



Mahasweta Devi's The Book of the Hunter and Bashai Tudu: Subaltern Historiography, Myth, and Resistance

Dr.R.Mythili,

Assistant Professor of English,

Bishop Ambrose College, Coimbatore

Abstract

This paper examines the thematic and narrative strategies in Devi's literary works, focusing on *The Book of the Hunter* (1994) and *Bashai Tudu* (1979), to explore how they challenge dominant historical and cultural narratives. Devi's writing consistently foregrounds the voices of marginalized communities, interrogating caste, class, and gender hierarchies. Through these texts, she reconstructs history from subaltern perspectives, offering a counter-narrative that resists hegemonic structures. *The Book of the Hunter* juxtaposes the medieval tale of a Brahmin scholar with the oral traditions of tribal communities, destabilizing canonical historiography and highlighting the erasures of indigenous knowledge. By centering the figure of the hunter, Devi reclaims indigenous epistemologies, challenging the Brahminical monopoly on textual authority. In contrast, *Bashai Tudu* dramatizes the struggles of tribal peasants against exploitative landlords and state machinery, presenting Bashai as a mythic, resurrected figure embodying collective resistance. The novel blends realism with allegory, transforming Bashai into a symbol of perpetual insurgency. Analyzing these works together, this paper argues that Devi constructs a counter-history that privileges oral traditions, myth, and collective memory over elite textuality. Both texts interrogate the politics of representation, foregrounding the agency of marginalized voices while critiquing systemic oppression. The comparative reading highlights Devi's narrative strategies—myth-making, intertextuality, and subaltern historiography—as tools to dismantle dominant power structures. Ultimately, this study underscores how Devi's fiction transcends literary boundaries, functioning as both political intervention and cultural reclamation. Her works demand a reconfiguration of the Indian literary canon, compelling readers to confront the erasures of tribal histories and the resilience of subaltern resistance.

Key words :

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) was one of India's most influential writers and activists. She was born in Dacca, which is now Dhaka in Bangladesh, and grew up in a family that valued the arts and social change. These influences helped shape her life's work in writing and fighting for justice. She studied at Visva-Bharati University and later at the University of Calcutta. Her first major book, *The Queen of Jhansi* (1956), was a historical novel about Rani Lakshmibai, a key figure in the 1857 uprising. This marked the start of a long and successful writing career that lasted more than fifty years.



Devi's writing is known for its honest look at the struggles of people who are often ignored, especially tribal and rural communities. Her books and stories often deal with unfair treatment, the oppression of women, and the strength of those who are oppressed. Some of her most famous works include *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1084), which tells about a mother's pain when her son is killed in political violence; *Rudali*, a touching story about professional mourners that shows how caste and class create unfair systems; and *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Right of the Forest), which follows the fight of tribal leader Birsa Munda against colonial and feudal rule.

Beyond writing stories, Mahasweta Devi was also a passionate activist. She worked hard with tribal people in places like West Bengal, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh. She fought for their right to own land, have jobs, and be treated with respect. Her writing and her activism were connected. Her stories helped tell the truth about their struggles, and her actions helped change things for the better. She was honored with top awards in India, like the Jnanpith Award, Padma Vibhushan, and the Ramon Magsaysay Award. Her work continues to inspire people all over the world.

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) is a special figure in Indian literature because she was not only a great writer but also a strong activist. She wrote many different kinds of works, including novels, short stories, plays, and essays. But all her writing focused on one common idea: to give a voice to people who were ignored, especially tribal communities, farmers, and women. Her writing and activism were always connected. She worked closely with tribal people in West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Bihar, and she wrote about their fights against unfair treatment. Her stories were not only beautiful but also powerful tools for change. Among her many books, two stand out: *The Book of the Hunter* (1994) and *Bashai Tudu* (1979).

