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### Abstract:

*This paper aims to discuss the powerful social realism in the works of Mahasweta Devi, a dominant Indian writer and sociopolitical activist. Her novels focus on the lives of people who are often ignored in society, such as tribal communities, Dalits, poor women, and the working class. Mahasweta Devi used her writing not just to tell stories but to fight against injustice. She lived among the tribal people, understood their struggles, and wrote about them with honesty and care. Important works like Draupadi, Rudali, Mother of 1084, and Aranyer Adhikar show the deep pain caused by caste, class, gender, and state violence. But her stories also show strength, resistance, and hope.*

*The paper also discusses how critics and readers have responded to her work. Scholars praise her simple, direct style and her strong commitment to truth. Mahasweta Devi has inspired many feminist, Dalit, and tribal writers to raise their voices through literature. Her work is not just fiction rather; it is a form of protest and a call for justice.*

### Introduction:

Mahasweta Devi was a prominent Indian author and socio-political activist who wrote mainly in Bengali. Most of her literary works focused on the people who are often ignored in society, especially marginalized, tribal communities, the poor, and women. Born in 1926 in Dhaka (now in Bangladesh), she had a legacy of writers and artists as most of her family members followed this field. It is widely documented that throughout her life, Mahasweta Devi wrote over 100 novels and 20 short story collections. Some of her most important works include *Hajar Churashir Maa*, *Rudali*, *Aranyer Adhikar*, and *Draupadi*. Besides writing, she also worked as a teacher, journalist, and activist, always standing by the side of India's most oppressed people. In 1997, she was awarded the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary honour, for her valuable contributions to literature. G.N. Devy mentioned that she was profoundly shaped by her directly, immersive engagement with marginalized communities in India, unlike an outside observing from a distance. (Devy, *After Amnesia*, 1992).

Literature is an art that is weaved through different threads and each thread within it has its own significance to make a creative work. In the same way there are also various narrative approach to narrate literature and among them is social realism. Social realism in literature means writing about real problems in society, especially the struggles of poor, working-class, or marginalized people. It shows how systems like caste, class, and patriarchy affect daily life. Arpit Dave writes in her study that, "Realism is a style of writing that gives the impression of recording, 'reflecting' faithfully and actual way life. The term sometimes refers to a more general attitude that neglects idealization, escapism and other qualities of romance favour of soberly recognizing the actual problems of life." (Dave, *Social Realism in English Literature*, 2019) In Mahasweta Devi's work, social realism is not just a style—it is a way to fight



injustice. She does not write for entertainment; her stories make us see the pain of people who are usually invisible in Indian literature. For example, in *Draupadi*, she shows how a tribal woman is abused by the state, but still resists with courage and dignity. Her characters are often victims, but they are also fighters. As Spivak says in her famous essay on *Draupadi*, Mahasweta “write in a place where writing is resistance” (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 1988). This paper identifies how Mahasweta Devi uses fiction to show the deep realities of caste, class, gender, and tribal exploitation in India.

### **Contextual Setup:**

During the 1970s to early 2000s, India saw major political and social changes. The country faced the Emergency period (1975–1977), marked by censorship and human rights abuses under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Alongside, India was dealing with poverty, caste discrimination, tribal marginalization, and landlessness. Neoliberal reforms of the 1990s widened the gap between the rich and poor, pushing indigenous people further to the margins. These decades saw protests by farmers, tribal groups, and workers demanding land, rights, and justice. Mahasweta Devi’s writing emerged strongly during this period, as she gave voice to those excluded from mainstream narratives; especially Dalits, Adivasis (tribals), and women.

Literature in India has long been a powerful tool for exposing injustice. Writers used stories, plays, and essays to question inequality and the misuse of power. Mahasweta Devi stood out because she was both a writer and an activist. She did not just write about the struggles of tribal communities she lived among them, fought for their rights, and took their issues to the courts and the streets (Mukhopadhyay, 9456, 57). Her fiction, such as *Draupadi* and *The Hunt*, exposed how the state and society often failed the most oppressed. Her words were not just art but weapons for justice. Through her dual role, she made literature a living force of protest and change.

