

Hunger, Land, and Resistance: Indigenous Oppression in Mahasweta Devi's Fiction

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's fiction gives powerful literary expression to the suffering, resistance, and historical neglect of indigenous communities in postcolonial India. This paper examines her representation of tribal oppression with special reference to "Little Ones," "Bitter Soil," "Draupadi," and "Duoloti, the Bountiful." Devi presents hunger, land dispossession, state violence, legal injustice, and gendered exploitation as interconnected forms of oppression. Her stories show that tribal suffering is not the result of accident or natural misfortune. It is produced by exploitative systems of governance, development, law, and social power. In "Little Ones," starvation becomes a visible sign of state neglect and internal colonialism. In "Draupadi," the violated female body becomes a site of resistance against military and patriarchal violence. In "Duoloti, the Bountiful," Devi links the exploitation of women with the destruction of land and community life. The paper also discusses Devi's use of myth, oral memory, and subaltern history to challenge official narratives of progress and development. Her fiction does not present tribal communities as helpless victims alone. It also records their courage, memory, cultural strength, and refusal to disappear. Through her literary and activist vision, Devi exposes the unfinished nature of freedom in India and calls attention to the moral responsibility of literature in confronting injustice.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, indigenous oppression, tribal resistance, land dispossession, starvation, ecofeminism, postcolonial India, Draupadi, Little Ones

1. Mahasweta Devi's Literature of Activism

Mahasweta Devi occupies a significant place in modern Indian literature because her writing is closely connected with social justice. Her fiction does not remain within the limits of ordinary storytelling. It becomes a form of witness, protest, and intervention. She writes about communities that are pushed to the margins of Indian society, especially tribal groups, Dalits, bonded labourers, landless peasants, and oppressed women. Her works are shaped by her long involvement with these communities. She did not write about them from a distance. She lived among them, listened to them, and treated their struggles as part of her own ethical and political commitment.

Devi's fiction is important because it questions the success of postcolonial freedom. India achieved political independence, but many tribal communities continued to live under conditions of hunger, dispossession, police violence, and social humiliation. Devi's stories expose this contradiction. They ask whether a nation can call itself free when its most vulnerable people remain without land, food, dignity, and justice.

In "Little Ones," Devi presents a painful picture of starvation and social abandonment. The story shows how hunger damages the body, weakens the community, and reduces human beings to a condition of forced invisibility. In "Bitter Soil," she reveals how tribal suffering grows out of long-term structures of exploitation. In "Draupadi," she presents the violence of the state through the body of Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman who refuses to be reduced to shame. Through these stories, Devi turns literature into a moral and political force. She gives voice to those whom official histories often ignore.

2. Starvation and the Destruction of Human Dignity

In “Little Ones,” the title itself is deeply ironic. The “little ones” are not children. They are adults whose bodies have become small and stunted because of long years of hunger. Their physical condition becomes a sign of a larger historical injustice. They have been reduced in body, in social position, and in political visibility. Devi uses their bodies to show how starvation destroys human dignity.

The statement that they “have seen rice but only in dreams” is one of the most painful images in the story. Rice is a basic necessity, but for these people it becomes almost imaginary. Food exists in the nation, but it does not reach them. Hunger, in Devi’s fiction, is not a natural condition. It is created by neglect, inequality, and administrative failure. The poor do not starve because food is absent everywhere. They starve because power decides who will receive food and who will be forgotten.

Devi’s description of their bodies is disturbing and direct. Their near-naked, shrivelled, swollen-bellied, and diseased bodies show the violence of poverty. Hunger becomes a weapon. It keeps the marginalized weak, dependent, and silent. It also separates them from the promises of citizenship. A developing nation speaks of progress, industry, and welfare, but the “little ones” remain outside these promises.

The story therefore presents starvation as a political condition. Devi shifts attention from charity to justice. The question is not whether the hungry should be helped occasionally. The deeper question is why they have been made hungry for generations. In this sense, “Little Ones” becomes a critique of internal colonialism. The tribal community is treated as if it belongs to an inferior world within the nation itself.

3. Tribal Alienation and the Loss of Land

Mahasweta Devi repeatedly shows that tribal alienation begins with the loss of land. For indigenous communities, land is not merely property. It is linked to livelihood, memory, culture, ritual, and identity. When land is taken away, the community loses more than economic security. It loses a way of life.

In “Little Ones,” the Agariyas once lived as skilled iron miners. Their knowledge of iron was part of their cultural and economic life. When the government destroyed their hills for ore extraction, they lost their traditional occupation and sacred space. This act of state violence pushed them into homelessness and dislocation. They were forced into forests and later treated as outsiders in their own ancestral region.

Their new identity as “forest dwellers” reveals the cruelty of this process. They are first displaced by the state and then blamed for their displaced condition. They are labelled as nomads, criminals, and lawless people. Such labels make it easier for the state to control them. Police harassment and administrative suspicion become part of their everyday life.