These books show how she used different ways to tell stories. *The Book of the Hunter* looks at how history is written and how it can be unfair. It compares the knowledge of educated people with the knowledge passed down through tribal stories. *Bashai Tudu* tells the story of a mythical character named Bashai, who keeps coming back to lead people in fights for justice. These books show how Mahasweta Devi worked to bring back old ways of thinking and to highlight the power of common people fighting together.

Historical and Cultural Context

Postcolonial India and Subaltern Studies

The study of postcolonial India is closely linked to the intellectual movement called Subaltern Studies, which started in the 1980s as a significant change in how South Asian history is written. This movement was led by historian Ranajit Guha and a group of scholars. The goal of Subaltern Studies was to challenge the usual stories of Indian history that were created by colonial rulers or nationalist leaders. The word subaltern refers to groups in society who were not in power—like peasants, tribal people, Dalits, women, and the poor. These groups were often not heard in mainstream history.

Postcolonial India



Postcolonial India means the time after the country became independent in 1947. During this time, India started to deal with the effects of colonial rule while trying to build a modern democratic country.

This period had several key features:-

- Nation-building projects: This included efforts to industrialize, reform land laws, and create democratic government.
- Persistent inequalities: Even after independence, issues like caste, gender discrimination, and economic gaps continued.
- Cultural negotiations: Writers, artists, and thinkers explored themes of identity, mixed cultures, and the fight against colonial ideas.

Postcolonial theory in India often looks at how the structures of colonial knowledge, control, and social hierarchy didn't completely disappear after independence. These structures still influence the challenges India faces today.

Subaltern Studies

The Subaltern Studies group focused on writing history from the perspective of the people at the bottom of society. They were interested in the daily lives and resistance of the marginalized. Important aspects of their work include:

- Critique of elitism: Both colonial historians and nationalist leaders often ignored or twisted the voices of subaltern groups.
- Alternative narratives: By studying uprisings of peasants, tribal groups, and Dalits, scholars showed different forms of resistance against powerful systems.
- Interdisciplinary reach: This movement affected history, anthropology, literature, and cultural studies, and became a major part of postcolonial thinking.

Significance

Subaltern Studies changed how scholars understand Indian society by:

- Showing the limits of the nationalist history that often focused on elite views.
- Offering a way to better understand the struggles of marginalized communities in postcolonial India.
- Influencing global postcolonial scholarship, including thinkers like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who asked, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Postcolonial India is not just about politics but also about intellectual debate. Subaltern Studies is still important because it insists that Indian history cannot be fully understood without hearing the voices of people who were ignored in the past. Together, they show the ongoing effort to make knowledge more inclusive and to support the voices of those who have been excluded.

Postcolonial Indian literature often focuses on the things that were left out in colonial and nationalist history. The Subaltern Studies group, which began in the 1980s, worked to recover the stories of groups who were left out of traditional accounts. Devi's writing is connected to this movement, even though she started her work before it. Her fiction shows subaltern history



by giving more attention to oral traditions, myths, and shared memories rather than relying on written records.

Tribal Struggles and Oral Traditions in India

The story of India's tribal communities is one of strength, fighting back, and a strong bond with land and culture. Their struggles often focus on protecting forests, resources, and their way of life against outside forces—like colonial rulers, local landlords, or modern government policies. These struggles are not only about politics but also about culture, with oral traditions playing a key role in keeping their history and resistance alive.

Tribal Struggles

- During the colonial era, tribes were among the first to resist British rule.

Movements like the Santhal Rebellion (1855–56) and Birsa Munda's Ulgulan (1899–1900) showed their fight against losing land, facing restrictions on forests, and dealing with unfair taxes. These uprisings were often very intense, because their traditional farming and forest-based lives were being disrupted.

- After independence in 1947, tribes still faced problems like being moved out of their homes because of new industries, mining, and dams.

The main goals of their struggles today are to protect land rights, get more autonomy, and have their cultural identity recognized. Many groups now focus on environmental justice, showing that tribal life is closely tied to forests and rivers.

