



REFLECTION OF INDIAN PSYCHE TOWARDS SUBALTERN WOMEN IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S SELECTED WORKS

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Abstract:

Mahasweta Devi's literary oeuvre powerfully articulates the lived realities of subaltern women who remain marginalized by intersecting structures of patriarchy, caste, class, and state power in Indian society. This paper examines the reflection of the Indian psyche towards subaltern women as represented in Mahasweta Devi's selected works, focusing on how dominant social attitudes normalize exploitation, silence resistance, and perpetuate systemic injustice. Through characters drawn from tribal, Dalit, and economically oppressed communities, Devi exposes the collective conscience of society that oscillates between apathy, moral hypocrisy, and fear of subaltern assertion. The study analyzes how subaltern women's bodies become sites of control, violence, and political contestation, while also highlighting their resilience, agency, and modes of resistance. By employing a socio-political and feminist framework, the paper argues that Devi's narratives challenge mainstream historiography and literary discourse, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power, gender, and marginalization. Ultimately, Mahasweta Devi's works function as a moral critique of the Indian psyche, urging a reimagining of justice, empathy, and social responsibility towards subaltern women.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, Subaltern Women, Indian Psyche, Feminist Discourse, Marginalization, Resistance, Power Structures

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi, one of India's most influential and socially conscious writers, has consistently foregrounded the lives and struggles of the marginalized, particularly subaltern women, in her literary oeuvre. Her works are not merely narratives but urgent interventions that challenge the dominant socio-cultural and political discourse, offering a penetrating critique of the entrenched hierarchies and oppressive structures of Indian society. The term "subaltern," popularized by scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to groups who are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structures. In the Indian context, subaltern women—tribal women, dalit women, and other marginalized female communities—bear the compounded burden of gender oppression, caste discrimination, and economic exploitation. Mahasweta Devi's writing provides a mirror to the Indian psyche, revealing how societal attitudes, institutional apathy, and cultural myths sustain their subjugation while simultaneously silencing their voices.

Through her iconic characters, Devi unveils the intersectional marginalization faced by subaltern women. Figures like Draupadi, from "Draupadi", and Birsa Munda's female counterparts, are not merely victims but symbols of resistance and resilience. They embody the paradox of being both hyper-visible as objects of exploitation and invisible in the societal imagination of justice and empathy. Devi's portrayal reflects the broader Indian psyche, which often oscillates between romanticizing the purity of womanhood and disregarding the lived realities of women from marginalized communities. This duality underscores a persistent moral and ethical ambivalence: while mainstream Indian culture venerates the



female figure in mythology and tradition, it simultaneously perpetuates structural violence against women who belong to socially marginalized groups.

Devi's narratives interrogate the complicity of various social institutions—law, bureaucracy, feudal structures, and patriarchal norms—in perpetuating the oppression of subaltern women. Her work exposes how societal indifference, coupled with systemic exploitation, dehumanizes these women, reducing their existence to mere tools of labor, sexual subjugation, and political manipulation. Yet, through these stories, the Indian psyche is also portrayed as being capable of empathy, recognition, and radical transformation, albeit often delayed or constrained by entrenched hierarchies. By giving voice to the silenced, Devi challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about inequality, casteism, and misogyny ingrained in social consciousness.

Moreover, Mahasweta Devi's writing transcends literary expression to become a form of activism. Her insistence on documenting the lived experiences of subaltern women serves as both a historical record and a critique of societal blindness. The Indian psyche, as reflected in her works, is thus complex and contradictory: it is simultaneously complicit in oppression and capable of moral awakening. Through her narratives, Devi not only illuminates the plight of subaltern women but also forces a collective introspection of the societal values, prejudices, and indifference that sustain such oppression.

In Mahasweta Devi's literature acts as a lens to examine the Indian psyche's relationship with subaltern women. Her unflinching depiction of exploitation, resilience, and resistance reveals the moral ambivalence and structural inequalities embedded within society. By foregrounding the voices of those historically silenced, Devi transforms literature into a tool for social consciousness, compelling readers to confront, question, and ultimately reconsider their understanding of justice, gender, and power in India.

