

## Mapping History in Fiction through Orality in Mahasweta Devi's *The Armeniun Champa Tree*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper establishes how the novel *The Armeniun Champa Tree* attacks the cemented belief that fiction is in direct contradiction to history, as it is apparently a harbinger of falsehood. In rewriting and refocusing history from the vantage of the subaltern, the paper also highlights Mahasweta Devi's endeavour to assert the importance of Orality and to sensitize the masses about the marginalized sections of the society with special reference to aboriginals. The paper, consequently, ascertains the power of oral sources, the need to signify the importance of literature vis-a-vis history, Devi as a subaltern historian and how she attempts to seek the voice of the subaltern.

**KEYWORDS:** Mahasweta Devi, Subaltern, orality, aboriginals, history

In the onset of the novel, *The Armeniun Champa Tree*, Mahasweta Devi proposes the intent of the work which is to write an unheard story with emphasis on story. The work serves to enforce Devi's deliberations on what is history, its relations to Orality, and the need to rehabilitate the marginalised existences of the subalterns. In order to reflect these significant issues which are emblematic of her writing, Devi has narrated a story that encompasses these tales into one. The interesting thing to note is that unlike her uncompromising fiction, this work is written in mild overtones echoing a new facet of Devi's writing style. While investigating these aspects evident in the novel, the paper highlights Mahasweta Devi's representation of a tribal boy called Buno and through him how she reflects the era of '76 that witnessed episodes as: Bengal famine, surge in dacoity, prevalence of religious superstitions and continuance of feudal totalitarianism. In the backdrop of these events, Mahasweta Devi has narrated a simple story of a tribal child, while employing her distinctive style of resurrecting the individual in history. In doing so, she has put forward a question which tempts introspection and also acts as a clarion call for those who believe that only written texts carry the truth and not the sources which are oral in nature. Devi writes:

...You have not read about these things anywhere. Not everything is written down in books. No book contains the story of Mato of the Buno quarters, of his goat Arjun and of the old padre sahib of the church. Though not written down, it is all true.

*(The Armeniun Champa Tree 2)*

While articulating these concerns over Orality and its distinction with written histories, various critics have highlighted the “dialogic relationship” between oral sources and written discourse, in saying how they should be analysed as “complementary categories” and not “mutually exclusive categories” (*Folklore as Discourse* 93). In the field of Subaltern Studies, this approach towards Orality has also found new grounds, keen engagements, and studies to discern methods and methodologies for reading of oral texts, and investigating its tools. The objective being to highlight the need to resurrect the importance of Orality as it has been overshadowed by the monopoly of written texts. This can be undone by allowing analysis of oral sources in tandem with written texts than declaring supremacy of one over the other. To attack this notion of elitism, and manifest a complementary exercise of oral sources and written texts, this work stands the test of such polemical issues. While further, setting the tone of the novel, and engaging the readers to discover a new facet of writing history, Devi has addressed her claim:

An old pandit once asked me, Who says these are true?  
This pandit does not believe in anything that is not written  
in books or palm-leaf manuscripts or inscribed on stone.  
Even the bookworms in his house are highly learned, and  
as for his cats and dogs, they're great scholars.

*(The Armenium Champa Tree 2-3)*

The import of these scathing remarks can be understood in Mahasweta Devi's active role in signifying the importance of orality, in that she is critical of the views that call it inconsequential or contradict its usage. Knowing that the stories of the tribal are generally oral records as in the folklores, myths, legends or simple narratives as this work, hence if Orality is underestimated, that would threaten the oral culture of the aboriginals of India. The basic and the most significant advantage of orality is in its direct association with tribal culture, and hence the tribal himself. Orality, allows the listener to hear the subaltern speak, in the process of which the subaltern is empowered to re-enforce his identity. In discerning the primacy of individual representation over representation which is far removed from the epicentre of tribal ethos, the author has relied on the functionality of Oral tradition and oral history. This emphasis is established knowing how tribal literature is generated in orality so if the historians decline to accept it as a legitimate field, that will invariably relegate tribal literature to the margins. In the academia, various arguments and issues are raised to ascertain the relevance and veracity of Orality, with key concerns being:

...the role oral discourse plays in the construction of the genealogy of identity of a particular group or community. There is no doubt that oral discourse gives a voice to the marginalised, subaltern identities even within a dominant, written discourse. But the role it plays in the construction of the history of a community without a written discourse is paramount. It does not simply provide valuable information for constructing history of such a community, but also helps to provide crucial space for constructing the onslaught of a dominant discourse.

