

## MARGINS THAT SPEAK: SUBALTERN VOICES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES IN MAHASWETA DEVI AND BAMA

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of subaltern voices and counter-narratives in the writings of Mahasweta Devi and Bama. Although the study belongs primarily to literary and cultural analysis, it reads their works through the political economy of caste, gender, land, labour, and social exclusion. Mahasweta Devi's fiction foregrounds Adivasi, tribal, bonded-labour, and dispossessed communities whose exploitation is linked to state power, feudal control, police violence, and capitalist extraction. Bama's writings articulate Dalit Christian women's experience of caste humiliation, religious contradiction, gendered labour, and collective resistance in Tamil society. The study argues that both writers transform literature into a counter-archive of the oppressed. Their texts do not merely represent marginality; they produce alternative knowledge from below. Through characters such as Dopdi Mejhen, Douloti, Sanichari, and Bama's Dalit women narrators, the margins become active sites of speech, critique, and social imagination. The study concludes that Mahasweta Devi and Bama redefine Indian literature by placing subaltern life at the centre of historical, ethical, and economic inquiry.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, counter-narrative, Mahasweta Devi, Bama, caste, gender, Adivasi, Dalit literature, political economy.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The question of subaltern voice occupies a central position in postcolonial and Indian literary studies. Ranajit Guha used the term "subaltern" to indicate social groups subordinated by class, caste, gender, ethnicity, and colonial power, whose agency was often erased from elite historiography [1]. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak later complicated the issue by asking whether the subaltern can speak when dominant institutions control the terms of representation [2]. In Indian literature, this question is not abstract. It is deeply connected with land alienation, caste hierarchy, gendered violence, bonded labour, religious exclusion, and the unequal distribution of economic resources.

Mahasweta Devi and Bama are two major writers who bring these suppressed histories into literary visibility. Mahasweta Devi writes from Bengal but her imagination travels across tribal, peasant, bonded-labour, and insurgent worlds. Her stories such as "Draupadi," "Douloti the Bountiful," "The Breast-Giver," and *Rudali* expose how the poor are consumed by state machinery, feudal patriarchy, and market structures [3], [4]. Bama, writing from the standpoint of Dalit Christian womanhood in Tamil Nadu, creates a powerful literary idiom in *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam*, where caste and gender are not separate categories but mutually reinforcing systems of oppression [5]–[7].

The present study studies how Mahasweta Devi and Bama create counter-narratives from the margins. The term "counter-narrative" is used here to mean a mode of storytelling that contests dominant social myths, official histories, upper-caste morality, patriarchal norms, and developmental claims. Both writers challenge the assumption that the poor, the tribal, the

Dalit, and the female are passive objects of pity. Their characters suffer, but they also observe, judge, resist, mock, remember, and speak. Their literary practice therefore becomes a form of social criticism and a record of subaltern consciousness.

## II. SUBALTERNITY, CASTE, GENDER, AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Subalternity in Mahasweta Devi and Bama cannot be understood only as cultural marginality. It is rooted in material deprivation. The poor are not simply voiceless because they lack language; they are made voiceless because land, education, credit, property, institutional access, and bodily autonomy are denied to them. Guha's subaltern historiography questioned elite-centred nationalism by recovering peasant agency [1]. Spivak, however, warned that even sympathetic representation can reproduce domination if the intellectual speaks over the oppressed [2]. Mahasweta Devi and Bama respond to this dilemma through literary strategies that allow the subaltern body, dialect, memory, and collective experience to interrupt elite discourse.

Mahasweta Devi's fiction reveals how economic exploitation is sustained by violence. In "Douloti the Bountiful," the body of a tribal woman becomes a metaphor for the nation's failure. Douloti is trapped in bonded sexual labour, and her exploitation is connected with debt, caste-like social power, patriarchal control, and the landlord-moneylender nexus [3]. The story rejects the celebratory language of national progress by showing that independence has not freed the most vulnerable from bondage. The political economy of debt becomes a system of bodily extraction.