Understanding the 'Subaltern Woman' in Indian Context

The term 'subaltern,' as theorized by Antonio Gramsci and later expanded by the Subaltern Studies Group, refers to groups excluded from hegemonic power structures. In the Indian context, subaltern women occupy the lowest rungs of social hierarchy due to the intersection of gender, caste, class, and ethnicity. Tribal women, Dalit women, bonded laborers, and rural poor women face multiple forms of oppression that are both systemic and normalized.

Mahasweta Devi's subaltern women are not symbolic abstractions; they are historically grounded figures shaped by colonial legacies, feudal exploitation, capitalist greed, and patriarchal dominance. The Indian psyche, as reflected in her writings, often perceives these women as expendable—useful only for their labor, sexuality, or reproductive capacity. Their suffering is rendered invisible, and their voices are dismissed as noise rather than speech. Mahasweta Devi challenges this perception by placing subaltern women at the center of her narratives, thereby reversing the gaze.

Subaltern Women and the Indian Social Psyche

The Indian psyche, as represented in Mahasweta Devi's works, is shaped by entrenched social hierarchies. Patriarchy defines women primarily through their bodies and reproductive or productive capacities, while caste and class determine their social worth. Subaltern women—tribal women, lower-caste women, widows, laborers, and prostitutes—are perceived



not as individuals but as functional entities whose labor, sexuality, and suffering can be exploited.

Devi's fiction reveals how oppression is normalized through custom and ritual. Suffering becomes invisible because it is routine, and exploitation becomes acceptable because it is institutionalized. The Indian psyche often expresses sympathy for the marginalized only in symbolic or performative ways, while materially sustaining the systems that oppress them. Against this backdrop, Devi's subaltern women emerge as unsettling figures who disrupt complacency and expose moral contradictions.

Rudali

Rudali presents one of Mahasweta Devi's most powerful critiques of feudal hypocrisy and the commodification of women's emotions. The story centers on Sanichari, a poor lower-caste woman who has experienced relentless personal loss—her husband, son, and relatives—all without the luxury of mourning. Ironically, she never cries for her own dead but later earns a livelihood as a professional mourner or *rudali*, hired to weep at the funerals of wealthy landlords.

The Indian psyche reflected in *Rudali* is deeply paradoxical. The upper-caste elite outwardly perform grief to display social respectability while being emotionally barren and morally corrupt. Genuine emotion is outsourced to subaltern women whose tears are bought and sold. Grief, traditionally considered sacred, becomes a commodity, revealing how capitalism and feudalism intersect to exploit female labor.

Sanichari's transformation from a silent sufferer to a conscious worker marks an important shift. While she initially internalizes her oppression, she gradually recognizes the transactional nature of her role. This awareness allows her to reclaim a measure of agency. Devi thus reframes subaltern women not merely as victims but as participants who strategically navigate oppressive systems for survival.

The figure of the *rudali* also exposes gendered expectations: women are culturally designated as bearers of emotion, even when that emotion is manufactured. The Indian psyche demands visible displays of feminine grief while denying women real dignity. By turning mourning into paid labor, Devi unmasks the moral emptiness of elite society and critiques the gendered exploitation embedded within cultural rituals.

Outcast:

In *Outcast*, Mahasweta Devi explores the brutal realities of caste oppression and the sexual exploitation of subaltern women. The protagonist, often identified with figures like Dhouli or similar marginalized women in Devi's short fiction, represents a woman doubly stigmatized—by her caste status and by her sexuality. Declared an outcast by society, she is denied respectability, security, and belonging.

The Indian psyche, as depicted here, is deeply invested in preserving caste purity while simultaneously exploiting lower-caste women's bodies. Sexual access to subaltern women is tacitly permitted, even normalized, while social acceptance is categorically denied. This hypocrisy exposes the moral double standards of a society that condemns women for the very exploitation it perpetuates.



Outcast reveals how subaltern women are blamed for their own victimization. When such women transgress prescribed boundaries—by asserting desire, independence, or dignity—they are punished through social exclusion. Devi critiques a psyche that fears female autonomy, particularly when exercised by women already deemed inferior.