*(Folklore as Discourse 93)*

Consequently, Devi is vehement in her stance to write a story recovered from her repository of oral lore and as a result begins her simple story with a formidable allegiance to oral sources. The

target of the author is to create a space for tribal literature and hence construct subaltern history which rectifies official or dominant history. As she claims in regard to the story:

But I think all this is definitely true. Many be I haven't seen Mato with my own eyes. But surely, somewhere, there is a romantic boy who turns positive on rainy day? Gets angry on a cloudy evening...or desperately love an abandoned, vagabond goat? If so, why can't Mato exist?

*(The Armeniun Champa Tree 3)*

In these lines, Mahasweta Devi wishes to state that Orality that she has incorporated in writing this particular work has tabled a microcosmic representation of an Indian village by depicting the social hierarchies and other systems as well as institutions which were established during the year '76. This assertion can be analysed by observing Spivak's critique where she deconstructs the polemics of history vs orality. Spivak has claimed:

(Mahasweta Devi's prose bends) into full-fledged "historical fiction, "history imagined into fiction...Indeed, her repeated claim to legitimacy is that she researches thoroughly everything she presents in fiction. Fiction of this sort relies for its effect on its "effect of the real". The plausibility of a (tribal boy called Mato) is that they could have existed as subalterns in a specific moment imagined and tested by orthodox assumptions.

*(In Other Worlds 224)*

Understandably, Mahasweta Devi has weaved an illustrative story of Mato – the tribal boy while keeping with the truth of a characteristic Indian village - the emblematic aspects of little tribal children, the irrefutable issues of poverty, starvation, bonded labour, and other facets which give a symbolic impression of a colonial India. In tracing a story of Mato – a tribal boy or any tribal boy, Devi's objective has been:

...using her considerable experience of oral history and grassroot realities ... (Devi has) weaved stories which educate future adults about an India very few of them would otherwise know.

*(The Armeniun Champa Tree 1)*

Here, the great writer intends to sensitise the mainstream of a society which from colonial to postcolonial era has remained in the fringes. And instead of telling the facts, she weaves the facts into a narrative that makes this novel an aesthetic as well as a social realistic venture to foster awareness. Further, in examining the epistemological advantages of Orality as an instrument of rectifying history, and thereby empowering the subaltern identity by including the subaltern, many debates shed light on its pros and cons and often negate it by emphasising on its demerits than on its merits. In the light of such tenuous perusals of Orality, which condemn it as illegitimate, employing Orality in narrating a historical paper or historical fiction is then naturally deemed as a controversial project. After all if Orality is hugely disparaged as a source of authentic record, using it can either discount the work as paltry or persuade the critics or the masses to take no note of it at all. In the wake of such polemical stances on Orality, Devi's role as harbouring and reinforcing its worth, its significance and preservation comes across as a powerful project to resurrect Orality from

the shadows of contempt and disregard. To add more, in re-enforcing the objective of the novel taken in the paper, and its impact on rehabilitating history, the role of Orality is further cemented as not something to be brushed aside as inconsequential. It was owing to Orality, Devi has been able to correct the damaging misrepresentation of the tribes and thereby attack the vicious import of colonial history and its blind appropriation by native elites. Critics in this regard have attested as to how Orality serves to expose these fatalities of incorrect histories, by launching an inclusive model of history – subaltern history:

(Orality is) equally relevant in arena of history in general and the Indian history in particular. The oral tradition of the history must be factored in historical research, and its use in the ancient Indian history and that of the world in general would provide new direction and insight. Moreover (and most importantly), it would unravel many mysteries and conspiracies that have been doing rounds since the long time.

