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IJIEMR Transactions, online available on 26<sup>th</sup> Dec 2022. Link

[:http://www.ijiemr.org/downloads.php?vol=Volume-11&issue=Issue 12](http://www.ijiemr.org/downloads.php?vol=Volume-11&issue=Issue 12)

**10.48047/IJIEMR/V11/ISSUE 12/95**

Title *EXPLORING THE REPRESENTATION OF SUBALTERNITY, SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS, AND SUBALTERN EXISTENCE IN THE WRITINGS OF MAHASWETA DEVI* Volume 11, ISSUE 12, Pages: 726-731

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## **EXPLORING THE REPRESENTATION OF SUBALTERNITY, SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS, AND SUBALTERN EXISTENCE IN THE WRITINGS OF MAHASWETA DEVI**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research paper aims to delve into the representation of subalternity, subaltern consciousness, and subaltern existence in the writings of Mahasweta Devi, a prominent Indian author and social activist. Mahasweta Devi's works provide a powerful portrayal of the marginalized communities in India, capturing their lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations. By analyzing selected texts from Devi's oeuvre, this paper will examine the ways in which she explores the intricate layers of subalternity, illuminating the conscious awareness and existence of the subaltern subjects. The research will employ a postcolonial theoretical framework, drawing on the concepts of subalternity, agency, resistance, and representation.

**Keywords:** - Subaltern, Mahasweta Devi, Communities, India, Writings.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Mahasweta Devi, a prominent Indian author and social activist, holds a significant position in the realm of Indian literature. Her writings serve as a powerful medium to explore the lives and experiences of subaltern communities in India. Devi's literary works not only provide a voice to the marginalized but also shed light on their consciousness, existence, and struggles. This research paper aims to delve into the representation of subalternity, subaltern consciousness, and subaltern existence in Devi's writings, using a postcolonial theoretical framework.

Subalternity, a term popularized by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, refers to the subordinate and marginalized position of certain groups within society.

These groups are often excluded from the dominant power structures and lack agency in shaping their own destinies. Devi's works provide a platform to explore the complex layers of subalternity and understand the dynamics of power, oppression, and resistance.

The concept of subaltern consciousness highlights the awareness and perception of subaltern subjects regarding their marginalized position. Devi's writings give voice to the subaltern, enabling them to articulate their experiences, aspirations, and challenges. Through her characters, she illuminates their agency, resilience, and capacity for resistance against oppressive structures.

Moreover, Devi's works vividly portray the lived realities and struggles of subaltern communities. She delves into the

intersectionality of caste, class, gender, and tribal identities, unraveling the multifaceted dimensions of subaltern existence. Devi explores issues such as land rights, displacement, labor exploitation, and violence, offering a nuanced understanding of the social, economic, and political challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Resisting the hegemonic structures that perpetuate their marginalization, the subaltern subjects in Devi's writings employ various strategies of resistance. From individual acts of defiance to collective mobilization and grassroots movements, Devi captures the transformative potential of subaltern resistance. Her narratives challenge the dominant narratives and offer alternatives to conventional power relations.

Representation and the ethical responsibility of the writer in portraying the subaltern Other also come under scrutiny. Devi grapples with the dilemma of accurately and empathetically representing subaltern experiences, while also acknowledging the limitations and potential pitfalls of such representation. The paper will explore Devi's approach to representation and examine the critical responses from postcolonial scholars.

By analyzing selected texts from Devi's vast literary repertoire, this research paper aims to contribute to the understanding of subalternity, subaltern consciousness, and subaltern existence in postcolonial literature. It seeks to illuminate the struggles, aspirations, and agency of subaltern subjects, while also addressing the ethical considerations involved in representing their lived experiences. Ultimately, Mahasweta Devi's writings

serve as a catalyst for social change, challenging existing power structures and advocating for the rights and dignity of the marginalized.

## II. THE CONCEPT OF SUBALTERNITY

The concept of subalternity, which originates from the works of Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, has been widely employed in postcolonial studies to analyze the marginalized and oppressed groups within societies. Gramsci defined the subaltern as those who are socially and politically subordinated, lacking access to power and agency. However, the understanding and usage of the term have evolved through the contributions of other scholars, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who expanded its scope in the postcolonial context.