Yet, the outcast woman in Devi's narrative does not passively accept her fate. Her refusal to conform, her assertion of choice—even within limited circumstances—constitutes a form of resistance. Devi presents marginality not only as a site of suffering but also as a space from which dominant norms can be questioned and destabilized.

Breast Stories:

Breast Stories is among Mahasweta Devi's most radical works, confronting the objectification of women's bodies with startling clarity. The stories, particularly "Breast-Giver," focus on women whose bodies are exploited for sustenance, pleasure, and labor. Jashoda, the central figure in "Breast-Giver," earns her living as a wet nurse, nourishing countless children of upper-caste households while neglecting her own health and family.

The Indian psyche reflected here is one that venerates motherhood in abstraction while exploiting maternal bodies in practice. Jashoda is revered as a mother figure but discarded once her body fails. Her breasts—symbols of nurture and femininity—become instruments of labor, stripped of dignity and autonomy.

Devi's portrayal of breast cancer in Jashoda's later life is profoundly symbolic. The diseased body becomes a testament to prolonged exploitation. Society that once depended on her now recoils from her decaying form. This rejection underscores how subaltern women are valued only as long as they are useful.

Importantly, *Breast Stories* also subverts the male gaze. Devi forces readers to confront discomfort, dismantling romanticized notions of motherhood and femininity. The female body becomes a political text, inscribed with histories of labor, violence, and neglect. In doing so, Devi challenges the Indian psyche's tendency to sentimentalize women while denying them rights and recognition.

MAHASWETA DEVI'S SELECTED WORKS

1. The Indian psyche as social structure: caste, gender and ritual

A central claim running through Devi's work is that the Indian psyche is not merely an individual mindset but a social structure that naturalises hierarchy. Caste and gender are the two primary axes along which that structure orders social worth. In *Rudali*, the ritual economy of mourning becomes a lens for this ordering: the professional mourner's labour is both demanded and despised; grief becomes a commodity, but the mourner herself remains socially marginal. The ritual gestures that sanctify elite loss — elaborate cremations, public lamentation — depend on the visible presence of a rudali, yet the rudali's presence does not confer status. That paradox — the indispensability of the subaltern woman to elite emotional life and her concurrent social exclusion — exemplifies how the Indian psyche tolerates and reproduces exploitation while pretending at moral refinement.

In *Outcast*, the logic is similar: to be cast out is to have been made symbolically unclean, untouchable, beyond the bounds of social solidarity. The Indian psyche's need to preserve purity and order finds its counterpart in the ritualised disciplining of "outcast" bodies. Gender



amplifies this penalty: women who transgress caste or sexual norms are stigmatized not only as “out of place” but as threats to the very moral cosmos. Devi shows how community rituals, gossip, and everyday practices — not merely law — enforce exile, thereby revealing that social exclusion is internalised and reproduced at the intimate level.

Breast Stories (a collection that contains multiple narratives about women’s bodies and reproductive labour) centres bodily intimacy as a site where national and familial anxieties converge. The woman whose breasts sustain others’ children, the tribal woman whose body becomes a battlefield between state forces and insurgents, the mother whose labor is unacknowledged — these images show how the Indian psyche commodifies and polices the female body. Breastfeeding, motherhood and sexual violation are treated not as private experiences but as social signs; they attract moralizing narratives that mark some women as nurturing archetypes and others as polluted anomalies. Devi thereby reveals how the psyche converts the body into a text that must be read, regulated and controlled.

2. Stereotypes, pity and the economy of compassion

One recurring feature across the texts is the way the dominant psyche deploys pity and stereotype to contain subaltern women. Pity functions as a means of maintaining moral distance: the dominant classes may express compassion but in ways that reaffirm their superior position. In *Rudali*, the wealthy class’s consumption of public mourning is an aestheticised form of compassion: its members ritualise grief as theatre while refusing material solidarity that would disrupt hierarchical relations. Their pity is performative not redistributive.

