

(Re)reading, (re)constructing and re-interpreting India's Colonial History: An Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi*

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's handling of colonial history in the biography titled *The Queen of Jhansi* is based not only on the archival documents of 1857, the year that witnessed India's first battle for independence from colonial domination, but on oral history, myths, legends, poems, songs and collective memory of the people of Bundelkhand. Using these multiple sources she re-reads, re-constructs and re-interprets the life and (her) story of the queen of Jhansi. Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi still lives in the hearts of the people of Bundelkhand. The present paper critically analyzes the text and locates it within Mahasweta Devi's vast literary canvas and her commitment to foreground the subaltern point of view.

Keywords: subaltern, history, domination, resistance, immortality.

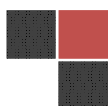
In his famous definition of postmodernism Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (*The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv). Postmodernism and deconstruction theory ushers in a paradigm shift in literary theorising and critical thinking. Literary, critical focus shifts to “mininarratives” instead of “grandnarratives”. Distinction between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ art dissolves. History is seen not as record of absolute truth that is sacrosanct but as perspective based. Hence, location, context, praxis assume as much importance as content. It alters and shapes the content. Mahasweta Devi’s handling of colonial history in the biography titled *The Queen of Jhansi* is based not only on the archival documents of 1857, the year that witnessed India’s first battle for independence from colonial domination, but on oral history, myths, legends, poems, songs and collective memory of the people of Bundelkhand. Using these multiple sources she re-reads, re-constructs and re-interprets the life and (her) story of the queen of Jhansi.

In order to justly portray the legendary queen of Jhansi, Mahasweta Devi, critically examines literary records and documented history. She notices suppression of facts and erasure of important details related to the revolt of 1857. She travels to Jhansi to (re)read the available documents, (re)construct the legendary queen who lived in Jhansi. Mahasweta Devi prioritises people’s account of the queen over documented evidences, as India’s colonial history that was handed down to us by the colonizers, was largely written by English historians and hence fractured by biases- Imperial, Racial and Eurocentric biases.

Mahasweta Devi, as she herself points out, has “always been driven by a strong sense of history” (321). She writes “histories from below” (Ludden 15). In her writings Mahasweta Devi presents the subaltern point of view. According to Mahasweta Devi, “To evaluate a war in history one has to take into account the views of the people who pay for that war; emotionally, physically and financially” (320-321). In the Appendix to the text titled *The Queen Of Jhansi* (translated from Bengali by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta) Mahasweta Devi connects this work to her later works of repute such as *Amritosanchay*, *Andharmanik*, ‘Stanadayini’ in her commitment to revive, retrieve and explore “people’s version of history” (320).

Mahasweta Devi’s major works such as *BashaiTudu* (1990), *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2002), *Mother of 1084* (1997), *Rudali* (1997), *Titu Mir* (2004), *The glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* (2003) deal with exploitation of the tribal, marginalised people. In *Aesthetics of Protest: A Study of the Works of Mahasweta Devi* Satpal Singh observes, “The Fictional world of Mahasweta Devi centres around the simple joys and sorrows of the marginalized; their exploitation and sufferings and conditions of abject poverty in which they are forced to survive and at the same time their struggle to survive against all odds. Her fictions are a virtual kaleidoscope of Indian subaltern lives; a close perusal of her work provides an actual and valuable glimpse of the underprivileged communities in India. They are a reliable barometer of human response to social forces and their effects” (12).

The word subaltern percolated into academic discussions as a result of the achievements of Subaltern Studies Collective. Borrowing the term ‘subaltern’ from Antonio Gramsci’s notion of subalternity, Ranajit Guha points out the elitist bias of the Historiography of Indian Nationalism:



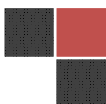
The Historiography of Indian Nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism- colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism...sharing the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness-nationalism-which confirmed this process were exclusively and predominantly elite achievements. In the colonialist and neo-colonialist historiographies these achievements are credited to British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, institutions and culture; in the nationalist and neo-nationalist writings-to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas (1).

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" critiqued the objectives of the Subaltern Studies Collective from the crucial perspective of gender thereby ushering in a shift of gaze from the male subaltern to the female subaltern. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's translations of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*, *Imaginary Maps* have made Mahasweta Devi's powerful texts accessible to readers who do not know Bengali and have made her famous worldwide. Being an activist, Mahasweta Devi lived in close contact with tribals and indigenous people of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Bihar. In an interview with Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, she mentions their long history of oppression and struggle. She cites the *Ramayana* as containing evidence of their eviction from their original homelands to the outskirts of mainstream culture. She points out the social superiority of the tribals as the tribals always had widow remarriage, fraternal polyandry, community obligations. Devi suggests that Draupadi might have been a tribal woman as she was black skinned. She mentions that South Indian tribals view Sita not as a human being but as nature (Devi, *Imaginary Maps* i-ii). Thus, Mahasweta Devi locates the presence of tribals since antiquity and points out the superiority of their understanding of life and nature. Through her works she endeavours to bring the margin to the centre.

