



Language of the Tribes in Mahasweta Devi's Works

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's works provide an insightful exploration of the languages, dialects, and oral traditions of various tribal communities in India. Her writing serves as a poignant remark on the cultural, social, and political struggles faced by Adivasi communities, particularly those from marginalized regions like Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh. Through her portrayal of tribal languages such as Santali, Munda, Kurukh, Ho, and Kharia, Devi reinforces the linguistic oppression and erasure experienced by these communities within a colonial and postcolonial context.

This paper analyzes how Devi entwines tribal languages and oral traditions into her narratives, using them as both a symbol of resistance and a means to articulate the Deep-rooted connection between language, identity, and land. Her narrative illustrates how tribal languages are not just tools of communication but vehicles of cultural survival and defiance against colonial and state

hegemony. This paper also brings out how Devi's representation of tribal languages bridges the gap between oral and written traditions, transforming literature into a site of linguistic activism. Eventually, the paper highlights the role of language in empowering marginalized voices and the broader implications of language as a tool for cultural resistance in the face of systemic oppression.

KEYWORDS:

Tribal languages, Mahasweta Devi, Linguistic Resistance, oral traditions, subaltern speech and Representation, Hegemony of Dominant languages, Santali, Munda, Ho, Kurukh, cultural and Linguistic survival, Linguistic Marginalization.

DISCUSSION:

Mahasweta Devi's works are deeply interwoven with the experiences, struggles, and resilience of Adivasi communities. One of the key elements of her storytelling is the use of tribal language and oral traditions, which not only serves to reflect the cultural identity of the tribes but also acts as a significant form of resistance against the dominance of mainstream linguistic and cultural norms. In Devi's narratives, tribal language is not simply a tool of communication but a symbol of survival, cultural autonomy, and resistance to external forces of oppression, including colonialism, state violence, and cultural erasure.

Devi goes beyond sociopolitical criticism in her interaction with Adivasi narratives. Her writings use language as a place of resistance rather than as a passive medium, equating the erasure of Adivasi languages with economic exploitation, political marginalization, and land confiscation. Her stories offer a counter narrative to history imposed by the state, emphasizing the cultural and epistemic sovereignty of Adivasis through the use of Santali, Ho, Munda, and Oraon linguistic features.

Devi highlights the role that language plays in forming Adivasi resistance in *Chotti Munda and His Arrows*. Chotti Munda, the main character, speaks Mundari, a language that is often suppressed by prevailing powers. He is yet linked to his forefathers and their historical resistance to the colonial and postcolonial state by his language, which endures as an identity marker. The continuous use of tribal language, despite state repression, signals linguistic resistance as a refusal to assimilate into the dominant discourse. Devi says, "His people spoke in a language older than the landowner's greed, older than the zamindars tax records. They spoke a language of rivers and forests, of myths and memory"(Chotti Munda and His Arrows, 79). This reflects how Adivasi language is intrinsically linked to land, history, and selfhood its suppression equates to cultural genocide, making its persistence a radical act.

Devi's *Imaginary Maps* frequently include untranslated tribal vocabulary like Hor, Santali, and

Diku. The untranslated terms serve as language barriers, promoting the notion that tribal identity exists beyond mainstream comprehension. Devi says, "The Diku's write history in their books, but we, the Hor, carry history in our tongues" (*Imaginary Maps*, XII). This deliberate linguistic strategy aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's argument in *Decolonizing the Mind* that indigenous languages serve as repositories of resistance. By keeping these words intact, Devi asserts the autonomy of Adivasi linguistic traditions.

Oral storytelling in Devi's works serves as an alternative historical record, preserving subaltern memory against state sanctioned erasures. In *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha*, Puran Sahay, an urban journalist, is perplexed by the Adivasis legendary explanation for a pterodactyl's presence on their territory. The pterodactyl is not a prehistoric creature but an ancestral spirit, representing their history of displacement and suffering. Here, oral tradition competes with written history, challenging colonial epistemologies. The tribal worldview, though dismissed as myth, contains a truth deeper than state records one of intergenerational trauma and resilience.