Devi turns pity inside out by showing how it can be both humiliating and politically neutralising. When pity replaces justice, it sustains the status quo: charitable gestures soothe conscience without undermining structural oppression. Subaltern women are forced to accept pity as an exchange currency — gratitude traded for humiliation — and so the psyche’s compassion becomes another technique of governance. Devi’s narratives refuse simple sentimentalism; instead, they expose the transactional logic beneath charitable sentiments and force readers to confront their own complacency.

3. The violence of the state and the betrayal of law

Devi’s fiction repeatedly highlights the betrayal of the subaltern by institutions — police, courts, landowners, even reformist movements — that are supposed to protect citizens. In *Breast Stories*, particularly in narratives that depict sexual violence and state brutality, the woman’s body becomes the site of political spectacle. The state’s power is exercised through humiliation and terror, often in collusion with local elites. The Indian psyche, in so far as it trusts institutional narratives of legitimacy, is complicit; it absorbs official stories that criminalise or dehumanise marginalized women (labeling them as “tribal troublemakers,” morally suspect, or legally expendable).

Devi’s portrayal of this dynamic is far from abstract: she shows the lived consequences of institutional failure — how women who seek redress are punished, how complaints are framed as provocations, how law becomes the instrument of disciplining rather than protection. In doing so she indicts not only specific acts of violence but also the broader cultural tendency to think of state violence as exceptional rather than systematic. The psyche

that tolerates such exceptionalism is one that detaches moral responsibility from political structures.

4. Silence, speech and narrative reclamation

A hallmark of Devi's aesthetic is her insistence that the subaltern speak — but crucially, that the manner of speaking is not assimilated to elite discourse. Her characters' speeches are often terse, raw, and inflected with local idiom; this refusal of polished rhetoric is a political choice. In *Rudali*, the mourner's language both reflects her poverty and becomes a form of testimony that cuts across elite pretense. In *Outcast* and the stories in *Breast Stories*, women's words — protestations, curses, laughter, silence — are narrative devices that disrupt official versions of events.

Silence plays a dual role. On one hand, imposed silence signals erasure: the subaltern's testimony is routinely discredited. On the other hand, strategic silence is survivance; it is a form of refusal that protects dignity in an environment of constant surveillance. Devi's narrators often record both kinds of silence, thereby problematising the assumption that silence equals consent. The act of writing itself becomes a form of retrieval: Devi, as chronicler and witness, transposes marginalized speech into literature without domesticating it.

5. Agency beyond victimhood: forms of resistance

One of Devi's most important interventions is her refusal to represent subaltern women solely as victims. Even within narratives thick with suffering, she depicts acts of agency — often shocking, sometimes ambiguous — that complicate moral judgment. These acts range from the pragmatic (turning grief into paid labour, as in *Rudali*) to the radically defiant (refusing to cover one's body after a public sexual assault; claiming one's dignity against both village and state). Such gestures transform the subaltern from a passive object of pity into a subject who makes painful choices.

Devi's notion of agency is not liberal empowerment or legalistic rights-talk; it is embodied, relational and frequently sacrificial. The subaltern woman's choices are constrained by material scarcity and social coercion; yet within those constraints she carves out spaces of moral autonomy. This reframing challenges an Indian psyche that expects the marginalized to conform to prescribed roles of suffering and quietude. The stories force the reader to concede that resistance need not look like conventional heroism to be politically consequential.

6. Narrative technique: realism, fragmentation and ethical gaze

Devi's formal strategies support her political claims. Her prose is stark, often stripped of ornamental lyricism; narration is direct, sometimes journalistic. This realism resists the sentimental or exoticizing gaze that often frames subaltern lives in mainstream fiction. Rather than aestheticize suffering, Devi deploys a documentary tone that centers facts of deprivation, names of officials, legal details and material conditions. Such a technique invites readers to witness rather than to vicariously consume.

At the same time, Devi's narratives frequently fragment orthodox plot expectations. Characters do not neatly resolve into moral types; endings are ambiguous or tragic. This refusal of closure mirrors the lived reality of structural injustice, where tidy resolutions are rare. The ethical gaze of the narrator — often an outsider who nonetheless refuses



condescension — fosters an intimacy that is neither voyeuristic nor patronising. The result is a literature that demands ethical engagement and critical self-awareness from its readership.