In Bama's work, caste operates through everyday labour and humiliation. *Karukku* records the narrator's discovery that caste determines touch, food, education, speech, and dignity [5]. *Sangati* extends this experience from individual autobiography to collective Dalit female history [6]. Dalit women in Bama's world work in fields, homes, markets, and informal labour spaces, yet their labour is undervalued and their bodies remain vulnerable to sexual and verbal violence. The economic system depends on their work while the caste system denies them honour. This contradiction is central to Bama's counter-narrative.

## III. MAHASWETA DEVI: ADIVASI RESISTANCE AND THE COUNTER-ARCHIVE OF VIOLENCE

Mahasweta Devi's work is inseparable from her activism among tribal and marginalized communities. Her literary world is populated by Santhals, Lodhas, Shabars, peasants, bonded labourers, sex workers, landless women, and political rebels. She does not present them as decorative symbols of rural poverty. Rather, she shows how state law, police repression, feudal authority, and capitalist accumulation produce their dispossession [8].

"Draupadi" is one of her most powerful stories of subaltern resistance. Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman associated with armed peasant struggle, is captured, tortured, and sexually assaulted by state forces [3]. Yet the story does not end with her defeat. Dopdi refuses shame. Her wounded body becomes a weapon against the male state. By standing naked before Senanayak, she reverses the logic of sexual violence. The state expects the violated woman to hide; Dopdi refuses concealment. Her body speaks where institutional language fails. This moment is not merely symbolic resistance; it is a radical disruption of patriarchal and military power.

In "The Breast-Giver," Jashoda's body is consumed by a household economy that turns motherhood into labour [4]. She becomes a professional mother, feeding the children of an upper-caste household. The story exposes the commodification of female care and the exploitation of reproductive labour. Mahasweta Devi anticipates important feminist economic

questions: Who benefits from women's unpaid or underpaid bodily labour? How does patriarchy convert motherhood into service while denying women autonomy? Jashoda's body becomes the site where caste privilege, domestic economy, and gendered sacrifice converge.

*Rudali* presents another form of counter-narrative. Sanichari, a poor lower-caste woman, is denied the right to mourn her own life's losses, yet she becomes a professional mourner for the rich [9]. The story attacks the hypocrisy of feudal society, where grief itself becomes a paid performance. Sanichari's transformation into a rudali reveals that even emotion is structured by class. The rich can purchase mourning, while the poor are forced to suppress their own pain in order to survive. Mahasweta Devi's irony lies in showing that the marginalized understand social reality more clearly than those who dominate them.

#### **IV. BAMA: DALIT FEMINIST SPEECH AND EVERYDAY COUNTER-NARRATIVE**

Bama's writing marks a decisive moment in Indian Dalit feminist literature. *Karukku* is not a conventional autobiography; it is a fractured testimony of caste, faith, anger, and awakening [5]. The title itself suggests serrated edges, wounds, and spiritual struggle. Bama writes against the sanitized language of dominant literature. Her prose carries the rhythm of Dalit Tamil speech, local idiom, oral memory, and community experience. This linguistic choice is political because it rejects upper-caste literary refinement as the only legitimate form of expression.

In *Karukku*, the narrator's awareness of caste emerges through daily incidents: the carrying of food packets without touching them, humiliation at school, contempt from upper castes, and contradiction within Christian institutions [5]. Bama shows that conversion to Christianity does not automatically abolish caste. Religious spaces reproduce hierarchy through practice, behaviour, and institutional culture. Thus, the text becomes a critique not only of Hindu caste society but also of any religious structure that tolerates inequality.

*Sangati* moves from the individual "I" to the collective "we" [6]. It records the lives of Dalit women whose stories are often excluded from both mainstream feminism and male-centred Dalit discourse. Bama's women quarrel, laugh, labour, desire, suffer, resist, and educate one another. Their speech is full of irony and force. They are not silent victims. They develop survival strategies within oppressive conditions. Through them, Bama constructs a Dalit feminist public sphere grounded in oral narration and shared experience.