Mahasweta Devi foregrounds the marginalised sections of society. Jashoda, Douloti, Gangor, Dopdi Mejhen are some of her path breaking creations. Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman involved in Naxalbari agitation, deserves special mention as she is a subaltern woman with both voice and agency. After her gang rape in police custody she refuses to clean up, cloth herself and uses her ravaged body to register her protest/ to "counter" her tormentors:

Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? ...There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me-come on, counter me-? Draupadi pushes Sennayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid (Devi, *Draupadi* 36-37).

The strength, impact and ferocity of Dopdi's voice may be compared to Lakshmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi's historic utterance " 'Meri Jhansi doonginahin.' 'I will not give up my Jhansi'" (Devi, 68). The East India Company had challenged her claim to the throne of Jhansi as protector of Damodar Rao, her adopted son. She could sense their Imperial might yet the ferocity, courage and passion in her voice marked her resistance. Lakshmi Bai's historic utterance was the "first and only protest" (68) uttered by rulers of Indian kingdoms at that time.



The historical queen may have died while fighting against the colonizers but the people of Buldelkhand sincerely believe in her immortality. If challenged with disbelief they do not jump up in protest. They merely state their conviction and belief. “ ‘*Rani margay nahouni, abhi to Jindahou*’ ” - the Queen isn't dead, she still lives amidst the rocks and soil of Buldelkhand (Devi xv). They sing of her glory while at work:

She made soldiers out of soil
And swords out of wood
She picked mountains and made horses,
And off she rode to Gwalior (Devi xv)

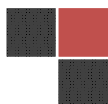
In the poems, songs and legends of her land she is forever alive. For the commoners of Buldelkhand the Rani of Jhansi is not merely a “page in the history” (Devi, xv) of our Nation. She is forever alive providing them with strength, fortitude and courage as they boldly face the multiple hardships of their ordinary lives.

Mahasweta Devi begins her text by tracing the lineage of the royal family of Jhansi. She also traces the Maharashtrian heritage, upbringing of Lakshmibai (Manikarnika before marriage to Gangadhar Rao) and her proximity as a child with Peshwa Bajirao II. Rani Lakshmibai's husband Gangadhar Rao came to the throne of Jhansi after the death of her brother Raghunath Rao. Gangadhar Rao had no direct heir to the throne as Lakshmibai's minor son did not live beyond three months. In absence of a legal heir to the throne he adopted his five year old relative (distant grandson) Ananda Rao as his son. But the Englishmen did not accept the legality of this adoption. They annexed Jhansi citing the Doctrine of Lapse as a law in favour of their move.

Lakshmibai did not immediately take up arms against the British. She tried to explain the legality of her claim. She wrote two ‘kharitas’ addressed to the English and even provided supporting documents to validate her claim to the throne. She cited cases where the Englishmen had accepted adopted children as rightful claimants to the throne. However, all her claims were ruthlessly rejected by the English without much consideration. These letters reveal her prudence and establish her as an able administrator who knew her job and the law of the land well enough to govern her subjects.

Lakshmibai received some help from Major Ellis, the deputy political representative of the Company. Ellis' respect for the queen was seen in perverse light and a novel titled *The Rane* was written to malign the queen. In the prejudiced, racial, Eurocentric gaze of the colonizer, Rani of Jhansi was an Indian widow. Hence, it was easy to see her as sexually available woman and base a novel on her alleged relationship with Major Ellis. They cared little about her position, lineage and respect as she was viewed not as a respectable queen but as a colonised woman. The Oriental woman has always been an object of sexual curiosity for the colonizers. As Edward Said argues in his seminal work *Orientalism*, such construction of the Orient as Europe's Other enabled them to construct their idea of Selfhood and also provided ideological justification for their act of colonization (Nayar 160-163).

Adding insult to injury, the Englishmen confiscated Jhansi, made the revered queen accept a humiliating meagre pension of five thousand rupees a month and also made her pay for her husband's past debts amounting to thirty six thousand rupees. English historians have also criticised this move made by the Company. Mahasweta Devi quotes T. Rice Holmes' views:



If the government had not called upon her to pay her late husband's debts out of her pension, a meagre 6000 pounds per year, Central India would have never had an uprising (Devi 81-82)

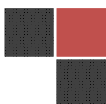
Thus, English historians criticised the act as an example of faulty governance that was responsible in triggering unrest and uprising in Central India. They made no effort to present the perspective of the queen, the insult and injustice done to her did not find mention in the archives of colonial history.