7. Cultural anxiety: nation, purity and the female body

Across these works, Devi surfaces a deep cultural anxiety about the body of the nation and the body of the woman. Subaltern women become metaphors for national anxieties: their suffering is invoked to symbolise the failures of development, the cost of modernization, or the danger of insurgency. Yet the psyche that equates the nation's body with upper-caste, male honor excludes the bodies that do not fit its image. Devi exposes this exclusion by showing how the "nation" appropriates the suffering of the marginalised while simultaneously denying them dignity.

Furthermore, the policing of women's sexuality — through honour codes, rape as punishment, or public shaming — reveals a society anxious to mark boundaries. The subaltern woman's body thus becomes the touchstone of communal identity: to control her is to control caste boundaries, property relations, and political obedience. Devi's narratives disturb this calculus by insisting that violations against these women are not private misfortunes but public indictments.

8. Ethical implications and the reader's responsibility

Devi does not allow comfortable distance. Her writing moralizes through detail rather than sermonising: the reader is confronted with the material conditions of exploitation and the psychological mechanisms that justify it. The ethical demand is clear — to refuse passive sympathy and to interrogate social structures, to see compassion as a starting point for political action rather than an endpoint.

The Indian psyche, as represented in these works, is complicit in systems of marginalisation; it is shaped by centuries of hierarchical habit. However, Devi also demonstrates that the same social terrain contains seeds of dissent: speech, stubborn survival, and acts of shared solidarity. The reader's task is to witness without consuming, to let outrage be a springboard for understanding, and to recognize the dignity of those whom society would erase.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of subaltern women offers a powerful reflection of the Indian psyche, exposing its deep-rooted contradictions of reverence and repression. Through her narratives, she unveils how Indian society simultaneously glorifies womanhood in theory while systematically marginalizing women from oppressed classes in practice. Subaltern women in her works are depicted as doubly colonized—by patriarchal structures and by caste, class, and state power—revealing an ingrained social consciousness that normalizes exploitation as destiny.

Devi's writing compels readers to confront the collective moral failure of a society that remains indifferent to the suffering of its most vulnerable women. Yet, she does not portray subaltern women merely as passive victims; instead, they emerge as sites of resistance, resilience, and moral authority. Characters like Dopdi in "*Draupadi*" challenge dominant power structures, turning their violated bodies into instruments of defiance. This transformation reflects an alternative Indian psyche—one capable of empathy, accountability, and change.

Ultimately, Mahasweta Devi's works function as a literary indictment of social apathy and an urgent call to awaken the conscience of the nation. By foregrounding the lived realities of subaltern women, she redefines Indian literature as a space for social justice, compelling readers to rethink entrenched hierarchies and recognize the humanity of those historically silenced.

Mahasweta Devi's selected works offer a powerful and uncompromising reflection of the Indian psyche in its treatment of subaltern women, exposing the deep-rooted structures of patriarchy, caste hierarchy, class exploitation, and state oppression. Through her vivid portrayal of tribal, Dalit, and marginalized women, Devi dismantles the romanticized notion of Indian social morality and reveals the harsh realities faced by those positioned at the lowest rungs of society. The Indian psyche, as reflected in her narratives, often oscillates between indifference and cruelty, normalizing violence, silence, and exploitation of subaltern women while benefiting from their labor and suffering.

At the same time, Mahasweta Devi does not present subaltern women merely as passive victims. Her female protagonists emerge as sites of resistance, embodying courage, resilience, and moral strength. By giving voice to characters who have historically been silenced, Devi challenges dominant literary and cultural discourses and forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about social injustice. These women resist not only patriarchal domination but also the systemic violence perpetuated by feudal landlords, state machinery, and socio-economic structures.

Ultimately, Mahasweta Devi's works compel a re-examination of the Indian collective conscience. They question the ethical foundations of a society that venerates womanhood in abstraction while brutalizing real women in marginalized communities. Her literature serves both as a critique and a call to action—urging social awareness, accountability, and transformation. The reflection of the Indian psyche in her writings thus becomes a mirror that exposes oppression while simultaneously illuminating the possibility of resistance, dignity, and social change for subaltern women.

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