Tribal communities in *The Book of the Hunter*, use ritual songs to encode their relationship with nature and hunting traditions. These songs carry centuries of ecological wisdom. Through oral traditions, Adivasis assert an alternative epistemology one that resists state-imposed knowledge systems. The songs are both an archive of identity and a form of defiance, rejecting the linguistic colonization of their culture. Mahasweta Devi's engagement with tribal language and oral traditions is not merely a literary device it is an act of cultural reclamation. Through untranslated words, myths, songs, and silence, she restores subaltern voices that have long been silenced by colonial and postcolonial state forces. In Devi's narratives, language is both a battlefield and a weapon. It preserves history, identity, and collective memory while resisting the erasure imposed by dominant discourse. By centering Adivasi linguistic traditions, Devi redefines literature as a site of linguistic justice, where tribal voices no longer whisper but roar.

Her works are deeply intertwined with the experiences, struggles, and resilience of Adivasi communities. One of the central aspects of her storytelling is the use of tribal language and oral traditions, which not only serves to reflect the cultural identity of the tribes but also acts as a powerful form of resistance against the dominance of mainstream linguistic and cultural norms. In her narratives, tribal language is not simply a tool of communication but a symbol of survival, cultural autonomy, and resistance to external forces of oppression, including colonialism, state violence, and cultural erasure. Devi's characters often speak in their native dialects, and her depiction of indigenous languages defies the linguistic imposition of the colonial and postcolonial state. Through her use of tribal language, Devi emphasizes the vital connection between language and land, where language carries cultural knowledge, ancestral memory, and a unique way of seeing the world. For instance, in *Imaginary Maps*, Devi uses Santali language to highlight the tribal struggle for land rights, where tribal communities are in constant conflict with landowners and government authorities. The Santali language, in this case, becomes a tool to express tribal resistance to the mainstream economic forces trying to erase

their land rights. In many of Devi's narratives the tribal language functions as a repository of indigenous knowledge. Oral traditions, including songs, myths, legends, and rituals, are not only preserved through speech but also contribute to the survival of cultural practices and values. In this context, the language becomes a tool of resistance, one that resists both cultural erasure and the imposition of dominant languages.

In the absence of written records, oral traditions have been the primary means of transmitting history, culture, and wisdom in Adivasi communities. Devi's stories are infused with oral storytelling techniques, drawing heavily on the mythological narratives, songs, and folklore of Adivasi tribes. This method of narration ensures that the voice of the oppressed is heard and preserves tribal heritage in the face of cultural homogenization. In *Chotti Munda and His Arrows*, the narrative is interspersed with stories of rebellion and warrior folklore, emphasizing the importance of oral tradition in the tribal struggle. The characters' engagement with oral histories enables them to maintain a sense of connection with their past while simultaneously resisting the pressures of the dominant societal norms.

Language in Devi's narratives is inseparable from the rituals and cultural practices of the tribes. Songs, chants, and prayer rituals are part of the oral tradition that ties the tribal community together, reinforcing a collective identity that remains resistant to the dilution of their cultural practices. The rituals are frequently depicted in tribal languages, further cementing the relationship between language and identity. In *The Book of the Hunter*, Devi shows how tribal hunters use their traditional knowledge of the forest, passed down through generations via oral storytelling. The language used in these stories is not only a means of communication but also a way of reaffirming their connection to the land and maintaining ancestral knowledge about the environment.

Mahasweta Devi's integration of tribal language and oral traditions in her narratives is a potent literary strategy that serves multiple purposes. Not only does it function as a preserver of cultural identity, but it also acts as a form of resistance to the cultural, political, and linguistic hegemony of the state. By foregrounding tribal language and oral traditions, Devi elevates them as sites of cultural resistance against the forces that seek to erase them, making them central to her postcolonial critique of the marginalization of Adivasis.