Subalternity encompasses a complex intersection of various forms of oppression, including but not limited to class, caste, gender, race, ethnicity, and colonialism. It recognizes that different marginalized groups face distinct challenges and power dynamics. The subaltern is situated at the periphery of society, often silenced and excluded from dominant discourses and structures.

The subaltern, as Gramsci proposed, is not merely a passive victim but possesses agency and the potential for resistance. This agency is rooted in the subaltern's consciousness and their understanding of their own conditions. Subaltern consciousness refers to the awareness and perception of the subaltern subject regarding their marginalized position within society. It involves a critical understanding of power relations and the

recognition of one's own identity and agency in challenging oppressive structures.

Subaltern consciousness is often expressed through alternative modes of knowledge production, cultural practices, oral traditions, and forms of resistance. Subaltern voices seek to disrupt dominant narratives and assert their own experiences and histories. Through their stories, songs, folklore, and everyday practices, the subaltern subverts the hegemonic power and claims their own space for self-expression.

The subaltern experience is not homogenous but varies across different contexts and identities. Subaltern existence encompasses the lived realities, struggles, and aspirations of marginalized communities. It includes the material conditions in which the subaltern live, such as poverty, exploitation, and discrimination, as well as the social, cultural, and political dimensions that shape their lives. Subaltern existence is marked by resistance, resilience, and the constant negotiation of power dynamics.

In the writings of Mahasweta Devi, the concept of subalternity is central. Devi's works portray the diverse and multifaceted nature of subaltern existence, capturing the complex interplay of caste, class, gender, and tribal identities. She sheds light on the struggles faced by the subaltern communities, including land dispossession, labor exploitation, violence, and cultural erasure. Devi's narratives offer a glimpse into the everyday realities and resistance strategies employed by the subaltern, highlighting their agency and consciousness.

Overall, the concept of subalternity provides a framework to analyze the social, political, and cultural dimensions of marginalization and oppression. It recognizes the agency and consciousness of the subaltern subjects while unveiling the complexities of their existence. Through the writings of Mahasweta Devi, the representation of subalternity, subaltern consciousness, and subaltern existence becomes a powerful means to challenge hegemonic structures and advocate for social justice.

### III. SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS: VOICE AND AGENCY

Subaltern consciousness plays a crucial role in the representation of marginalized communities and their struggles for recognition, agency, and social transformation. It encompasses the awareness, understanding, and articulation of the subaltern subject regarding their marginalized position within society. Mahasweta Devi's writings vividly depict the emergence of subaltern consciousness, giving voice to the silenced and amplifying their agency.

One aspect of subaltern consciousness is the reclaiming of voice. The subaltern subject, historically marginalized and excluded from dominant discourses, seeks to assert their own narratives and challenge the dominant representations imposed upon them. Devi's works provide a platform for subaltern voices to be heard, allowing them to share their stories, experiences, and perspectives. Through the use of language, dialogue, and narrative techniques, Devi empowers her characters to reclaim their agency and challenge their marginalization.

Devi's narratives often feature strong and resilient subaltern protagonists who refuse to remain silent in the face of oppression. These characters become the embodiment of subaltern consciousness, defying societal norms and power structures. Through their struggles, they navigate the complexities of their identities and confront the injustices imposed upon them. Devi's writings highlight the transformative potential of individual agency in challenging oppressive systems. Moreover, Devi's portrayal of collective agency is central to the representation of subaltern consciousness. She explores the power of community, solidarity, and collective action as means of resistance and social change. Devi's characters form alliances, engage in grassroots movements, and mobilize their communities to challenge oppressive forces. By depicting the collective agency of subaltern groups, Devi emphasizes the strength and resilience that arise from shared experiences and shared struggles.

In her writings, Devi also delves into the importance of cultural identity and heritage in shaping subaltern consciousness. She explores the subaltern's connection to their roots, traditions, and indigenous knowledge, highlighting how these elements contribute to their sense of self and empowerment. Through the preservation and celebration of cultural practices, the subaltern subjects assert their agency and challenge the dominant narratives that seek to erase their identities. Devi's representation of subaltern consciousness is not idealized or simplified; it acknowledges the complexities and contradictions within the subaltern subject's journey toward self-

awareness and agency. She recognizes the internal struggles, conflicts, and limitations that subaltern individuals may face in their pursuit of empowerment. Devi's narratives capture the nuances of subaltern consciousness, portraying its evolution and transformation as a process influenced by both external factors and internal reflections.