*(The Greatest Farce of History 78)*

Orality, hence, as analysed above rectifies the nonconformity of history with truth, and ensures a subaltern account of the marginalised is represented to rid the records of fatal stigmas, libels and slanders. In doing so, Orality empowers the subaltern - in listening to the subaltern, listening to his own story in his own words and in his own oral tradition. As Muthukumaraswamy states:

There is no doubt that oral discourse gives a voice to the marginalised, subaltern identities even within a dominant, written discourse...It does not simply provide valuable information for constructing history of such community, but also helps to provide crucial space for countering the onslaught of a dominant discourse.

*(Folklore as Discourse 93)*

In saying so, he further claims that Orality should not be considered as a monopoly on evidences or sources for writing history, as the reasoning which critics wish to table is that Orality does not supersede written materials, and neither does the latter. It is in conjunction both of them work to substantiate and corroborate each other and result in a subaltern record. That is, "...oral and written discourses are not mutually exclusive categories, rather, they should be treated as complementary categories" (*Folklore 93*). It is because of these observations, that Orality is gaining recognition by which one can know the past and how it should be employed along with written histories than following a one-sided train of evidences and placing the burden of true history on its head.

Beginning her story, Mahasweta Devi apprises us of the figure of Janakinath Singh, a machiavellian landlord, who plays tricks with the aboriginals to steal their lands, their harvest and even their lives so they work for him for generations at end. He loans paddy during famine, but then next year exacts cash or paddy from the poor farmers and if they are unable to pay, he seizes their lands and their labour. In presenting the story of this landlord, Devi intends to articulate the feudal set up of Indians society and its treacherous exploitation of the subalternized communities such as the tribals. She further represents the life of the dacoits as to why they were forced to turn to this life for making ends meet. Through the figure of Mato's older brother, Chhibilas, Devi describes that these dacoits, as unknown to the masses, were originally recruited as army personnel in the

military of Nawab Ali Vardi. The objective was to fend off attack of the *bargis* (Maratha invaders) or the Afghans. But after the colonial invasion of India the company rulers terminated their employment and as these men only knew how to fight, they were not skilled of farming, hence became dacoits. Besides, as they claim, in such dire times, “how can one support a family without dacoity?” (*The Armeniun Champa Tree* 6). Further, the author represents the social hierarchy of the village with detailed representation of the Buno tribes, their work, life and culture when she writes:

...Bunos go and clear underbrush, build thatched shelters, collect firewood and banana leaves. They carry piles of spinach-brinjal-radish-pumpkin-gourd-chillies in yoked baskets, on their shoulders...it is the Bunos who tend to the oxen, give them water and fodder. There are other jobs too. Suppose someone wants to get a road constructed in the name of his mother or father or guru, or a well dug, or a quay built for the bathers in the Ganga. These jobs belong to the Bunos.

(*The Armeniun Champa Tree* 9)

In these explicit details, Devi has striven to represent the facts which to any other writer would seem trivial, but not to the author. It is the attribute of her historic technique that she highlights the individual in the history, by portraying how a human influences an event than how an event sways a human. Spivak has also attested to this mode of historicizing as adopted by Devi when she opines, “(Devi) has always been gripped by the individual in history” (*In Other Worlds* 243). Hence, in the work we find Devi's characteristic emphasis on the persona of the individuals mentioned and how they stir the plot along to denouement. It is her adherence to Orality that has allowed her to capture the individual in history. This in turn renders the story of the tribal as if it is an autobiography of the subaltern. Orality as discerned above, fortifies the identity of the tribal, and in doing so it also attacks the elitist representation of the subaltern that is perpetuated as a gospel truth in the historical texts. As the elitist representations in history are considered to be a model of absolute truth, the need of Orality to subvert thereby resurrect the subaltern record hence becomes indispensable and matter of urgency. In this regard, it has been stated:

Oral history, when represented as an autobiographical account of a subaltern subject, often diverges from historical representation constructed from an elitist perspective and thus sheds light on aspects outside the vision of official history. It is thus arguable that oral history may produce alternative historical narratives that challenge dominant historical view.

