

The Depiction of Violence as a *Social Reality*: A Cross Sectional Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's *The Hunt* and Indira Goswami's *The Beasts*

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Abstract

The paper attempts to explore the violence meted out to gendered subaltern and also scrutinizes the destructive role of patriarchy in the lives of women protagonists in the writings of Mahasweta Devi and Indira Goswami. Violence against women is as old as the world. The kind and the intensity of violence vary from time to time and place to place, but it is there everywhere. Mahasweta Devi and Indira Goswami are some of the rare women writer-activists who have taken a daring attempt to expose the kind of violence faced by the women in their everyday life. Their writings expose the cruel deeds of patriarchy. The cruelty happening in the lives of gendered subalterns in terms of caste and class is heart breaking. Through their writings, they advocate that protest is the only choice to stop such atrocities against women instead of being a mute observer. Only by resisting, women can minimise the violence committed on them. Women protagonists of Devi and Goswami are trying to protest and they challenge patriarchy. The gender based violence like rape and sexual assault threatens the well-being and the dignity of women. The paper analyses Devi's short story *The Hunt* (2001) and Goswami's *The Beasts* (2002) in bringing about the stark reality and cruelty occurred in the lives of "gendered subaltern" of the contemporary West Bengal and Assam in the 90's through their writings.

Keywords: gendered subaltern, violence, patriarchy, social reality, activism

1. Introduction

In order to understand the fiction of Devi and Goswami in a deeper level, it is imperative to know the prominence of women in the past. Even today, in the twenty first century of globalization, where there has been tremendous progress in women empowerment, atrocities against women still continue. The stature of women in India has been subjected to many dramatic changes over the last few decades. Some theorists and philosophers who studied the history and background of ancient India believed that the women enjoyed equal position and respect with men in all fields of life. According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, later the status of women began to decline with the *Smritis* (a Hindu religious text containing traditional instructions on religion esp. *Manusmriti*) and with the Islamic invasion of Babur, the Mughal Emperor deteriorated the predicament of women further. *Sati*, child marriages became part of social life in India. The practice of *pardah* (practice of covering the head) had been introduced to India during the Conquest of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. The practice of widow immolation in huge number (*Jauhar*) was also followed in many Rajput families in Rajasthan to save themselves from being dishonoured. In some parts of India, the temple prostitutes (*Devadasis*) were sexually abused. European scholars observed that the 19th century Indian women are "naturally chaste and more virtuous than other women" (Nelasco, 2010). During the reign of British, many revolutionaries such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyothirao Phule, etc., fought for the revival of women. In the year 1829, the practice of *Sati* was abolished. It was made possible by the tremendous effort by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. In 1856, the Widow Remarriage Act was introduced. This act came into existence as a result of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's fight for the betterment of the widows. Many women activists such as Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade, Savitribai Phule also worked for the cause of women upliftment.

The image of a subaltern woman is quite a significant and complicated subject in the postcolonial domain. The word 'subaltern' in its plain term refers to anyone who exists in the lowest rank of any nation. In the current study, the word 'subaltern' is used to denote those women belonging to the lowermost strata of the society as well as the middle class women who have been suppressed and marginalized. Some select works of the two distinguished writer-activists of Indian descent, Mahasweta Devi and Indira Goswami, are examined to explore the voice of the gendered subaltern. The writers, while portraying the subalterns as women, offer a space for them to endure subjugation through their bodies and to be heard.

Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is first given as a lecture in 1983 and later published in different versions in 1985 and 1988. She offers a greatly expanded revision in her well-known work *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). A subaltern, according to the dictionary, is a person holding subordinate position originally a junior officer in the British army. She attempts to advocate judiciously the lives and pasts of subaltern groups who are victimized socially and enslaved diplomatically. Her writings undoubtedly display the experiences of suppression of the subaltern groups at its social and political levels in postcolonial societies of the nation. It bisects the difference in class,

religion, language, ethnicity, gender and their origin. She added that the “colonialized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous.” (Spivak, 1988)

