indigenous speech patterns to convey subaltern experience. These narrative choices resist standardised literary language and affirm culturally embedded modes of expression that have historically been excluded from canonical literature. By incorporating songs, myths, and collective memory, her stories recover subaltern knowledge systems and validate non-elite ways of meaning-making, allowing marginalised communities to speak from within their cultural contexts rather than through imposed frameworks.

2. Fragmented Narratives and Testimonial Realism

Fragmentation is a key narrative strategy in her short fiction, reflecting the disrupted histories and precarious lives of subaltern subjects. Non-linear structures, abrupt

shifts in perspective, and testimonial modes of narration convey trauma, dispossession, and historical rupture. Testimonial realism prioritises lived experience over aesthetic coherence, transforming the story into a record of suffering and resistance that challenges official histories and bureaucratic representations of truth.

3. Irony, Satire, and Stark Realism

Irony and satire operate alongside stark realism to expose the hypocrisy of state institutions, development discourse, and moral authority. Mahasweta Devi employs an unsentimental narrative tone that refuses consolation, compelling readers to confront violence without narrative closure. Satirical moments destabilise dominant power by revealing its moral emptiness, while realism insists on the materiality of suffering.

4. Authorial Mediation and Ethical Witnessing

While her narratives inevitably involve authorial mediation, Mahasweta Devi foregrounds this mediation as an ethical problem rather than concealing it. The writer positions herself as a witness rather than a spokesperson, acknowledging the limits of representation. This self-reflexive stance transforms storytelling into ethical witnessing, where the act of narration itself becomes a form of resistance against erasure and silence.

Gendered Subalternity and Feminist Resistance

In the short stories of Mahasweta Devi, gender emerges as a critical axis through which subalternity is intensified and resistance is reconfigured. Her fiction demonstrates that women's oppression cannot be understood in isolation from caste, class, tribal identity, and state power. By situating gender within broader structures of domination, her narratives

challenge universalist feminist paradigms and foreground context-specific forms of feminist resistance rooted in lived experience.

- **Tribal Women as Doubly Marginalised Subjects**

Tribal women in Mahasweta Devi's short stories occupy a position of double marginalisation, subjected to both socio-economic exploitation and patriarchal control. As members of dispossessed communities, they face displacement, poverty, and state violence; as women, they endure gendered labour exploitation and sexual vulnerability. Their marginality is thus not additive but intersecting, producing unique forms of vulnerability and resilience that shape their responses to power.

- **Sexual Violence as an Instrument of Power**

Sexual violence is depicted not as an aberration but as a systematic instrument of domination deployed by feudal, state, and military forces. Women's bodies become terrains upon which authority asserts control, discipline, and humiliation. Mahasweta Devi's unsparing portrayal of sexual violence exposes its political function, dismantling narratives that individualise or normalise such acts as incidental or private.

- **Female Corporeality and Counter-Hegemonic Assertion**

At the same time, female corporeality becomes a site of counter-hegemonic assertion in her fiction. Women's bodies, marked by labour, scars, and endurance, resist erasure by confronting power with material presence. Acts of bodily assertion—whether through defiance, refusal, or exposure—transform corporeal vulnerability into political resistance,

challenging the symbolic authority of patriarchal power.

- **Redefining Feminism through Indigenous Resistance**

Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of women's resistance redefines feminism beyond elite, urban frameworks. Her narratives foreground indigenous forms of resistance grounded in survival, collective memory, and moral confrontation. Feminism here is not articulated through formal rights discourse but enacted through lived defiance, endurance, and ethical resistance, offering a radically inclusive and decolonised feminist vision rooted in subaltern realities.

Conclusion

The short stories of Mahasweta Devi constitute a powerful literary intervention that exposes the persistent structures of power shaping subaltern existence while simultaneously reimagining resistance as an everyday, embodied, and ethical practice. Through her unsentimental portrayal of feudal exploitation, state violence, capitalist displacement, and patriarchal domination, she dismantles the myth of postcolonial progress and reveals how historical injustices are reproduced within contemporary political and economic systems. Yet her fiction does not reduce marginalised subjects to passive victims; instead, it foregrounds their agency through acts of refusal, endurance, silence, and moral confrontation that challenge dominant frameworks of resistance. Central to her narrative project is the recovery and articulation of subaltern voices, achieved through innovative narrative strategies that draw upon oral traditions, testimonial realism, fragmentation, and stark irony. These strategies not only disrupt elite literary conventions but also raise critical

ethical questions about representation, mediation, and witnessing. Her portrayal of gendered subalternity further complicates feminist discourse by situating women's oppression within intersecting structures of caste, class, tribal identity, and state power, thereby offering an indigenous and decolonised vision of feminist resistance. Collectively, Mahasweta Devi's short stories reaffirm literature's capacity to function as a site of political critique, ethical responsibility, and counter-historical narration. By compelling readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power and inequality, her work transforms storytelling into an act of resistance that refuses closure and demands continued engagement with the lives and struggles of those relegated to the margins of postcolonial Indian society.

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