Oral Traditions

Oral traditions are the heart of tribal identity.

They act as a way to remember history, pass down values, and keep resistance alive through songs, stories, and rituals.

- Cultural Continuity: These stories keep myths, family lines, and shared experiences alive, helping tribal knowledge survive even under outside pressure.
- Political Expression: These traditions are not just for entertainment; they are politically powerful.

They often tell stories of fighting against oppression, offering alternative histories that challenge the mainstream view. For example, oral traditions in Goa tell stories of defiance and survival, showing strength and choice.

- Community Cohesion: Oral traditions help bring people together, guiding how they relate to land, forests, and ancestors.

They act as guides for values like unity and taking care of the environment. Tribal struggles and oral traditions are connected: one is about fighting for survival and respect, while the other keeps memory and identity alive. Together, they show how strong India's indigenous



communities have been against past and present challenges. By listening to these voices, we learn more about India's rich and diverse heritage and the ongoing search for fairness.

Tribal communities in India have always faced taking away their land, being treated unfairly, and being forgotten. Their oral stories, myths, and shared memories are places of resistance. Devi's books honor these traditions, making them into alternative histories that go against mainstream stories. In *The Book of the Hunter*, oral traditions challenge the written stories of the Brahmins, while in *Bashai Tudu*, myths become tools for fighting back.

The Book of the Hunter: Reclaiming Indigenous Epistemologies

Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter* is a strong literary work that looks at the connections between tribal identity, oral traditions, and indigenous knowledge. At its heart, the book is more than a story—it's about reclaiming ways of knowing that have been ignored or silenced by colonial and nationalist ideas. Through her writing, Devi brings attention to the voices of tribal communities, especially the Lodhas and Shabars in Bengal, who were unfairly labeled as "criminal tribes" by colonial laws.

Indigenous Epistemologies

Indigenous epistemologies are ways of knowing that come from local traditions, oral histories, ecological practices, and community values. These differ from Western ways of thinking, which often rely on written records and a linear view of history. Tribal epistemologies focus on:

- Orality: Knowing through stories, songs, and rituals passed down over time.
- Ecological wisdom: A deep connection with nature, including forests, rivers, and land.
- Collective memory: Keeping history alive through shared experiences rather than records made by a few.

Devi's story shows that these ways of knowing are not simple or backward. They offer fresh and meaningful ways to understand history, identity, and resistance.

Reclaiming Through Literature

In *The Book of the Hunter*, Devi brings back these indigenous voices by using oral traditions in her fiction. She fights against the forgetting of tribal histories by colonial and national leaders, showing that the struggles and knowledge of marginalized groups are important to India's culture. The book becomes a place of resistance, where indigenous ways of knowing challenge the ideas of modernity and progress.

Significance

- This act of reclaiming is very important in postcolonial India, where tribal communities still face being moved away from their homes and treated as less important.
- By focusing on their oral traditions and knowledge, Devi gives them a place in the story of India.
- Narrative Structure and Historiographic Metafiction in *The Book of the Hunter*
- Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter* shows how the way a story is told can be a way to question how history is written.



The novel mixes fiction with historical thinking, challenging the idea that official records are always reliable. It brings forward the voices of people who are often left out, especially those from tribal communities.

Narrative Structure

The story uses a complex structure, moving between the present and the past. It combines spoken traditions with written stories. This helps Devi compare the views of tribal people with the usual, mainstream historical accounts. By including myths, songs, and oral histories, she breaks up the usual, straight line of storytelling. This fragmented style reflects the broken experiences of those who are marginalized. It also fights against the neat, orderly way that history is usually presented by those in power.

Historiographic Metafiction

Historiographic metafiction is when a story is aware of how history is written. In *The Book of the Hunter*, Devi shows that history is not just an objective record, but something made by people. She points out how history often ignores the voices of the poor and powerless. By retelling the stories of tribal people and using their ways of knowing, she criticizes the way colonial and national histories have treated these communities. The novel becomes both a story and a comment on the process of telling stories, showing how history can be forced to leave out certain people and ideas.

