

**Mahasweta Devi's Literary Analysis of Harsh Realities of Indigenous People's
Oppression in Postcolonial India beyond the Veil of Progress.**

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Abstract

In this paper we examine Mahasweta Devi's literary portrayal of indigenous suffering in postcolonial India through her short stories "Little Ones," "Bitter Soil," and "Draupadi." We explore how Devi exposes the systemic roots of tribal oppression—such as famine, land dispossession, and state violence—as outcomes of exploitative policies and internal colonialism. Through symbolic use of myth, vivid depictions of hunger, and cultural memory, Devi critiques state complicity in marginalization. We also highlight her ecofeminist vision, which draws parallels between the exploitation of women and nature, and her representation of tribal resistance through acts of defiance and cultural resilience. Ultimately, we argue that Devi's work demonstrates the power of literature to challenge dominant narratives and advocate for social justice for the most marginalized communities in India.

Key words: Mahasweta Devi, Indigenous oppression, Ecofeminism, Postcolonial India, Land dispossession, Tribal resistance, "Little Ones," "Bitter Soil," "Draupadi"

1. Mahasweta Devi's Literature for Activism

Mahasweta Devi is a towering figure in Bengali literature who is recognised for her literary talent and unwavering commitment to social justice. Her writings go beyond conventional storytelling to bear witness to the suffering of the most marginalized groups in

India, particularly tribal and Dalit communities. Her first-hand engagement with these lives—especially those of oppressed women—enabled her to depict their experiences with both intimacy and urgency. For Devi, literature was not detached from activism; it was a means of protest and intervention. In “Little Ones,” she presents a stark microcosm of hunger and alienation, vividly illustrating the physical and emotional toll of systemic neglect. Similarly, in “Bitter Soil,” she reveals how tribal suffering is the outcome of structural and enduring exploitation—not chance misfortune. Through these stories, Devi critiques both past and present systems of injustice and treats literature as a tool of resistance and political insight.

2. Dehumanizing Force as starvation

In “Little Ones,” the title refers to adults whose bodies appear tragically stunted due to years of chronic hunger, rather than to children. These “Little Ones” symbolize a community diminished—physically, socially, and politically—by long-term malnutrition. Their emaciated bodies become a powerful metaphor for the erasure of dignity, space, and livelihood in a nation that claims to be developing. Devi ironically notes that they “have seen rice but only in dreams,” a haunting image that reveals hunger as not just a condition, but a permanent feature of their lives. She asserts that this starvation is not caused by natural disaster but by structural neglect. Her use of the word “forced” to describe their suffering directly implicates the state, shifting the focus from poverty to betrayal. The visceral images—“near-naked, shriveled, worm-ridden, swollen-bellied” bodies—illustrate how hunger becomes a weapon of domination. Starvation is a method of subjugation designed to keep the marginalized weak, dependent, and voiceless. In Devi’s portrayal, the politics of food becomes a politics of control under the regime of internal colonialism.

3. Consequences of Tribal Alienation

In “Little Ones,” Mahasweta Devi reveals how tribal alienation stems from the violent loss of land and livelihood. The Agariya tribes, once skilled iron miners, lost their traditional occupation and sacred land when the government destroyed their hills to extract ore without consent. This act of institutional violence led to homelessness and cultural dislocation, forcing them deep into forests where they became outcasts. Their new identity as “forest dwellers” shows both physical displacement and a state of enforced invisibility, which left them vulnerable to continued state aggression. Labelled as nomads and treated as criminals, they endured police brutality and harassment in their ancestral space. Devi introduces the myth of the Sun God who curses the Agariyas and reduces their iron wealth

to ashes. Rather than dismissing the myth as superstition, she employs it as a vehicle for cultural memory and symbolic resistance. The myth preserves historical trauma and narrates the loss imposed by external forces. In her narrative, indigenous mythology functions as subaltern historiography and offers an alternative archive of suffering where state records remain silent. The story also exposes the disconnect between state welfare and the lived reality of tribal people. A well-meaning officer attempts to help but fails to understand that “his way of handling the problem is unintelligible to the starving tribal.” This moment reveals a deep cultural gap. Development remains top-down and alienating, with policymakers unable or unwilling to recognize tribal knowledge systems. Instead of enabling self-determined progress, official interventions impose alien solutions that deepen marginalization.

