

# Themes and Techniques of Tribal Writers – Quest for Identity of Mahasweta Devi Novels

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**Abstract:** The recent Indian fiction arrived at the present stature passing through the successive imitative realistic, philosophical and psychological stages. The post fifties indicated a shift in emphasis from the social sphere to the inner life of man. This focus on inwardness offered new horizons from the Indian English writers in terms of thematic perspectives. The quest for identity has been the major thrust of the recent Indian English fiction among the recent Indian English novelists. Mahasweta Devi is an eminent Indian Bengali writer, who has been studying and writing incessantly about the life and struggles faced by the tribal communities in the states like Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Mahasweta Devi graduated from the University of Calcutta and this was followed by an MA degree in English from the Visva Bharti University. The fiction of Mahasweta Devi from the perspective of quest for identity. It also discusses the struggle of author in resolving different levels of conflicts between individual and community, individual and society and the conflict of contestation of the notion of nationality, as a part of study I covered the novels of Mahasweta Devi. To understand the development of tribal literature, to explore the theme of quest for tribal identity, to bring out the trauma and protest by the tribals in the process of social change, conservation and development of primitive groups, to preserve and protect tribal culture and traditional knowledge.

**Keywords:** Fiction, identity, philosophical, social, thematic

## Introduction:

The present study is a modest attempt in this direction. This work is theoretical in nature involving the study of tribal literature. This research work that broadly comes under the tribal literary studies is an attempt to examine in the life history of tribals and individual and collective suffering of the people. Tribal writing emerged as an important literary genre in the pre-independence period to 21<sup>st</sup> century. Personal confession, the suffering of the people and their struggling for existence became pre-dominant in literature.

The fiction of Mahasweta Devi from the perspective of quest for identity. It also discusses the struggle of author in resolving different levels of conflicts between individual and community, individual and society and the conflict of contestation of the notion of nationality, as a part of study I covered the novels of Mahasweta Devi. To understand the development of tribal literature, to explore the theme of quest for tribal identity, to bring out the trauma and protest by the tribals in the process of social change, conservation and development of primitive groups, to preserve and protect tribal culture and traditional knowledge.

Tribals among them who have been trying to raise their voice against various forms of subjugation and oppression they have been subjected, they are trying for liberation of themselves but equally of their self but equally against all forms of oppression prevalent in the society. In the name of caste and religion. The dominant theme of tribal literature has been quest for identity and struggling for the existence. Tribals are extremely away from the social and spiritual life of the mainstream society.

The tribals in various parts of India have a sophisticated set of values, social norms and codes that are far superior to the mainstream cultures. They may have no sense of prosperity and no notion of money. There is no dowry system and widow re-marriage has always been the custom among the Dravidian tribes of India.

## Themes and techniques of tribal writers;

The recent Indian fiction arrived at the present stature passing through the successive imitative realistic, philosophical and psychological stages. The post fifties indicated a shift in emphasis from the social sphere to the inner life of man. This focus on inwardness offered new horizons from the Indian English writers in terms of thematic perspectives. The quest for identity has been the major thrust of the recent Indian English fiction among the recent Indian English novelists.

The major writers in Indian English reflected the theme in their works. A brief view of the Indian writing in English from the perspective of the theme of identity reveals that the quest seems to have given importance.

## Biography:

Mahasweta Devi is an eminent Indian Bengali writer, who has been studying and writing incessantly about the life and struggles faced by the tribal communities in the states like Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Mahasweta Devi is a reputed Indian writer who was born in the year 1926 into a middle class Bengali family at Dacca, which is located in present day Bangladesh. She received her education from the prestigious Shantiniketan set up by the great Indian philosopher and thinker,

Rabindranath Tagore that went on to become a part of the Visva Bharti University later on. Mahasweta Devi graduated from the University of Calcutta and this was followed by an MA degree in English from the Visva Bharti University. Read on to know more about the biography of Mahasweta Devi. Since her entire family had shifted to India by now, Devi began teaching at the Bijoygarh College in 1964. In those times, this particular college was a forum operating for elite female students. This phase was also utilized by Mahasweta Devi to work as a journalist and a creative writer. Of late, Mahasweta Devi is known to have been studying the life history of rural tribal communities in the Indian state of West Bengal and also women and dalits.

Mahasweta Devi is a social activist who has wholly involved herself to work for the struggles of the tribal people in states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. In the fiction themed on Bengal which Devi writes, she often narrates the brutal oppression faced by the tribal people at the hands of the powerful upper caste persons comprising landlords, money lenders and government officials in this belt. During the 2006 Frankfurt Book Fair when India happened to be the first country to have been invited to this fair for a second time, Mahasweta Devi made a very touching inaugural speech which moved many among the listeners to tears. Inspired by the famous Raj Kapoor song, she said: "This is truly the age where the Joota (shoe) is Japani (Japanese), Patloon (pants) is Englistani (British), the Topi (hat) is Roosi (Russian), But the Dil (heart) is always Hindustani (Indian).