Significance

By mixing narrative and metafiction, Devi makes readers think again about what counts as real history. She treats oral traditions, myths, and shared memories as just as valid as written records. This approach supports indigenous ways of knowing and changes what historiography means. The novel acts as a counter to the usual history, giving space to voices that have been ignored for a long time. The narrative structure of *The Book of the Hunter* is an example of historiographic metafiction.

By mixing oral traditions with a critical look at how history is written, Devi argues that history must be many-sided, always being changed, and include everyone. Her work is a strong challenge to both literature and how history is written. The stories of the Gies are seen as real and important. The novel uses a layered structure, combining a medieval tale about a Brahmin scholar with tribal oral traditions. This structure questions how history is written, showing the missing parts and exclusions in traditional texts.

Critique of Brahminical Textual Authority

The idea of Brahminical textual authority has been questioned by people from postcolonial, feminist, and subaltern backgrounds. These groups challenge the way Sanskrit texts like the Vedas, Dharmashastras, and epics have controlled the understanding of Indian history and culture. These texts have long been seen as the main sources of knowledge and moral guidance. However, this approach has often left out the voices of non-Brahmin people,



tribes, Dalits, and women. Their experiences and stories have been ignored or turned into stereotypes.

Historical Context

During the colonial era and in the nationalist movement, people in power focused on Brahminical texts as the real sources of Indian tradition. This created a view of society where Brahmins were seen as the keepers of knowledge, while others were excluded from being part of the story. This focus led to a history that missed many important oral traditions, folk customs, and local ways of knowing.

Subaltern and Feminist Critiques

Subaltern Studies scholars say that Brahminical texts help maintain an elite system by not recognizing the actions and roles of peasants, tribals, and others who are often ignored. They argue that oral stories, myths, and local histories are just as valuable but have been overlooked. Feminist critiques point out that Brahminical texts often support strict rules about gender, limiting women's freedom and reinforcing the power of the caste system. Writers and activists, like Mahasweta Devi, have worked to bring back these silenced voices and offer different stories that oppose the dominance of texts.

Contemporary Relevance

Today, the need to question Brahminical textual authority is still important. It pushes for a more inclusive understanding of history and culture. This means recognizing other kinds of knowledge, like oral traditions, ecological wisdom, and community-based learning, that challenge the control of elite texts. This means that history and culture should come from many sources, not just from a few important books. The critique of Brahminical textual authority is about making sure that knowledge is shared by everyone. By looking beyond the control of elite texts, scholars and writers can give space to the voices of those who are often ignored, like the people who speak through oral traditions and hold indigenous ways of knowing. This change helps make Indian history a richer and more accurate picture of the many different people and ideas in the country. The work of the Brahmin scholar who inscribes history shows how important it is to control the story. Devi challenges this by bringing forward oral traditions that resist being written down. The figure of the hunter represents indigenous knowledge, which questions the idea that Brahminical texts hold all the truth.

The Hunter as a Counter-Symbol

The hunter represents resistance and the ability to survive. He challenges the idea that written stories are more important than spoken ones. He is a symbol that counters dominant ideas, helping to bring back knowledge from indigenous communities. Through this character, Devi changes the way history is written, making it something that is fought over and constantly debated.

Bashai Tudu: Myth and Resistance

- Bashai as Resurrected Insurgent
- Bashai Tudu is a story about peasants fighting against landlords and the government.



- Bashai keeps coming back to life, showing that the spirit of resistance never dies. His return shows that the fight of people together can't be destroyed.

Fusion of Realism and Allegory

The novel mixes realistic stories with symbolic meaning. While it shows the real struggles of peasants, it also makes Bashai into a legend. This mix allows Devi to show how resistance is both a real event in history and a lasting symbol.