4. A metaphor for postcolonial hypocrisy

“Little Ones” stands as a powerful metaphor for the enduring hypocrisy of postcolonial India. Though the country gained political independence, Mahasweta Devi shows that structures of exploitation remain intact. She writes that “present civilization is no different from the colonizers of the past,” exposing how the Indian state continues to replicate colonial mechanisms of control. The shrunken bodies of the “Little Ones” symbolize more than physical deprivation; they reflect the shrinking rights, spaces, and dignity of tribal populations. These citizens live on the margins of a nation that calls itself progressive and democratic. The term “postcolonial” appears hollow in this context, as land alienation, hunger, and displacement persist in familiar forms. Through this story, Devi shows how the state has failed to fulfill the promises of freedom. The metaphor of the “Little Ones” captures this double failure: the betrayal of independence and the reproduction of colonial injustice. Her work forces readers to confront the uncomfortable truth that, for India’s most marginalized, true liberation has never arrived.

5. Systemic roots of oppression

Mahasweta Devi identifies the roots of tribal suffering in deeply embedded systems of governance, economic inequality, and legal injustice. The hardships faced by marginalized communities do not occur in isolation; they result from a coordinated structure of exploitation. Government policies, corrupt institutions, and land dispossession reinforce one another to maintain tribal subjugation. Devi argues that post-independence policies have often deepened colonial patterns of control. She observes that “wrong policies have induced more injury to our people than the British,” placing blame on the

postcolonial state for internalizing oppressive frameworks. In regions such as Singur and Nandigram, the government seized fertile land at minimal compensation and handed it over to industrial powers. Farmers and tribals were forced to surrender their land in the name of national progress. She also highlights the enduring impact of colonial laws. The 1959 “Habitual Offenders Act,” which she critiques as a continuation of the “Criminal Tribes Act,” punishes entire communities instead of individuals. By equating tribal identity with criminality, the law sustains historical stigma and allows constant surveillance. These examples reveal how state policy and legal frameworks work in tandem to produce economic ruin, social isolation, and cultural erasure.

6. Contagious Corruption and Administrative Complicity

Mahasweta Devi reveals how corruption and state complicity deepen the exploitation of tribal communities. In “Little Ones,” government relief efforts fail because officials misuse their power. The special relief officer and the tehsildar divert aid meant for starving tribals. The tehsildar routinely misappropriates supplies, turning a public welfare program into a source of private profit. This betrayal of public trust shows that the machinery of governance serves the powerful rather than the vulnerable. Devi also shows how landlords and state agents work together to suppress resistance. In “Draupadi,” when Dopdi and Dulna rise against SurjaSahu, the state responds not by addressing injustice but by unleashing its police force on the rebels. Law enforcement protects landlords and criminalizes dissent. The state punishes the oppressed while ignoring the conditions that led to rebellion. This selective application of justice exposes the bias within legal and administrative systems. While the marginalized endure harassment, arrest, and brutality, those in power enjoy protection. Devi portrays corruption as more than theft; it becomes a condition that infects governance itself, making justice unreachable for those who need it most.

7. Land Dispossession and the Erosion of Tribal Livelihoods

Mahasweta Devi’s stories expose land dispossession as a central force behind tribal marginalization. In both “Little Ones” and “Draupadi,” she shows how British-imposed land laws dismantled communal ownership and replaced it with a system of private control. This shift allowed landlords and the state to claim tribal land and uproot entire communities. In “Little Ones,” the Agariya tribe loses its ancestral right to mine iron when the government destroys their sacred hills for ore extraction. This act causes economic collapse and severs their spiritual and cultural bonds with the land. Their forced removal

begins a cycle of poverty, alienation, and loss of autonomy. Devi criticizes development policies that promise progress but inflict further harm. Plans for land redistribution or industrial growth often ignore tribal worldviews and fail to protect indigenous livelihoods. These initiatives, shaped by market logic and elite interests, reduce tribal communities to disposable labor. Dispossession leads not only to material deprivation but also to the collapse of generational knowledge and cultural continuity. Entire families face bonded labor, displacement, and identity loss. Devi argues that meaningful reform must begin with recognition of tribal values and a redefinition of land rights based on justice, not profit.