Devi also uses myth to record this history of loss. The myth of the Sun God, who curses the Agariyas and turns their iron wealth to ashes, should not be dismissed as superstition. It functions as cultural memory. It preserves the pain of dispossession in a language that belongs to the community. Official records may describe mining as development, but tribal myth remembers it as loss. In this way, Devi treats indigenous mythology as an alternative history.

The story also exposes the failure of welfare. A relief officer may wish to help, but he cannot understand the deeper causes of tribal suffering. His methods remain official, distant, and alien to the starving community. Devi shows that development becomes harmful when it ignores tribal knowledge and self-respect. Welfare without understanding becomes another form of control.

4. Postcolonial Progress and Its Contradictions

“Little Ones” also works as a metaphor for the failure of postcolonial progress. India may have removed colonial rulers, but colonial methods of control continue in new forms. Devi suggests that the present system often repeats the violence of the past. Tribal communities remain under surveillance. Their land is taken in the name of development. Their labour is exploited. Their hunger is treated as a minor administrative problem.

The small bodies of the “little ones” symbolize the shrinking rights of indigenous people. Their bodies have been reduced, but so have their spaces, livelihoods, and voices. They live within a democratic nation, yet democracy

does not protect them equally. The language of progress hides the violence that makes progress possible for the powerful.

Devi's critique is sharp because she does not reject development in a simple way. Instead, she asks development for whom and at whose cost. Industrial growth, mining, dams, plantations, and land acquisition often appear as signs of national advancement. Yet for tribal communities, these projects may mean eviction, hunger, cultural loss, and forced labour. Devi exposes this gap between official promise and lived reality.

The term "postcolonial" becomes unstable in this context. Political independence has not brought real liberation to the most marginalized. The story makes the reader confront a painful truth: freedom remains incomplete when some citizens are denied the basic conditions of life.

5. Systemic Roots of Oppression

Mahasweta Devi does not present tribal suffering as an isolated problem. She identifies its roots in larger systems of power. Government policy, corrupt administration, unjust law, landlordism, and economic inequality work together to produce oppression. These systems reinforce one another.

Devi strongly criticizes post-independence policies that continue colonial patterns of control. Land acquisition in the name of industry often benefits corporations, landlords, and the state, while farmers and tribal people lose their homes and livelihoods. The language of national development hides the violence of displacement. When fertile land is taken with little compensation, the poor are asked to sacrifice for a future in which they have no place.

Devi also draws attention to the continuation of colonial legal thinking. Laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act and its later forms created a dangerous connection between tribal identity and criminality. Entire communities were treated as suspicious by birth. Such laws did not simply punish crime; they produced social stigma. They allowed police surveillance, harassment, and control over communities already made vulnerable by poverty.

This legal injustice has long-term consequences. When a community is seen as criminal, its suffering becomes easier to ignore. Its protest becomes easier to suppress. Its demand for land and dignity is treated as a threat to order. Devi's fiction exposes this system with clarity. She shows that oppression survives because it is supported by law, administration, property, and public prejudice.

6. Corruption and Administrative Complicity

Corruption in Mahasweta Devi's fiction is not a minor moral weakness. It is part of the structure of oppression. In "Little Ones," relief meant for starving tribal people does not reach them properly because officials misuse their authority. The tehsildar and other local agents turn public welfare into private gain. Aid becomes another opportunity for exploitation.

This betrayal is especially cruel because it occurs in the name of help. The state claims to provide relief, but its own machinery prevents relief from reaching the hungry. Devi reveals how the poor are trapped between need and corruption. They depend on the same system that exploits them.

In "Draupadi," the connection between landlords and the state becomes even clearer. Dopdi and Dulna resist Surja Sahu and the oppressive forces around him. The state does not respond by asking why rebellion has taken place. Instead, it sends armed power to crush resistance. Police and military forces protect property and punish the oppressed.

This selective justice is one of Devi's strongest concerns. The powerful break moral and social laws, but they remain protected. The poor resist injustice, and they are treated as criminals. Law becomes a weapon in the hands of those who already possess power. Devi's fiction forces the reader to see that administrative failure is not accidental. It is often organized, repeated, and protected.

7. Land Dispossession and the Collapse of Livelihood

Land dispossession is one of the central forces behind tribal suffering in Devi's stories. In "Little Ones" and "Draupadi," land is connected with survival, dignity, labour, and memory. When land is taken away, the community loses its economic base and its cultural continuity.

British land systems had already damaged communal forms of ownership. After independence, new policies often continued the same logic. Land became a commodity that could be transferred, acquired, mined, or sold. Tribal relationships with land were ignored because they did not fit the language of private property and market value.