Collective Memory and Political Mobilization

Bashai's story becomes a shared memory for the people. He is not just one person but a symbol for all who fight together. Devi uses this to show how stories can be used to bring people together and push for change.

Comparative Analysis

Oral vs Textual Traditions in The Book of the Hunter

Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter* explores the difference between stories told by people and stories written down. It looks at how tribal people keep their history through stories, songs, and how they pass knowledge from one generation to the next. Oral stories show the real, lived experiences of communities and their fight against unfair treatment. They are flexible and full of meaning, deeply connected to the people's lives. In this book, oral stories challenge how history is usually told by those in power.

Oral Traditions

In the novel, oral traditions are a way for tribal communities to keep their culture alive. These stories, songs, and ways of telling tales pass on knowledge and values through generations. They highlight the shared experiences and wisdom of the community. Oral stories are not fixed—they change and grow with the people, showing their connection to the land and each other. In *The Book of the Hunter*, these stories challenge the way history is usually written by those in power.

Textual Traditions

Textual traditions, especially those from Brahmin and colonial times, are shown as strict and unfair. Written records often focus on the views of the powerful and ignore the stories of those without power. These texts are seen as permanent and true, but they often forget the real lives and struggles of tribal communities. Devi shows how these records fail to understand the real world of the people they write about.

Interplay in the Novel

The narrative of **The Book of the Hunter** intentionally mixes oral stories with written texts. By including oral stories in her fiction, Devi weakens the power of written records and shows that indigenous knowledge systems are valid and important. This mixing shows historiographic metafiction, where the novel does more than tell a story—it also looks at how



stories and histories are made. In *The Book of the Hunter*, oral traditions are seen as important places where truth and resistance live, while written traditions are shown as tools that exclude people. Devi's work brings back indigenous ways of knowing, showing that history should be many-sided and include both oral and written voices. Both books question how stories are told and who gets to tell them. *The Book of the Hunter* gives more value to oral traditions than written ones, while *Bashai Tudu* mixes myths with real political events. Together, they show how oral traditions continue to be strong, even when facing challenges.

Myth-Making as Resistance

Myth plays a big role in both books. In *The Book of the Hunter*, myths challenge how history is written; in *Bashai Tudu*, they help build a movement for change. Devi uses myths not to escape reality, but to fight against unfair power structures.

Subaltern Historiography Across Both Texts

Both books create a history from the point of view of those who have been ignored. They bring back voices that have been quieted, focus on shared memories, and challenge powerful systems. Devi's writing shows how literature can be used to tell a different kind of history.

Narrative Strategies and Literary Techniques

- Intertextuality, Allegory, and Symbolism
- Devi uses intertextuality by putting together well-known texts with oral stories.
- She uses allegory to turn *Bashai* into a hero of a myth, and symbolism to make the hunter a symbol of a new way of knowing. These methods help break down the old ways of looking at the world.

Language Politics and Representation

- Devi's writing moves between real-life language and symbolic meaning, written words and spoken stories.
- She portrays tribal voices in a way that avoids making them all the same, showing how language can be a tool for resistance.

Political Implications

Literature as Activism

Devi's fiction goes beyond being just a story—it becomes a form of activism. Her writing helps remember shared experiences, criticizes unfair systems, and brings back indigenous ways of knowing.

Reconfiguring Indian Literary Canon

- By showing tribal voices and oral traditions, Devi forces a change in how Indian literature is seen.



- Her work questions the power of elite stories and asks for a place for the voices of those who have been left out.
- Resonance with Today's Problems
- Devi's themes connect with today's issues like being taken away from home, unfair treatment, and being forgotten.
- Her stories still matter because groups that are treated unfairly keep fighting against unfair systems.