Several factors accelerated the change of political climate of Jhansi. Opening of a slaughterhouse in the middle of the city without caring for the religious sentiments of the people was an example of racism and intolerance; constant preaching of Christian missionaries that native religion, education is "false" and terrible economic condition of the natives which made landless farmers join the army are some of the reasons which breed a mood of discontent and tension. Holy men, ascetics and fakirs counselled the people that time has come to revolt against the British. The uprising became a mass movement. Chapatis and lotus petals were used to send codified signals to people. The introduction of the Enfield rifle contributed in worsening the situation as the bullet paper had to be bitten off with the teeth before loading the gun. 19th Regiment revolted in Baharampur on 26 February. Mangal Pande shot Sergeant major Hughson igniting the rebellion which "shook the foundations of the British Empire for two whole years" (Devi 105). The Englishmen made attempts to write off the rebellion after managing to douse the flames of the rebellion. Almost all important documental evidence, letters related to the revolt was destroyed to suppress the impact and magnitude of the rebellion.

Mahasweta Devi does not view the revolution of 1857 as an isolated event. She connects it to other rebellions carried out by "ordinary agricultural people" (Devi 93) such as rebellion at Bareilly in 1816, the Kol Revolt of 1831-32, several uprisings in Chhotanagpur and Palamau by the tribals residing in these regions, Faraiji rebellion in Barasat, the Faridpur rebellion of 1847 led by Dudu Mian, the Mopla uprisings of 1849, 1851-52 and 1855 and the Santhat Revolt of 1855-56.

The Englishmen were well aware of the military uprising in Jhansi and plan to massacre the colonizers. The queen sent her palace guards to protect the officers and their families. But these guards joined the rebellion. The rebels carried out the rebellion hailing Lakshmibai as their ruler. Their slogan "the reign belongs to Lakshmibai / And Jhansi belongs to her" (113) made her accountable for the massacre of the English in Jhansi though she did not take part in it. Lakshmibai took up the reins of administration as there was no one to protect Jhansi from internal strife and external aggression of neighbouring states such as Orchha in absence of the Company. She was a good administrator and ruler. Hindus and Muslims were given equal importance in her army. She organised a women's troop and made women warrior fight at par with men. She did not shy away from public view. She was an able warrior who wore a Pathan style outfit and joined her forces riding her mare Sarangi and leading from the front. Her cannon Karakbijli was pulled by elephants in battles. Her dress code was practical and made room for free movement in warfare. It was a departure from the usual navari saree but traditional.

The queen showed deep respect to women. She introduced *Haridra Kumkum* ceremony to show respect to women. Women from Brahman, kshatriya and vaishya castes joined this tilak ceremony. She showed deep reverence towards her family deity of



Mahalakshmi. Using religion, culture and tradition as cementing force between her subjects, she gained popularity and respect. Her palanquin bearers were women. She gave agency and equality to women. She served free meal from her temple and tended to the hunger pangs of the poor. She preserved and maintained the palace library. Ancient scriptures, handwritten manuscripts, Bhagavadgita were preserved in her library.

Mahasweta Devi notes that distinguished English historians such as Rice-Holmes labelled the uprising of Central India as 'Maratha Uprising' but in reality it was a heterogeneous group comprising of Bundalas, Baghelas, Rajputs, Afghans and Pathans. Common people of Buldelkhand provided food, shelter and participated in exchange of information.

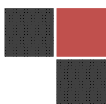
Prolonged battle with Hugh Ross weakened Jhansi over time. Eventually the palace was set on fire. Every individual of Jhansi fought for their land. The "ground became slippery with blood" (Devi 208). The English troop committed heinous atrocities which were recorded to show their Imperial might. Violence became a spectacle and human slaughter continued for two years. Racial hatred made them enjoy and chronicle their act of barbarity. The queen of Jhansi escaped from the palace with her minor son to join the rebellion. In Gwalior, she fought alongside Tatia Topi, took charge of the crucial Kotah-ki-Sarai. She succumbed to the injuries she received while fighting prolonged battle against the English. Her loyal followers Ramchandra Rao, Kashi Kunbin and Gul Mohammad performed her last rites. Her spirit and resolve still fascinates Indians. Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's poem "Jhansi Ki Rani" celebrates her valour and courage. People of Buldelkhand still read 'Lakshmi Bai Raso' in their homes to honour their beloved queen (Devi, 130). She has achieved immortality as her name and fame lives in the legends, folklores and songs that people sing while at work or at ceremonies:

That Queen, so very great was she,
Said she would never let go of Jhansi.
She fought for the sake of her soldiers,
And took bullets herself.
As long as water in India flows
The Queen of Jhansi will live (Devi 69).

Thus, in the biography titled *The Queen of Jhansi* Mahasweta Devi re-interpreted, re-constructed the historical queen of Jhansi by foregrounding people's view of history. (Her) story also includes people perception of their beloved queen. She lives in their songs and in their faith - '*Rani margay nahouni, abhi to Jindahou*' (Devi xv)

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