*Vanmam* focuses on divisions within Dalit communities and the destructive politics of internal conflict [7]. This is important because Bama does not romanticize the oppressed. She examines how structures of domination can enter marginalized communities and produce rivalry, suspicion, and violence. Her counter-narrative is therefore ethically complex. It criticizes caste oppression from outside while also urging internal solidarity among the oppressed.

#### **V. LANGUAGE, BODY, AND TESTIMONY AS RESISTANCE**

Both Mahasweta Devi and Bama use language as a method of resistance. Mahasweta Devi often incorporates official reports, folk memory, oral speech, and documentary realism. Her fiction reads like a counter-file against the state. The names, locations, and bodies in her stories resist erasure. Spivak's translations and introductions helped bring Mahasweta Devi's work into global postcolonial debate, especially by showing how translation itself becomes an ethical act when dealing with subaltern texts [3].

Bama's language is equally radical. She refuses to polish Dalit experience for upper-caste comfort. The idiomatic energy of her prose asserts the dignity of Dalit speech [5], [6]. In literary terms, this is a rejection of linguistic hierarchy. In social terms, it is a demand that Dalit women's words be heard as knowledge, not merely as complaint. Her narratives show that testimony is not weak evidence. It is a mode of historical truth produced by those excluded from official archives.

The body is another major site of counter-narrative. Dopdi's violated body, Douloti's exploited body, Jashoda's maternal body, Sanichari's labouring body, and Bama's Dalit women's working bodies all reveal the economics of oppression. These bodies are not passive metaphors. They expose the real cost of caste, patriarchy, feudalism, and state violence. The subaltern body becomes a document of history.

## VI. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

Mahasweta Devi and Bama differ in region, language, community location, and narrative form, yet their literary projects converge in significant ways. Mahasweta Devi writes primarily about Adivasi and tribal dispossession, bonded labour, state violence, and feudal exploitation. Bama writes from within Dalit Christian womanhood, emphasizing caste humiliation, gendered labour, religious hypocrisy, and community assertion. Mahasweta Devi's counter-narrative often emerges through confrontation with the state and landlord power; Bama's emerges through memory, speech, and collective Dalit female consciousness.

Both writers reject elite humanitarian pity. Their texts do not ask the reader merely to feel sorry for the marginalized. They demand structural recognition. Poverty is not treated as accident; it is shown as an outcome of historical and institutional arrangements. This is where the economic dimension becomes crucial. Landlessness, debt, labour exploitation, low wages, lack of education, and social exclusion are not background details; they are the very mechanisms through which subalternity is produced.

Both writers also challenge mainstream feminism. Mahasweta Devi shows that gender oppression cannot be separated from class, tribe, state power, and labour. Bama shows that feminism without caste analysis remains incomplete. Their works therefore anticipate intersectional reading, although their political force comes from lived Indian realities rather than imported theoretical vocabulary [10].

## VII. CONCLUSION

Mahasweta Devi and Bama transform the literary margin into a speaking centre. Their writings challenge the silence imposed by caste society, patriarchal morality, state violence, religious hypocrisy, and economic exploitation. Mahasweta Devi creates a counter-archive of Adivasi, tribal, peasant, and labouring lives, where the oppressed confront the institutions that seek to erase them. Bama creates a Dalit feminist narrative world in which everyday humiliation is converted into speech, memory, anger, humour, and collective strength.

The phrase "margins that speak" therefore captures the central achievement of both writers. Their characters do not merely appear in literature as objects of representation; they alter the moral and political terms of representation itself. They compel readers to recognize that subaltern voices are not absent from history. They are suppressed by dominant structures and must be heard through forms of writing that respect their language, pain, labour, and agency. In this sense, Mahasweta Devi and Bama remain indispensable to Indian literary studies, subaltern studies, Dalit feminism, and the broader study of social justice.

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