### **Key Themes in Mahasweta Devi’s Works:**

#### **a. Caste and Class Oppression:**

Mahasweta Devi’s writings powerfully critique the entrenched caste and class hierarchies in Indian society. In *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1084), she explores how class privilege blinds the urban elite to the suffering of the marginalized. The novel tells the story of Sujata, a middle-class mother whose son Brati becomes a Naxalite revolutionary and is killed by the state. Through Sujata’s journey of discovering her son’s hidden life, Devi exposes the stark divide between the privileged and the oppressed. The state’s violence supported by the silence of the middle class, shows how systemic oppression is maintained through both active suppression and passive complicity. (Gopal Paul 2015).

In Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*, the caste-class equation is a central theme, highlighting the intersectional oppression faced by marginalized women in feudal-capitalist rural India. The story exposes how the upper caste, land-owning class exploits the economic vulnerability of lower-caste women. The protagonist, Sanichari, is a poor Dalit widow who is hired to weep at upper-caste funerals. The irony here is sharp: while Sanichari is excluded from the social fabric due to her caste and poverty, her grief is commoditized by the same society. Devi uses this to expose how caste and class systems do not just exploit but dehumanize people (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013). Importantly, the story doesn’t just show victimhood, it also shows Sanichari’s awakening and her forming a



network of women to survive and resist together, highlighting collective agency under oppression.

## **b. Tribal Marginalization:**

Tribal lives and struggles are central to Mahasweta Devi's literary and activist work. In *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Right to the Forest), she narrates the life of Birsa Munda, a real historical figure and tribal freedom fighter. Unlike the stereotypical image of the Adivasi as backward or passive, Birsa is portrayed as a visionary leader who resists British colonialism and fights for the land rights of his people. Devi reconstructs tribal history from the ground up, giving agency and dignity to characters that are often erased from national narratives (Omvedt 1994). Mahasweta Devi's highbrow oeuvre challenges the prevailing power structures and politics of society. Moreover, in her writing, she often depicts the brutal oppression of tribals and the untouchables by local authorities; the novel *Aranyer Adhikar* is no exception. (Ahmed 121)

Similarly, in the short story *The Hunt*, the tribal woman Mary Oraon challenges the forces that seek to exploit her. As a migrant tribal worker, Mary resists both sexual and economic exploitation. When a powerful man tries to coerce her, she defends her violently, reclaiming control over her body and life. Mahasweta Devi presents tribal people not as helpless victims but as active resisters, capable of self-assertion and justice in their own terms (Spivak 1995). Her stories highlight the conflict between indigenous ways of life and external forces state, market, and upper castes that seek to displace and dominate them.

## **c. Gender and Exploitation:**

Mahasweta Devi's female characters are often placed at the intersection of gender, caste, and class oppression. One of her most powerful characters, Draupadi (from the short story *Draupadi*), redefines resistance in the face of brutal state violence. Draupadi Mejhen, a tribal woman and Naxalite supporter, is captured, tortured, and raped by security forces. However, in a stunning reversal of power, she refuses to clothe herself after the assault and confronts her tormentors, using her nakedness as a form of protest and defiance. Her act challenges not only patriarchal power but also the state's attempt to silence resistance through sexual violence (Spivak 1981).

Devi's stories consistently show how gender is inseparable from caste and class. Women like Sanichari (*Rudali*) and Mary (*The Hunt*) face exploitation not just as women but as poor, lower-caste or tribal. Yet, these characters do not remain passive. They organize, resist, and reclaim control over their lives. As scholar Anshika Jain's analysis of Mahasweta Devi's female characters focuses on how Devi portrays these women as victims of oppression who ultimately find ways to resist, regain agency, and challenge patriarchal and social norms. Jain's work specifically examines the story *Dhowli*, analyzing how Devi's narrative explores social death and systemic violence against women at intersection of caste and gender.

