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## Recovering the Silenced: Postcolonial and Ecocritical Perspectives on Tribal Identity in Mahasweta Devi's Works

**Dr. S. Mahalakshmi**

Assistant Professor of English

Chikkaiah Govt. Arts and Science College

Erode, Tamil Nadu, India

Email: [maharavin33@gmail.com](mailto:maharavin33@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's literary works demonstrate the power of representing marginalised tribal communities in India to expose postcolonial socio-political structures and environmental exploitation. This paper analyses Devi's works, specifically *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (1980) and *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha*, (1995), through postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives to understand how tribal identities form and get suppressed and then recovered. The research examines how Devi represents tribal resistance against systemic oppression and ecological devastation to illustrate the interconnectedness of caste and class with environmental justice. The analysis employs postcolonial theories by Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, as well as ecocritical perspectives from Rob Nixon, to demonstrate how Devi's narratives challenge dominant discourses while advocating for subaltern community identity.

**Keywords:** Mahasweta Devi, tribal identity, postcolonialism, ecocriticism, subaltern, environmental justice, resistance, caste, class, slow violence.

### Introduction

Mahasweta Devi uses her Indian postcolonial novels and short stories to study how Adivasi communities suffer from systemic marginalisation through colonial structures and capitalist expansion, and environmental degradation. The analysis employs postcolonial theories from Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, alongside ecocritical perspectives, to examine how Devi presents tribal communities as both suffering from and actively fighting against oppression and ecological violence. Devi presents Adivasis' forced relocation from their ancestral lands and their subsequent mistreatment in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* while demonstrating their cultural heritage preservation through archery practices. Similarly, *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay*,

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and *Pirtha* focus on the ecological changes impacting tribal communities, emphasising the interconnectedness of their cultural identity and natural environment. Devi's work, often translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, highlights the inherent wisdom of Adivasi ecological practices and their crucial role in shaping sustainable environments, while simultaneously advocating for the recognition of their struggles and rights. This study aims to reveal how Devi's narratives not only expose the injustices faced by tribal communities but also serve as potent calls for social change and environmental justice.

## Postcolonial Framework: Subalternity and Resistance

Postcolonial theory offers a critical lens for understanding the silencing of tribal identities in Devi's works. Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism" highlights how colonial discourses construct marginalised groups as "other" to justify their subjugation (Said 3). In the Indian context, Adivasi communities were historically labelled as "primitive" by colonial authorities, a narrative perpetuated by postcolonial elites to facilitate resource extraction and land appropriation. Gayatri Spivak's seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 271), further interrogates whether marginalised voices can be heard within dominant discourses. Devi's works challenge this silencing by centring tribal characters who resist systemic erasure. In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Devi chronicles the life of Chotti, a Munda tribal leader, whose resistance against feudal landlords and state authorities embodies subaltern agency. The novel's episodic structure captures the cyclical nature of oppression faced by the Mundas, from colonial land dispossession to postcolonial economic exploitation. Chotti's archery, a symbol of cultural pride, becomes a tool of resistance against upper-caste landlords who exploit tribal labour. As Devi writes, "Chotti's arrow is not just a weapon; it is the song of his people's survival" (*Chotti Munda* 45). This metaphor underscores the continuity of tribal identity through resistance, aligning with Spivak's argument that subaltern voices can emerge through acts of defiance, even if mediated by external narrators.

Similarly, in *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha* Devi explores the alienation of tribal communities in a rapidly modernising India. The titular *Pterodactyl*, a prehistoric creature discovered in a tribal village, symbolises the ancient connection between Adivasis and their land, now threatened by developmental projects. *Puran Sahay*, a journalist, grapples with his inability to fully comprehend the tribal worldview, reflecting Spivak's concern about the subaltern's representation by outsiders. Devi writes, "The pterodactyl is not just a fossil; it is the soul of a people who refuse to vanish" (*Pterodactyl* 132). This imagery critiques the postcolonial state's failure to integrate tribal epistemologies into national narratives, reinforcing their marginality.