### Early life

Mahasweta Devi was born in 1926 in Decca, British India (now Dhaka, Bangladesh) to literary parents. Her father, Manish Ghatak, was a well-known poet and novelist of the Kallol movement, who used the pseudonym Jubanashwa. Ghatak's brother was noted filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak. Devi's mother, Dharitri Devi, was also a writer and a social worker whose brothers were very distinguished in various fields, such as the noted sculptor Sankha Chaudhury and the founder-editor of Economic and Political Weekly of India, Sachin Chaudhury. Mahasweta Devi's first schooling was in Dhaka, Eden Montessori school (1930) but after the partition of India she moved to West Bengal in India. Then she studied in Midnapur Mission School (1935). After that she admitted in Santiniketan from 1936 to 1938. After that she studied in Beltala Girls' School (1939-1941) and got metric. Then in 1944 she got I.A. from Asutosh College. Then she joined the Rabindranath Tagore-founded Patha-Bhavana Vishvabharati University in Santiniketan and completed a B.A. (Hons) in English, and then finished an M.A. in English at Calcutta University.

### Literary works

Devi wrote over 100 novels and over 20 collections of short stories primarily written in Bengali but often translated to other languages. Her first novel, titled *Jhansir Rani*, based on a biography of Rani of Jhansi was published in 1956. She toured the Jhansi region to record information from the people and folk songs for the novel.

In 1964, she began teaching at Jadavpur, Kolkata-32 (an affiliated college of the University of Calcutta system). During those days, Vijaygarh jyotish Ray College was an institution for working-class women students. During that period she also worked as a journalist and as a creative writer. She studied the *Lodhas* and *Shabars*, the tribal communities of West Bengal, women and dalits. In her elaborate Bengali fiction, she often depicted the brutal oppression of tribal peoples and the untouchables by potent, authoritarian upper-caste landlords, lenders, and venal government officials. She wrote of the source of her inspiration:

I have always believed that the real history is made by ordinary people. I constantly come across the reappearance, in various forms, of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people across generations. The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat. For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble, suffering human beings. Why should I look for my raw material elsewhere, once I have started knowing them? Sometimes it seems to me that my writing is really their doing.

Postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has translated Devi's short stories into English and published three books *Imaginary Maps* (1995, Routledge), *Old Woman* (1997, Seagull), *The Breast Stories* (1997, Seagull).

### Social activity

Mahasweta Devi raised her voice several times against the discrimination of tribal people in India. In June 2016, the Jharkhand State Government freed the statue of noted tribal leader Birsa Munda upon Devi's activism. The statue showed Birsa in chains as was photographed by the then ruling British government. Her 1977 novel *Aranyer Adhikar* was on the life of Munda.

Devi spearheaded the movement against the industrial policy of the earlier Communist Party of India (Marxist) government of West Bengal. Specifically, she stridently criticized confiscation of large tracts of fertile agricultural land from farmers by the government and ceding the land to industrial houses at throwaway prices. She supported the candidature of Mamata Banarjee in the 2011 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election that resulted in the end of the 34-year long rule of CPI(M). She had connected the policy to the commercialization of Santiniketan of Rabindranath Tagore, where she spent her formative years. Her lead in the Nandigram agitation resulted in a number of intellectuals, artists, writers and theatre workers joining together in protest of the controversial policy and particularly its implementation in Singur and Nandigram.

She is known to have helped the noted writer Manoranjan Byhari to come into prominence as his initial writings were published in her journal and as prompted by her.

At the Frankfurt Book Fair 2006, when India was the first country to be the Fair's second time guest nation, she made an impassioned inaugural speech wherein she moved the audience to tears with her lines taken from the famous film song "Mera Joota Hai Japani" by Raj Kapoor.

This is truly the age where the Joota (shoe) is Japani (Japanese), Patloon (pants) is Englistani (British), the Topi (hat) is Roosi (Russian), But the Dil... Dil (heart) is always Hindustani (Indian)... My country, Torn, Tattered, Proud, Beautiful, Hot, Humid, Cold, Sandy, Shining India. My country.

### Personal life

On 27 February in 1947, she married renowned playwright Bijon Bhattacharya, who was one of the founding fathers of the Indian People's Theatre Association movement.<sup>[7]</sup> In 1948, she gave birth to Nabarun Bhattacharya, who became a novelist and political critic. She worked in a post office but was fired from there for her communist leaning. She went on to do various jobs, such as selling soaps and writing letters in English for illiterate people. In 1962, she married author Asit Gupta after divorcing Bhattacharya. After that she broke up relationship with Gupta in 1976.

### Death

On 23 July 2016, Devi suffered a major heart attack and was admitted to Belle Vue Clinic in Kolkata. Devi died of multiple organ failure on 28 July 2016, aged 90. She also suffered from diabetes, septicemia and urinary infection.

On her death, Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal tweeted "India has lost a great writer. Bengal has lost a glorious mother. I have lost a personal guide. Mahasweta Di rest in peace." Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted "Mahashweta Devi wonderfully illustrated the might of the pen. A voice of compassion, equality & justice, she leaves us deeply saddened. RIP."

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