## **Mahasweta Devi's Narrative Style and Realism Technique in her Works:**

Mahasweta Devi's novels are known for their strong realism and powerful storytelling. She uses simple and direct language that reflects the lives of tribal and marginalized communities in India. Her characters often speak in their own local dialects or vernaculars, making the story feel more real and grounded. This language style helps readers connect deeply with the struggles of people who are usually ignored in mainstream literature. For example, in *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1084), Devi avoids flowery or emotional words. Instead, she uses stark imagery to show the pain of



a mother who loses her son in a political conflict (Devi, 1997). Her words are not fancy, but they are very powerful. The suffering, hunger, and violence described in her novels feel very real because she does not romanticize poverty or heroism. The emotions come through not from beautiful language, but from harsh truths.

Devi also breaks away from traditional storytelling. Her narration is often non-linear, she moves back and forth in time to reveal the hidden histories of her characters. In *Rudali* and *Aranyer Adhikar*, she mixes real facts with fiction, using journalistic and documentary methods (Spivak, 1995). She often researched the history and political background of tribal movements before writing her stories. This mix of fiction with real-life reports and documents makes her work feel like a voice of protest, not just a story. Unlike writers like R.K. Narayan, who focused more on the middle class and used gentle humor, Devi's realism is sharper and more political. Her writing stands closer to that of writers like Mulk Raj Anand, who also showed the suffering of lower-caste people, but Devi's work is even more rooted in real activism. Her stories are not just literature; are part of her lifelong fight for tribal rights and justice. This deep connection between fact and fiction, between writing and activism, gives her realism a very strong impact.

### **Critical Reception on Devi's Social Realism:**

Mahasweta Devi's work has received strong appreciation from scholars, critics, and readers for its bold representation of India's marginalized communities. Many critics agree that her writing goes beyond storytelling; it is a form of activism. G.N. Devy highlights that her literature was deeply rooted in direct engagement with the tribal and oppressed people (Devy, *After Amnesia*, 1992). Scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have written in-depth about Devi's work, especially the short story *Draupadi*, praising how Devi gives voice to those who are silenced in society (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 1988). Readers have also admired her clear and honest language, which does not try to beautify or soften the harsh truths of poverty, caste, or gender violence. Her realism is powerful because it speaks plainly, yet deeply, about everyday struggles. Critics also note that her use of local dialects and broken timelines adds a raw authenticity to her work.

Mahasweta Devi played an important role in shaping social consciousness in Indian literature. Her writings influenced the way literature could be used as a tool for change. Feminist scholars appreciate her portrayal of strong women who resist both patriarchy and caste oppression. Stories like *Rudali*, *Draupadi*, and *Dhowli* have become important texts in feminist literature studies (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013). She also inspired Dalit and tribal writers by showing how literature can speak truth to power. Scholar Gail Omvedt noted that Devi reconstructed tribal identity and history with dignity and depth (Omvedt, 1994). Her fearless representation of marginalized voices helped many new writers feel empowered to share their own stories. Overall, Mahasweta Devi's legacy lies not only in her books but also in how she changed the purpose of writing in India—from just storytelling to a powerful tool for justice and awareness.

### **Conclusion:**

Mahasweta Devi was not just a writer, she was a voice for the people who are often forgotten in India. Through her powerful stories, she spoke about the pain, struggles, and strength of tribal people, Dalits, poor women, and others who face injustice every day. Her writing showed how systems like caste, class, and patriarchy hurt people in



real life. But she also showed how these same people fight back, survive, and raise their voices.

What makes Mahasweta Devi's work special is that it was never separate from real life. She lived with the tribal communities, fought for their rights, and understood their problems deeply. Her stories, such as *Draupadi*, *Rudali*, *Aranyer Adhikar*, and *Mother of 1084*, are not only literary pieces—they are tools of protest. She used simple language, real characters, and true events to show the harsh truth. This is called social realism, and in her case, it was not just a style it was a way to fight injustice.

Critics and scholars have praised her work because it opened the eyes of many readers. She helped people see how literature can be used for change, not just for entertainment. Feminist writers, Dalit writers, and young activists were inspired by her. Through her stories, Mahasweta Devi reminded us that writing has the power to speak for those who are silenced.

In the end, her legacy is about truth, courage, and justice. She showed that literature can give voice to the voiceless and bring real change in society. Mahasweta Devi's work will continue to inspire those who want to write with honesty and stand with the oppressed. Her pen was her weapon and she used it with great power and purpose.

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