(*Gender, Discourse and the Self* 197)

These statements can be reiterated with respect to Orality and tribal literature of India. It has been established that tribal literature is rendered in oral form, and in realizing the trivialization of Orality, one can invariably recognize the trivialisation of tribal literature. In speaking about the repository of tribal literature which is spoken than written, G.N. Devy has also stated:

Tribal literature, in spite of its rich traditions, has been subjected to gross cultural neglect just because it is oral. If the visibility of tribal languages has remained somewhat

poor, those languages need not be blamed for want of creativity. The responsibility rests with the received idea that literature, in order to be literature, has to be written and printed as well. After the print technology started impacting Indian languages during the 19th century, the fate of the oral became precarious. A gross cultural neglect had to be faced by the languages which remained outside the print technology.

(“Wealth of Wisdom” *The Hindu*)

That is, due to the oral nature of tribal lore it is deemed inconsequential which hence also undermines the creative power of it. Further, the import of the critic is to highlight the contemporary reality of oral literatures and how they have been marginalised with the preference and supremacy given to written texts. According to the critic, the oral literature is being smothered into the realms of amnesia not because they do not carry creative significance, but that they are oral in nature. Highlighting Mahasweta Devi’s role to legitimise Orality thereby establishing the significance of tribal literature, G.N. Devy has aptly commented:

What is the source of her remarkable memory, the frightening economy of her words, that great simplicity which having distributed life between necessary and the unnecessary, shuns all that is unnecessary? Is she an adivasi taken to literature, or a writer drawn to the adivasi?

(“The adivasi Mahasweta” 2004)

Devi, undoubtedly, embodies the universal truth of an “an adivasi taken to literature, or a writer drawn to the adivasi”. Hence, it can be discerned that the simplicity of Devi’s language, her concern for the tribal, and her remarkable oral knowledge about the tribal has aided her to present a symbolic demonstration of the tribal life. In the light of the above mentioned words of G.N. Devy, the work also highlights the extreme discrimination rather violence against oral literature and how even in the contemporary scenario, Orality is deemed as tenuous, inconsequential and detrimental to the production of knowledge. It is this adverse mentality that needs revisiting, and in order to mobilise such a radical change, Mahasweta Devi’s emphasis on Orality prove immensely substantial.

In the work, *The Armeniun Champa Tree* Mahasweta Devi’s portrayal of Mato’s mother as a spirited tribal woman and as a leader of her tribe, whom everyone calls a “tigress... the Bunos cannot do without her... (She) is a natural leader” is an attempt to eulogise the tribal authority (*The Armeniun Champa Tree* 14). It is Mato’s mother who does not keep quiet when it comes to the sufferings of her tribe. In challenging the local landlord Janakinath, she does not flinch to report on his conniving practices of fleecing the tribes and other communities as she roars:

All the Bunos and Bagdis are furious with you...or are the self-styled mahajans safe from the fear of sin? (She further indicts him for grabbing their lands) ... you give us paddy and rice during the famine and scheme to swallow up our lands, hearts and homes.

(*The Armeniun Champa Tree* 14)

Throughout the novel, Devi highlights the relationship between the elite and the subaltern in order to depict each in a constant flux than isolation and consequently, the author discerns the inherent binary opposition between elite and subaltern. In her novel, it is noticeable that one cannot just stamp this elite-subaltern opposition on any text because, “these binarisms of colonizer-colonized, western-non-western, domination-resistance help initiate the analysis of power but also constrain the study of the ways in which power is engaged, contested, deflected and appropriated” (*Reading* 216). Binarism as highlighted in the novel has its own myriad causes, repercussions and codifications and cannot be singularly addressed as elite-subaltern. Mahasweta hence has eloquently taken into consideration the historical, the social and economical factors that contributed into the making of this opposition instead of ‘mechanistically’ rendering the social strata of the novel into the categories of elite and subaltern (*Reading* 224). In the novel, hence, we find how in mapping this subaltern history of the tribals, Mahasweta has vehemently exposed the ploys of the elite such as the feudal landlords who ritualistically oppress the subaltern. While depicting these tales with as much adherence to truth as possible, Devi comes across as a subaltern historian who places the subaltern as a maker of his story. It is pertinent to note how Ranajit Guha has emphasized on this cardinal rule of writing a historiography in the second volume of *Subaltern Studies*, when he says:

the subaltern is the maker of his own history and the architect of his destiny...the subaltern groups are to write that history and oppose elitism through the detailed intensity of their scrutiny of the past record no matter how great the difficulties posed by the recovery of information about the past. (*Reading* 192)