For indigenous communities, language is the primary repository of collective memory, a means through which they connect to their ancestors, heritage, and land. In many of Devi's works, tribal languages are deeply connected to the spiritual and cultural lives of Adivasis. The use of tribal language in Devi's works is not passive; it is an active form of resistance against the colonial and postcolonial state. Tribal languages are positioned as defiant symbols against the hegemonic forces that seek to erase or marginalize indigenous cultures. The colonial history of India involved the imposition of European languages primarily English and Sanskrit on the subjugated peoples of the subcontinent. These languages were tools of colonial domination that positioned

indigenous languages as inferior or backward.

Chotti Munda's use of Mundari a language that is not understood by the landowners or colonial administrators becomes an act of linguistic sovereignty. By continuing to speak in Mundari, Chotti Munda not only resists cultural assimilation but also reasserts the autonomy of his people. This rejection of the dominant language is a refusal to be subjugated, a refusal to allow the colonial and postcolonial forces to control the narrative of Adivasi lives. The act of speaking in tribal languages also signifies defiance against the cultural and epistemological violence that these communities face. Language becomes a weapon a means of contesting the colonial view that indigenous people are primitive or backward. By writing and speaking in indigenous languages, Devi does not just represent the marginalized but actively challenges the legitimacy of the colonial and state power structures that have sought to eradicate these languages.

Mahasweta Devi also uses tribal language as a symbol of community solidarity and collective memory. Unlike individualistic Western narratives, Adivasi languages are often communal, rooted in shared experiences, communal histories, and common struggles. Language is the vessel through which the collective experiences of the tribe its legends, songs, rituals, and stories are transmitted and preserved across generations. In *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*, the tribal characters language is intertwined with their connection to nature and collective memory. Through their language, they articulate a worldview that refuses to be defined by state structures. By preserving their language, Adivasis assert that they belong to a living, breathing community, tied to the earth, history, and one another. This collective memory, passed down through language, becomes a form of survival in the face of external oppression.

Tribal languages are also vehicles for continuing a spiritual legacy. The connection between Adivasi people and their land is sacred; it is reflected in the way language is used to invoke the divine presence in nature. The ritualistic use of language, such as the songs and prayers of tribal communities, becomes a means of maintaining sacred ties to the earth and spiritual ancestors. Devi illustrates how tribal language is closely connected to rituals of resistance and spiritual defiance. Dopdi's silence and her final scream are a rejection of the colonial forces that attempt to dominate her body and mind. Her refusal to speak the language of the oppressor and instead express herself through her body and her scream is an act of spiritual defiance. Through language, Devi challenges the state's ability to control tribal peoples' spiritual and emotional lives, demonstrating how language is not just a tool of cultural survival but a symbol of defiance against state-imposed narratives of subjugation.

CONCLUSION:

Mahasweta Devi's depiction of tribal language in her narratives is a powerful testament to its role as not just a means of communication, but as a vital tool of resistance and cultural survival. Through her portrayal of tribal communities' relationship with language, Devi reveals how it

serves as a vehicle for asserting identity, preserving cultural heritage, and challenging systemic oppression. In her narratives, tribal languages transcend their traditional role, becoming symbols of defiance against colonial and state hegemony. By intertwining oral traditions with written narratives, she bridges the gap between the past and present, ensuring that these languages are not erased but remain alive, active, and empowered.

Furthermore, Devi demonstrates how language is an instrument for resistance against the forces of cultural assimilation, political domination, and economic exploitation. For marginalized communities, especially tribal groups, language is the foundation upon which they rebuild their identity in the face of external forces that seek to undermine their existence. Devi's writing underscores the broader implications of language as a tool for social change and empowerment, enabling marginalized voices to assert their human rights, challenge their oppressors, and reclaim their cultural sovereignty.

Through her work, Devi not only defends the linguistic rights of tribal communities but also provides a universal model for all marginalized groups fighting against oppression. The resilience of tribal languages serves as a reminder that language is not a passive tool but a form of active resistance that shapes and defines the cultural and political struggles of oppressed communities.

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