In "Little Ones," the Agariyas lose their ancestral right to work with iron. The destruction of their hills is also the destruction of their collective life. Their forced movement creates poverty, alienation, and dependence. In such a situation, hunger is not separate from land loss. It is one of its direct results.

Devi criticizes development projects that treat tribal people as obstacles. Plans for industrial growth often speak of progress, employment, and national benefit. Yet they rarely protect those who are displaced. Tribal people are removed from their land and then pushed into low-paid labour, bonded work, or migration. Their knowledge systems are dismissed, and their cultural practices are weakened.

For Devi, real reform must begin with justice. Land rights cannot be understood only in legal or economic terms. They must include memory, community, ecology, and dignity. Without such recognition, development remains another name for dispossession.

8. Ecofeminism, Gendered Violence, and Environmental Injustice

Mahasweta Devi's fiction also carries an ecofeminist concern. She shows how women, land, forests, and tribal communities are often exploited by the same systems of power. Patriarchy, capitalism, caste, class, and state violence treat both women and nature as resources to be controlled.

In "Duoloti, the Bountiful," the body of Duoloti becomes a record of social and economic violence. Her suffering is not merely personal. It reflects the exploitation of an entire community. Her body is used, consumed, and abandoned, just as land and forests are seized and destroyed. Devi connects sexual violence with economic exploitation and ecological damage.

This vision is close to Vandana Shiva's idea of "maldevelopment," which criticizes models of progress that destroy sustainable relationships between people and nature. Devi's fiction shows that development becomes violent when it separates human life from land, community, and ecological balance. Women from marginalized communities suffer most severely because they stand at the intersection of many forms of power.

In "Draupadi," Dopdi Mejhen's body becomes the site of state violence. She is captured, tortured, and sexually assaulted. Yet Devi does not allow the story to end in defeat. Dopdi refuses to cover herself before Senanayak. Her nakedness becomes a form of resistance. She turns the sign of violation into a sign of moral power. Her question, "Are you a man?" exposes the weakness of the system that has tried to destroy her.

Dopdi's resistance is powerful because it rejects shame. The state expects the violated woman to become silent, broken, and invisible. Dopdi refuses this role. Her body, instead of becoming proof of defeat, becomes an accusation. Devi shows that tribal women are not passive victims. They possess courage, anger, memory, and political clarity.

9. Identity, Memory, and Collective Resistance

Mahasweta Devi's writings are deeply concerned with the struggle for identity. Dalit and indigenous communities are often denied their histories, names, rights, and voices. Official narratives describe them through labels such as criminal, backward, primitive, or rebellious. Devi challenges these labels by placing marginalized people at the centre of her fiction.

Her characters do not always speak in the polished language of power, but their silence, gestures, myths, songs, and acts of resistance carry meaning. Devi respects these forms of expression. She treats oral memory and

community knowledge as valid forms of history. This is important because official histories often erase the suffering of subaltern communities.

Women such as Dopdi, Duoloti, Bayen, and Sujata resist the identities imposed on them. They refuse to remain only victims. Their resistance may not always lead to victory in a conventional sense, but it breaks the moral confidence of oppressive power. Devi's women expose the violence hidden behind law, respectability, family, development, and nation.

Devi also emphasizes collective identity. Some of her characters may seem similar in their suffering, but this sameness has political meaning. It shows how dominant systems erase individuality and treat marginalized people as a mass. At the same time, Devi reveals the strength that comes from shared memory and collective survival. Community becomes a form of resistance against erasure.

Reclaiming identity, in Devi's fiction, is both personal and collective. It involves remembering the past, naming injustice, protecting cultural knowledge, and refusing disappearance. Her stories insist that the marginalized are not outside history. They are central to any honest understanding of the nation.

10. Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's fiction offers a powerful critique of postcolonial India's failure to protect its most oppressed people. Through "Little Ones," "Bitter Soil," "Draupadi," and "Duoloti, the Bountiful," she exposes the violence hidden beneath the language of progress, development, law, and nationalism. Her stories show that hunger, land dispossession, gendered violence, ecological destruction, and state complicity are connected forms of oppression.

At the same time, Devi's fiction is not only a record of suffering. It is also a record of resistance. Her tribal characters remember, endure, confront, and defy. Her women, especially, turn their wounded bodies and silenced voices into instruments of protest. Dopdi's refusal to cover herself remains one of the strongest images of resistance in modern Indian literature.

Devi's work reminds readers that literature can question power and recover suppressed histories. She measures national freedom not by official institutions alone, but by the condition of the most vulnerable. Her fiction asks whether independence has meaning when hunger, dispossession, and violence continue to define the lives of many indigenous communities.

In this sense, Mahasweta Devi's writing remains urgent. It challenges readers, scholars, and citizens to look beyond the veil of progress and confront the harsh realities of social injustice. Her literature stands as an ethical call for dignity, equality, and a more humane understanding of freedom.

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