In observing these precepts of subaltern history, one can draw three delineations; first, subaltern should be the maker of his history which should be deemed as evident; second, historians have to ensure to write their history as Mahasweta Devi has done by pursuing written as well as oral accounts to set the stage for the subaltern to speak; third this recovery of the past must be diligently pursued as any half-hearted and questionable methods of history writings also serves to further the devious scheme of discrimination. While following these paradigms of history-writing as proposed by subaltern critics, Devi, hence, continues her story.

The village of Malto is visited by a “kapalik” – tantric mystic who makes an ill-foreboding that unless a goat is sacrificed, the village will be inundated, “There will be a great flood. The big rives Padma and Bhagirati, and even our small Khorey will swell with tides and waves likes the ocean” (*The Armeniun Champa Tree* 7). Hearing this proclamation, Mato realises his pet goat would be sacrificed and so he flees with it in the pitch of the night. He makes his way for the Armeniun church, which in the novel has been represented as a haven and its padre as a benign saviour. In Mato’s precarious journey, traced by Devi, one can symbolise in it an escape of the tribal from the vicious claws of social hierarchy, feudalism, and religious intransigence. Mato despite being weak because of his congenital condition is nevertheless determined to save his goat and reach the church before the rigid society of the elite overpowers him. In his strenuous journey through the jungle, the waters and other equally perilous places, Devi apprises the readers of other characters, their stories, and how each play a significant role in testing the courage of the tribal boy. Despite all the hazardous obstacles, Mato finds himself in front of the church and before he is caught, he enters without any fear or apprehension. The old padre on hearing the ruckus, steps out, and Devi notes how the mob which had gathered outside still do not budge and demand that the boy be returned for the sacrificial puja:

(the padre) After listening to the whole story, he said, I won’t hand him over at any cost. Besides, once a beast is

inside the Church, it no longer remains fit for sacrifice to your Mother goddess... It's you who say so.

*(The Armenium Champa Tree 38)*

In dispersing the crowd with his timely alertness, Devi notes that from that day onwards, Mato takes shelter in the church. In this manner, Devi has implicitly imparted the boy with a freedom of choice, as he flees from his rigid society rather than succumb to it. The writer also comments rather satirically that no floods ever came in the village hence highlighting her attack at the superstitious fabrication of religious ideology. In the end, Mato's mother comes to collect him, but Devi leaves it open-ended whether Mato decides to go or not. However, whether the boy leaves or not, Devi has left it open-ended. All she says is that the boy was not understood by anyone perhaps indicating how the mainstream is similarly unaware of the stories of the tribal world. What happens to the old padre and the tribal boy, Devi again leaves it open-ended. But in the conclusion of the novel, the readers can make an intelligent guess that perchance Devi has imparted them immortality by suggesting how the Armenium Champa Tree has captured the spirit of the padre and the tribal. In doing so, the tree hence appears or gives an impression of carrying the 'story' or essence of the two. Devi notes:

At times the tree looks like an old padre. As if he is standing silently with his head bent, and his hand resting upon somebody's head.

*(The Armenium Champa Tree 39)*

Through such a vivid description, Devi has reiterated her goal by giving a sublime imagery of a tree. The paper establishes the existence of the tree as a symbol for Orality which continues to grow, flourish, thereby, symbolising the ever-resonant story of Mato and various tribals. Further, the tree as a symbolic imagery for Orality continues to tell the story of the tribal boy Mato and highlights the role of Orality in furthering the narratives of the aboriginals through ages to come. Is the tree a symbol for Orality, or can it serve as a symbol of tribal history, these are questions which can have various interpretations, but in the paper, this assessment has been drawn to emphasise the importance of oral forms as vindicated by the author herself.