Conclusion

Devi's Legacy in Subaltern LiteratureMahasweta Devi's work in Indian writing and activism is closely tied to the ideas of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial discussions. Her legacy isn't just about how much she wrote but how she used writing to fight back, giving a voice to those who were silent and challenging the usual way history is told. To understand her work, it's important to see her in the bigger picture of subaltern literature and how her stories still speak to us today.

Supporting the Voice of the Marginalized

Devi's stories often focused on people who were left out of mainstream stories—tribals, Dalits, women, and poor rural people. By highlighting their fights, she joined the efforts of the Subaltern Studies group to write history from the bottom up. Her books like *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Right of the Forest) and *Rudali* are not just stories, but actions that reveal unfair treatment and bring back old knowledge. In this way, her work represents subaltern literature: it speaks for those who are not heard and shows they have power.

Using Oral Stories and Alternative Histories

A big part of Devi's legacy is using oral traditions as real sources of history. She used myths, songs, and folk stories in her writing, which challenged the idea that only written records are real. This matches with historiographic metafiction, where stories question how history is written. By recognizing oral traditions, Devi created new histories that questioned the old ones, making sure tribal struggles were seen as important parts of India's past.

Writing as a Form of Activism

Devi didn't just write about people's lives; she actively helped them. She worked with tribal communities, fighting for land rights, dignity, and survival. This made her writing both a way to remember and a way to move people. In subaltern literature, this mix of art and action is vital, showing that writing can be a way to resist, not just look pretty.

Global Influence

Even though Devi came from India, her influence goes far beyond. Her work has been translated into many languages, affecting postcolonial and feminist studies around the world.



Thinkers like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak used her writing to talk about subaltern speech and representation. This shows how Devi's stories are part of a bigger movement that questions power, knowledge, and voices across cultures.

Still Relevant Today

In modern India, where tribal communities are still being pushed out due to projects and environmental damage, Devi's work is more important than ever. Her belief in listening to the subaltern makes it clear that everyone needs to rethink development and fairness. Subaltern literature, shaped by her work, isn't over; it's an ongoing conversation about inclusion, resistance, and dignity.

Mahasweta Devi's legacy in subaltern literature is huge.

She changed how writers see their role, showing they can be both historians and activists. She validated oral traditions as real history and made stories that gave power to the oppressed. Her work represents subaltern literature's core: resisting being forgotten, gaining power, and demanding justice. In postcolonial India, Devi stands as a light reminding us that history is missing without the voices of those who were silenced. Her legacy isn't just about stories; it's about ethics, politics, and deep human values, making sure subaltern literature keeps shaping shared memories and social changes. Mahasweta Devi's legacy is in her devotion to writing history from the perspective of the marginalized. Her stories bring back voices that were lost, highlight shared memories, and criticize the structures that dominate. "The Book of the Hunter" and Bashai Tudu show her two main approaches: bringing back indigenous knowledge and using myths to fight back. Their lasting importance is because they inspire today's struggles, showing that writing can be both an art and a way to change things.

References

1. Bagchi, Alaknanda. Conflicting Nationalisms: The Voice of the Subaltern in Mahasweta Devi's Bashai Tudu. Forum After Empire, Purdue University. JSTOR.
2. Sahu, Ashis. Mahasweta Devi's Use of Satire in Operation? Bashai Tudu. International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR), Vol. 2, Issue 4, July–August 2020.
3. Sahu, Ashis. Mahasweta's Depiction of Tribal Life in Operation? Bashai Tudu. International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR), Vol. 9, Issue 2, April–June 2022.
4. Umar, M. Mahaswetha Devi's Women as Victims Under Patriarchy. International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES).
5. Mishra, Pallavi. Un-Liberated Mothers and Subversion of the Joys of Motherhood in the Texts of Mahasweta Devi. Literary Herald, ISSN: 2454-3365.
6. Choudhury, Biswajit. Multiple Subalternity of Women as Witch: A Postcolonial Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Bayen. International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR), Vol. 13, Issue 1, 2026.