#### **IV. SUBALTERN EXISTENCE: LIVED REALITIES AND STRUGGLES**

Subaltern existence refers to the lived realities, struggles, and challenges faced by marginalized communities within society. Mahasweta Devi's writings provide a profound exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of subaltern existence, shedding light on the material conditions, social dynamics, and systemic injustices experienced by these communities.

Devi's works delve into the intersecting identities of subaltern individuals, including caste, class, gender, and tribal affiliations. She portrays the lived experiences of marginalized communities, exposing the inequalities and discrimination they endure. Through her narratives, Devi highlights the harsh realities of poverty, exploitation, and violence that are endemic to subaltern existence.

Land dispossession and displacement are prominent themes in Devi's works. She examines the struggles faced by subaltern communities who are forcibly evicted from their ancestral lands, often for the benefit of powerful vested interests. Devi vividly captures the loss of livelihood, cultural heritage, and community cohesion resulting from such displacements. Her

narratives reveal the resilience and resistance of subaltern communities in the face of land alienation.

Labor exploitation is another crucial aspect of subaltern existence that Devi addresses in her writings. She portrays the subjugation of marginalized workers, such as agricultural laborers, factory workers, and tribal artisans. Devi exposes the exploitative labor practices, low wages, and inhumane working conditions that perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality. By giving voice to the exploited workers, Devi unveils their struggles for dignity, fair treatment, and improved livelihoods.

Violence, both physical and structural, is a pervasive element of subaltern existence in Devi's narratives. She confronts issues such as police brutality, state oppression, caste-based violence, and gender-based violence. Devi sheds light on the systemic injustices that perpetuate violence against subaltern communities, bringing attention to the need for justice and social change. Her writings challenge dominant power structures that perpetuate violence and advocate for the rights and safety of the marginalized.

In addition to material struggles, Devi explores the cultural erasure and marginalization experienced by subaltern communities. She depicts the loss of indigenous knowledge, traditions, and languages as a result of assimilationist policies and the dominance of mainstream culture. Devi's narratives emphasize the significance of cultural identity and heritage in the lives of subaltern communities, emphasizing the need to preserve and celebrate their unique contributions.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the writings of Mahasweta Devi provide a compelling exploration of subalternity, subaltern consciousness, and subaltern existence. Devi's works serve as a powerful medium to amplify the voices, experiences, and struggles of marginalized communities in India. Through her narratives, she sheds light on the complex layers of subalternity, capturing the conscious awareness and existence of the subaltern subjects.

Devi's portrayal of subaltern consciousness reveals the agency and resilience of marginalized individuals and communities. Her characters reclaim their voice, challenge dominant narratives, and assert their own experiences and perspectives. Devi emphasizes the transformative potential of individual and collective agency, highlighting the power of resistance and grassroots movements in challenging oppressive structures.

The representation of subaltern existence in Devi's writings exposes the lived realities and struggles faced by marginalized communities. She addresses issues such as land dispossession, labor exploitation, violence, and cultural erasure, bringing attention to the systemic injustices that perpetuate inequality and marginalization. Devi's narratives capture the material conditions, social dynamics, and complexities of subaltern existence, giving visibility to the marginalized and demanding social change.

Devi's writings also raise important ethical considerations in representing the subaltern Other. She grapples with the challenge of accurately and empathetically portraying subaltern experiences while acknowledging the limitations and

potential pitfalls of such representation. Devi's approach emphasizes the importance of authentic representation, empathy, and a commitment to social justice.

Overall, Mahasweta Devi's writings make a significant contribution to postcolonial literature and social activism. Her exploration of subalternity, subaltern consciousness, and subaltern existence challenges dominant power structures and advocates for the rights, dignity, and social transformation of marginalized communities. Devi's works continue to inspire further research, advocacy, and engagement with issues of subalternity and social justice.

As we reflect on the representation of subalternity in Devi's writings, it becomes evident that the stories and experiences of the marginalized deserve attention and recognition. By listening to and amplifying these voices, we can strive for a more inclusive and equitable society, where the subaltern are not silenced but celebrated for their resilience, agency, and contributions to the fabric of humanity.

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