The Madhura rape case was one of the most unforgettable incidents in India. It marked as the first issue at national level that brought the groups of women collectively. The discharge of the policemen accused of raping a young girl Mathura in a police station, led to huge protests in the late 1970s. Feminist activists united over issues such as rapes, female infanticide, domestic violence, health and female literacy. In spite of all these above mentioned Acts and laws, the condition of women has not changed. Dr. Shobana Nelasco in her book, *Status of Women in India* throws light in the most shocking records: “high incidence of crimes against women in India. The National Crime Records Bureau reported in 1998 that the growth rate of crimes against women would be higher than the population growth rate by 2010. Earlier, many cases were not registered with the police due to the social stigma attached to rape and molestation cases. Official statistics show that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of reported crimes against women.” (Nelasco, 2010)

Gender assault is a term for wide range of violation, which consists of both physically and sexually, from example ranging from sexual abuse in society to sexual assault in prison. Women are immensely the victims of gender brutality, which happens in various forms in different social contexts throughout the world. (Merry, 2009) In India, rape is the fastest growing crime and reports indicate that it has elevated noticeably in the recent years. *The Times of India* dated 27th December in the year 2017 reported that as per the records of National Crime Records Bureau in India (NCRB), there has been a shocking rise of 873.3% in the number of rape cases registered in India from 1971 to 2011. On the other hand, professionals report that the exact number of rape cases officially reported is far from being recorded since the unreported number of cases is extremely huge as per the report of Human Rights Watch, an international non-governmental organisation. Rapes remain as one of the vastly unreported crime of the realm due to several reasons such as fright of vengeance from their perpetrators, lack of medications for the victims’ state, fear of scepticism and social censure.

Generations of women have been mute victims of violence like rape, domestic violence, and physical assault. The United Nations states violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (General Assembly Resolution 48/104).

2. Objective of the Study

To critically analyse the works of Devi and Goswami to bring about the depiction of violence on “gendered subaltern”

To highlight the relevance of chosen writers’ works by drawing a parallel line in the contemporary society.

To underscore writers as social activists

3. Review of Literature

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987) in “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi’s *Stanadayini*” states that Devi’s account of *Stanadayini (Breast Giver)* is “a parable of India after decolonization.” Like Jashoda in the story, India is a mother-by-hire. Public used and exploited her (India) and later discarded her just like a piece of garbage as it happened in the case of Jashoda. She nurtured all her children by breast feeding them. Her “breast” which was considered a symbol of sacrifice once is considered a garbage as it is out of use. She died of breast cancer.

Works of Mahasweta Devi and Indira Goswami are constantly analysed and interpreted by critics and reviewers taking notice of the reality in their creative writings. In the literary article, “Of Rape and Marginalization”, M. Asaduddin (2002) remarks on the communal perception of Mahasweta Devi and spectacles about the exceptional blend of the activist and the author campaigning against the societal prejudices done to the downtrodden and the marginalized. In the research article, “The Case of Mary’s Identity as a reversal of gender roles in Mahasweta Devi’s *The Hunt*”, Karla Araya Araya (2010) did a critical scrutiny of Devi’s *The Hunt* in terms of structure of female identity.

To do so, an exploration of

the protagonist, Mary, is accomplished by taking into consideration the role she takes in the story and also the way she is perceived in the social scenario of the Kuruban society. Finally, the researcher has concluded that Mary has undergone a transformation from a stereotypical image of a woman by deconstructing the conventional patriarchal gender identities. In the paper “Brave Tribal Women: A Study of Mahasweta Devi’s *The Hunt*”, (Sharma, et al. 2023) focuses on women of Devi transgress their gender roles. They prove that masculine roles like hunting starting a new adventure, acquiring knowledge-are not exclusive male dominated area. The women can also wield the weapon in case of any oppression.

4. Research Gap

The research gap identified by analysing the review of literature is that considerable amount of research is done on the writings of the chosen writers on various perspectives. The theme of representation of subaltern in general is analysed by various researchers, but the theme of depiction of violence in select short stories of Mahasweta Devi and Indira Goswami is not being analysed. Thus, the paper focuses on the representation of violence in the works of the select social activists cum writers.

5. Method

The researcher has adopted thematic interpretation of the select works of the chosen writers and hence the study is qualitative in nature. The primary sources of the works, Mahasweta Devi’s *The Hunt* (2001) and Indira Goswami’s *The Beasts* (2002), have been scrutinised.

Interviews of the writers were also keenly observed to have a deep understanding of the works. Figures and tables are not used in the paper as study focuses on the interpretative aspect of literature.