8. Ecofeminism, Gendered Oppression, and Environmental Injustice

Mahasweta Devi's work reflects an ecofeminist vision that links the exploitation of women with the degradation of nature. She shows how patriarchal and capitalist systems treat both as resources to control, consume, and discard. In "Duoloti, the Bountiful," the protagonist's diseased body bears witness to the violence inflicted by these intersecting forces. Duoloti and her father, both crushed by structural oppression, represent a wider community suffering under economic, social, and ecological injustice. Devi's perspective aligns with Vandana Shiva's concept of "maldevelopment," which critiques Western models of progress for destroying sustainable relationships between people and nature. In "Duoloti," patriarchal forces seize forests, expropriate land, and commodify women's bodies. Duoloti's death on Independence Day becomes a tragic symbol of unfreedom, showing how national liberation bypassed the most vulnerable. In "Draupadi," Dopdi's final act of resistance—standing naked before her torturer—transforms her violated body into a weapon of moral defiance. When she says, "You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" she exposes the absurdity of a system that preaches civility while inflicting cruelty. Her body, no longer an object of shame, asserts dignity and resistance. Devi presents tribal women as central figures in the struggle for justice. Their strength rises from within, shaped by lived experience and resilience. Devi's ecofeminist vision encourages a renewed understanding of environmental ethics and human dignity.

9. Marginalised Women's and Communities' struggle for Identity

Mahasweta Devi's writings consistently address the struggle for identity among Dalits and indigenous communities, groups that remain excluded despite the nation's democratic promises. Her stories give voice to people who face systemic denial and distortion of their histories, identities, and rights. Rather than portray them as passive sufferers, she presents them as active agents in search of dignity and justice. Her female

characters, such as Bayen and Sujata, reject roles imposed by society and assert their right to speak, act, and exist on their own terms. These women refuse to wait for rescue. They fight with clarity and determination. They confront structures that silence and erase them. Devi also emphasizes collective identity. Her characters often appear similar, not due to a lack of detail, but to reflect how dominant systems strip marginalized groups of individuality. This sameness becomes a political statement. Where the state sees anonymity, Devi sees shared resistance. The strength of community emerges not from conformity but from collective survival and solidarity. Her stories also reject official histories. She upholds oral traditions, memories, and cultural practices as valid forms of knowledge. In doing so, she supports subaltern studies and critiques state narratives that obscure oppression. Reclaiming identity, in Devi's vision, becomes both a personal and communal act—one rooted in memory, resistance, and the refusal to disappear.

10. Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's fiction strongly criticizes postcolonial India for failing its most oppressed people. Through stories like "Little Ones," "Bitter Soil," "Draupadi," and "Duoloti, the Bountiful," she reveals how systemic violence—land dispossession, gendered exploitation, ecological destruction, and state complicity—continues under the banner of independence and development. Her literary vision exposes more than suffering. It illuminates acts of resistance, moments of defiance, and the moral courage of the marginalized. Tribal women confront dominant power through fierce clarity. Their bodies, words, and silences act as weapons of protest and self-definition. Devi stands close to their struggles, never detached from their reality. Known as "Didi" to those she wrote about, she lived among the communities she defended. Her writing bridged the gap between literature and activism. For Devi, storytelling became a form of political struggle. She measured a nation's freedom not by its institutions but by how it treated its most vulnerable people. Her impact calls readers, writers, and citizens to question inherited truths, confront injustice, and imagine a more equal future. We can ultimately observe that her work shows how literature can reveal injustice, give voice to the silenced, and call for change.

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