In the discussion so far, hence it has been founded that Orality serves two functions, and in understanding these functions, one can recognize the demand of its legitimatisation as a tool of history. The first function being to "counter official versions and the sovereign status they implicitly give to European epistemologies"; the second being to "extract counter-narratives of important anti-colonial events, document unheralded and heroic popular participation in them...(and how these) small voices may counter the weight of official discourse because they remain undomesticated and unsullied by 'state-managed historiography and the 'monopolizing force of official knowledge'" (*The Oral History Reader 374*).

Realizing these key issues, it can be ascertained that Orality apprehends the apparent irrefutability of colonial epistemologies, and excavates the buried truths of subaltern classes hitherto which were stamped as untruths, and paltry collections of knowledge. And as Mahasweta Devi claims, "the oral tradition is a vital source of Indian history... (Devi) acknowledges that it ought to be preserved as a historical document" (*The Radical Humanist 36*). In the light of above observations, the importance of tracing oral history and hence tracing the historical account of the subaltern can be attested. The author in doing so has sensitized the mainstream, and apprehended the falsified accounts that are stereotypically stamped on the tribals. In *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*, for instance,



Mahasweta has declared, “Munda (tribal) language has no script. So they turn significant events into story, and hold them as saying, as song. That’s their history as well” (xii). It has been a general technique of history-writing in India to ignore the vast collection of oral lore in favour of written scripts as the author claims:

India’s history, as it is written today, suffers from the gross negligence. Unwritten oral folk material is equally important as a source of history . . . Today I am doubly convinced that the local elements, the vast wealth of locally written and oral folk material are not only rich in language and thought, but are also important historical elements. We...have not used this vast legacy of myths, beliefs, social laws, narration by professional story tellers, ballads and songs. The folk material and the common people’s version of events are assets to literature. In using them – and I do not use them as decoration – I have found salvation.

*(Chotti Munda 16)*

As reflected in these words, Devi has attempted to empower the subaltern, by digging the “vast legacy of myths, beliefs, social laws, narration”, thereby, reaffirming her belief that in ignoring the oral lore, the official history and the elite are destroying the voices of the subaltern. Consequently there is no mention of the same in the dominant discourses and epistemologies; as they have been strategically marginalised in the trash bins of history. To counterattack these tenuous models of history-writing, Devi, therefore, has imparted historical truth to her fiction to serve as a voice of the subaltern.

While, reiterating the arguments as discussed above, it can be concluded that the novel serves to attack the myopic lies which state that fiction is inferior to history and hence cannot tell truth or serve to apprise the world of the truth. These blinkered views on the power of Fiction have been significantly assailed by Devi’s work which allows for a rethinking of these rigid views and ensuring fiction is considered an ally to history and vice versa. To add more, while analysing the novel, it has been found how literature can tell history as the difference between history and literature has more to do with the degree of truth than negating one as a harbinger of falsehood. It has also been ascertained that the debates which give more precedence to history and derogatively consider literature as a world of imagination are downright erroneous. As believing in these errors makes it difficult to appreciate the truth which is narrated in the literary works because historians reject literature as being inauthentic. To add more, in the assertions of Mahasweta Devi, it has been observed how the history which is proposed and published in the majority is generally a lopsided telling of one section of the community which either ignores the other sections or criminalizes them for ulterior motives. This stratagem which has been pervasive in the writing of history is investigated by Subaltern Studies and as observed in the novel, has been attacked most fervently by the author Mahasweta Devi. The contention has been how history is intentionally narrativized with fabrications to suit a hidden agenda of colonial or postcolonial ramification. Consequently it is evidential Mahasweta Devi has employed her vast repository of oral lore, and weaved a tale to highlight why history needs to be rewritten from the perspective of Orality. It has been her primal motive to rewrite history, as in the lack of an authentic artifact about the subaltern; they do not exist in the eyes of the mainstream, and hence are relegated to the margins to survive as victims.

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