6. Violence at Its Threshold: A Critical Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's Short Story *The Hunt*

The short story, *The Hunt* by Mahasweta Devi is taken from the collection *The Imaginary Maps* translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It is an account of a half tribal woman, Mary Oraon, who is a prey of male sexual violence and punishes her oppressive plight by killing her oppressor. The tale begins with the description of her as an "Eighteen years old, tall, flat-featured, light copper skin. Usually she wears a print sari. At a distance she looks more sedative, but close up you see a strong message of rejection in her glance." (*The Hunt*, 2001, p. 2) Mary's father deserted her mother soon after impregnating her. As Mary does not possess a pure tribal blood, she is considered an outcaste by the Oraon community. She is also not bound to laws imposed on women of the Oraon community and lives an independent life according to her dictums. She is even betrothed to a Muslim boy named Jalim. Mary works hard and is appreciated by everyone for her business making qualities. Even her owner's wife admires Mary as she says, "You have to take words from a girl who works like an animal, carries a forty pound bag on her back, and boards the train, cleans the whole house in half an hour." (*The Hunt*, 2001, p. 4) Mary is courageous, confident, outspoken and intelligent. All these qualities set her apart from the other tribal women of her community.

Mary's life becomes miserable when the developer Tehsildar Singh sets his lustful eyes on her. He tries to make sexual advances towards Mary, who refuses to buckle down under pressure. As he becomes impatient, he attempts to grab Mary one day while returning from market, but she somehow manages to escape the sexual violation of her body by saying that she is "unclean" and he must wait till the following day to gratify his carnal desires. That very day she decides to avenge her insult and secure her dignity by killing the Tehsildar. She invites the Tehsildar to a forest on the day of the annual spring festival. It is publicized that the ritual of the hunt that the tribes celebrate at the spring festival is for the women to perform this year. For twelve years men run the hunt. Then comes the women's turn, "It's Jani Parab. Like the men they too go out with bow and arrow. They run in forest and hill. They kill hedgehogs, rabbits, birds, whatever they can get. Then they picnic together, drink liquor, sing and return home at evening. They do exactly what men do. Once in twelve years." (*The Hunt*, 2001, p. 11)

It was Mary's turn this time. The unsuspecting developer then comes to the forest only to die in the hands of Mary. "Mary caresses Tehsildar's face, gives him love bites on his lips. There is fire in Tehsildar's eyes, his mouth is open, his lips wet with spittle, his teeth glistening. Mary is watching, watching, the face changes into? Now Yes, becomes an animal." (*The Hunt*, 2001, p. 16)

In a tribal society, women are respected, and committing rapes is considered a great sin. Mary by killing the Tehsildar not only avenges the oppressor, his attempt to subdue the gendered subaltern through violence and injustice. She kills him with her machete and at a time when the tribal women instead of men become hunters on the twelfth year of the annual spring festival. As per ritual, the ones who have committed any crimes are given punishment by the tribal women during this occasion. Every year this role of imparting justice is performed by the tribal patriarchy. But in the twelfth year there is a gender reversal ritual. So through the character of Mary, Devi has tried to ventilate that in this patriarchal society women can alter their subaltern position only by recognizing that they are individuals who deserve equal status as men and that they should protest against violence and injustice committed on them both individually and collectively.

"Mary is not afraid, she fears no animal as she walks, watching the railway line in the dark, by starlit. Today all the mundane blood-conditioned fears of the wild quadruped are gone because she has killed the biggest beast." (*The Hunt*, 2001, p. 17)

A constant concern for the oppressed women characterizes much of the writing of Mahasweta Devi. Having been aware of the enormous spread of monstrous exploitative mechanism, she always feels "an urge and an obligation to document." (Bandyopadhyay, 1986, viii.) In an interview, Devi states that her "thoughts and writings have been influenced by a sense of sympathy for the suffering humanity." (an interview to Suprabhatham, Telugu, October 1991) "The utter dehumanisation and physical exploitation of the subalterns by the moneylender mahajans and/or upper castes/classes/the mainstream is a current theme in most of Mahasweta Devi's tribal narratives." (Bhowal, 2016) The story is a revolt against gender oppression and sexual exploitation of subalterns. Resistance is the central theme in the stories of Mahasweta Devi and the theme of resistance addresses the issues such as feudal oppression and women subjugation.