## Ecocritical Perspective: Land, Identity, and Environmental Justice

Ecocriticism complements postcolonial analysis by foregrounding the environmental dimensions of tribal oppression. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" describes the gradual, often invisible harm inflicted on marginalised communities through environmental degradation (Nixon 2). In Devi's works, tribal identities are inextricably linked to land, which serves as both material and spiritual anchor. The destruction of forests and displacement of Adivasis for

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mining and development projects constitute forms of slow violence that erode tribal lifeways. In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, the Munda community's dependence on forests for sustenance is disrupted by feudal landlords who clear land for agriculture. Devi illustrates this ecological violence through vivid descriptions: "The forest shrinks as the landlord's fields grow, and with it, the Munda's world narrows" (*Chotti Munda* 78). This loss of land mirrors the erosion of cultural identity, as rituals and oral traditions tied to the forest are disrupted. Eco critic Cheryll Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism as the study of "the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii) is apt here, as Devi's narrative links environmental destruction to the marginalisation of tribal communities.

*Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha* further amplifies this ecocritical perspective by depicting the impact of drought and mining on tribal lands. The Pterodactyl, a spectral figure, embodies the ecological memory of a landscape ravaged by modernity. Devi's portrayal of the tribal protagonist Bikhia, who communicates with the Pterodactyl, underscores an indigenous ecological knowledge that contrasts with the extractive logic of development. As ecocritic Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee notes, Devi's works reveal "the complicity of postcolonial states in perpetuating colonial environmental exploitation" (Mukherjee 145). By centring tribal perspectives, Devi challenges the anthropocentric bias of development narratives, advocating for environmental justice.

## Intersectionality of Caste, Class, and Ecology

Devi's works highlight the intersectionality of caste, class, and ecological marginalisation in shaping tribal identity. In India, Adivasis are often positioned at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, subjected to economic exploitation and cultural erasure. In *Chotti Munda*, the Munda community faces double marginalisation as both tribals and bonded labourers. Devi writes, "The Munda is neither caste nor class; he is the shadow that the nation refuses to see" (*Chotti Munda* 102). This statement critiques the postcolonial state's failure to address the compounded vulnerabilities of tribal communities.

Ecocritical scholar Graham Huggan argues that postcolonial ecocriticism must account for "the ways in which environmental issues are entangled with social inequalities" (Huggan 12). Devi's narratives exemplify this entanglement by depicting how both caste prejudice and capitalist greed fuel tribal dispossession. In *Pterodactyl*, the tribal village's struggle against drought is exacerbated by government neglect and corporate mining, which deplete groundwater reserves. Devi's portrayal of these intersecting oppressions aligns with Nixon's observation that "environmental injustice is inseparable from social injustice" (Nixon 15).

## Reclaiming Tribal Agency

Despite the systemic silencing of tribal voices, Devi's works emphasise their agency through acts of resistance and cultural preservation. In *Chotti Munda*, the protagonist organises his community to resist bonded labour, using traditional knowledge and collective action. The novel's oral storytelling style, rooted in Munda folklore, serves as a counter-narrative to hegemonic histories. As postcolonial scholar Ania Loomba notes, such narratives "reclaim the past as a site of resistance" (Loomba 23).

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In *Pterodactyl*, Bikhia's ritualistic interaction with the Pterodactyl represents a refusal to assimilate into modern frameworks that devalue tribal epistemologies. Devi writes, "Bikhia does not speak to the world; he sings to the earth" (*Pterodactyl* 156). This act of singing symbolises the persistence of tribal identity through cultural practices, challenging Spivak's notion of subaltern silence by demonstrating alternative modes of expression.

## Conclusion

Through her works *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* and *Pterodactyl*, Puran Sahay, and *Pirtha*, Mahasweta Devi reveals a deep understanding about how tribal identities became silenced and reclaimed in postcolonial India. This paper has examined how Devi uses postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives to analyse the connections between caste and class systems and environmental injustice, while praising tribal resistance. Through her focus on marginalised voices, Devi fights against dominant narratives while promoting a broader postcolonial storytelling approach. Her works continue to serve as a warning about the need to acknowledge marginalised communities' power to resist systemic oppression and ecological violence.

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