7. The Violence in Indira Goswami's *The Beasts* as a Social Reality

Goswami deals with some of the burning social issues of the time like gang rape and clash between the castes. *The Beasts* is one of the prominent short stories of Goswami having a strong theme. The tale depicts how people living among beasts become themselves bestial. The transformation of Krishnakanta from hero to villain and his participation in the gang rape of Nimai indicates a terrible truth. The story is set in Rabha village. The story begins with Nimai Rabha searching for Krishnakanta. The protagonist, Nimai Rabha is introduced to the readers through the words of some men describing her. It is watched by Shahabuddin, "a strong and vigorous young man, he was a mute." (*The Beast*, 2002, p. 140) Nimai Rabha is a true representative of a gendered subaltern. "She was from a very poor Rabha family. And yet she had self-respect" (p. 144). Krishnakanta, a head nooseman, had a deep relationship with Rabha village on the bank of the Kuls. Everybody had a weakness for Nimai Rabha. She moves about fearlessly in these wild and eerie places. She tells Krishnakanta that she has always been thus. She believes that nobody could harm her. Nobody could harm "a person who is a pure of heart..." (p. 147) She is also familiar with the herds of barking deer and swamp deer which frequented the forest in that region. Smuggling of ivory and calf is done in the Rabha village. Krishnakanta and his associates are also involved in this. "Constant association with the elephants had made Krishnakanta a kind of demi-god for them. His was not included in the names of the smugglers who operated in the forest." (p. 149)

Goswami has made enormous comparison of men with beasts in the story, *The Beasts*. She conveys that the behaviour of some men is

beastly sometimes. The long stay in the elephant-leasehold seemed to have made beasts of them all. “Krishnakanta, who roamed the forests singing sweet melodies of the great beasts” (The Beast, 2002, p. 156) and their “skins had hardened to resemble the hide of a rhinoceros.” The entire tale can be compared with a predator hunting for its prey. “They all had sharply-pointed teeth. Even their nails were like claws.” (p. 150) “Nimai Rabha’s body is exactly like that of a deer.” (p. 145) Shahabuddin is the only soul in the entire vicinity who observes everything and understands the plot planned, but he is not understood by any. Even Nimai Rabha has not understood him. Except for his mother and his brother, nobody could understand him. He is a mute, but his mother reflects his every thought. Shahabuddin has a soft corner for Nimai Rabha. He has never expressed it to Nimai since he is a Muslim. His love for her is beautifully portrayed by Goswami in the following words:

“I am dumb.

I am a Muslim. If you do not accept me, it does not matter. I shall look after you
like a brother, Nimai Rabha!

Could he express these thoughts? He was a mute. He had no speech.... But they
said that love had no language. (The Beasts, 2002, p. 157)

His mother alone understands him. She says, “God is love, love is God...where then was the need for speech?” (The Beasts, 2002, p. 158) Krishnakanta along with his associates cunningly plot to rape her in the dense forest where they have tented. She is being brutally gang raped by them and left her half naked in the forest. Later her body is found by the one of the guards of the forest. He steps back in shock. It is spattered with blotches of dried-up blood. In the meantime, the Rabhas from the village started to come down, one by one at a time. One of them stood near Shahabuddin and says, “She is dead. She is refused to move from this spot. Today her father sold off her utensils to the cowherd.” (The Beasts, 2002, p. 159) Suddenly, among the cushion with their spilled entrails, the neck-strings and the jute neckbands, Shahabuddin catches the sight of a piece of blouse worn by Nimai Rabha. Like a maniac he starts to claw up the blouse from the ground. “His lips dribbled saliva. His eyes started out of his head.” (The Beasts, 2002, p. 159)

The story ends with a tragic note. Shahabuddin understands slowly who is behind this, but reveals nothing. He hears Krishnakanta’s voice amidst the crowd. He notices Krishnakanta arrives the spot. But it was almost impossible to recognise Krishnakanta. On his wrist was a watch, his dhoti was as white as heron’s wing, while the gold buttons on his kurta (loose shirt) gleamed and glistened. He had come dressed like the merchants of Darbhanga and Dinajpur. Placing a hand on Shahabuddin’s shoulder, he said, “I have come looking for the leaseholder’s turban! He left it behind while larking around here the other day!” (p. 159)

Depiction of violence is one of the striking characteristic features which is common in the works of Devi and Goswami. Goswami’s novel *The Man from Chinnamasta*, too faced the same kind of violence as the characters of Devi. The novel reminds the status of women in the conservative Assamese society. The women, here are no better than the sacrificial animals. The term, “blood” is often repeated in both the works of Devi and Goswami to highlight the intensity of pain and trauma that her protagonists undergo. The writer-activists have given a darker shade to some of the men characters they depicted. This mirrored the behaviour of some menfolk towards the downtrodden and underprivileged women in the society they lived. This is one of the striking similarity shared by them. The men in their writings bear certain resemblances. Tehsildar in Devi’s *The Hunt* has been brought to the level of an animal. Devi writes, “she fears no animal” and “the wild quadruped.” In the similar manner, in Goswami’s *The Beasts*, men are compared with beasts. The choice of the Goswami’s words enhances the severity of violence on women. She writes “sharply-pointed teeth”, “nails were like claws”, and “skins are hardened to resemble the hide of a rhinoceros.” The writers depicted men as predators hunting for their prey. Women are often compared with poor deer and helpless preys.

Goswami presents the tragic predicament of a gendered subaltern who becomes a victim of sexual violence. The story pictures the condition of women who are marginalized due to their economic standards. Another common aspect in the writings of Devi and Goswami is that they depict the reality of violence, insurgent problems and terrorism in their respective states and their own emotions and feelings. They constantly protest against the inhumanity prevailed in the society. Their works mostly focus on the history of people in their states which is marked by bloodshed and traumatic effect caused by political, social and cultural upheavals.

8. Discussion

The researcher has identified the validity of the discussion on the theme of violence meted on women; especially on a gendered subaltern is the need of the hour. Even in the 21st century, the predicament of women is of no different.

8.1 Common traits in the works of Devi and Goswami are

- i. Violence meted on Gendered Subaltern
- ii. Concern for Women and Women Empowerment
- iii. Activism
- iv. Resistance and Survival
- v. Powerful voices of the powerless
- vi. Aimed at promoting equality

It is a fact that the works of writers bear true testimony of their true activism. Given below a pic-chart indicates the comparison done in the short stories selected for the current study:

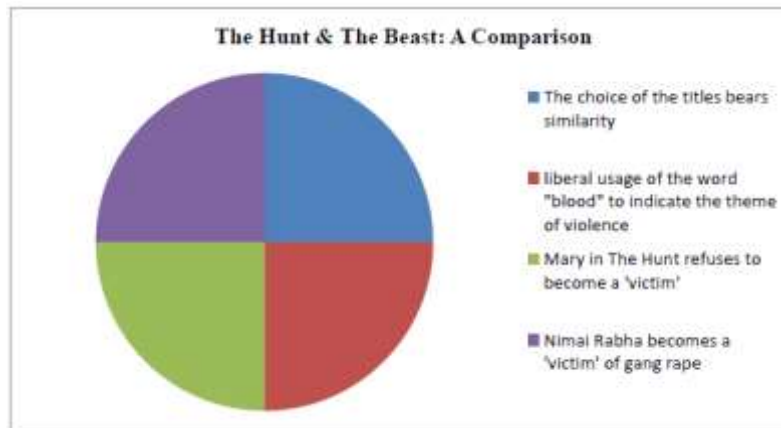


Figure 1. A Cross Textual Analysis

9. Conclusion

The writings of Devi and Goswami bring to the limelight the intricacies of violence between the castes, class, and gender that exist in India today. What really brings these writer activists is their concern for women, especially the women who have been subdued due to gender, caste, class, and ritualistic practices. Indra Goswami says, "I am a crusader against female foeticide, girl child exploitation and all heinous crimes against women". The fictional world of Devi and Goswami are marked for their portrayal of violence. Assam is one of those states in India which has a long running history of political insurgencies. Devi's women never accept defeat nor commit suicide whereas Goswami's women protagonists fight but at time they are defeated due to the upper hand of men in the society. Death is also a kind of protest for Goswami's women. Survival instinct is the only driving force in the lives of the marginalized women whose dreams are crushed by the patriarchy. The writings of Devi and Goswami are not meant for leisure reading, but they are real tales of torture, rape, and extreme exploitation. They use their writings as weapons to fight against domination, abuse, crime and discrimination of all sorts. Through the writing of the social activists, the naked reality of crimes and violence against women, are brought to light and thereby accepted as a part of main stream literature. Their works will continue to fight against the violence and the relevance of their themes is prevalent still today.

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