



International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

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Representation Without Voice: Re-Theorizing Subalternity in Mother of 1084

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Abstract: This paper explores the politics of representation in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*, focusing on how the story foregrounds Sujata, a middle-class protagonist while sidelining Somu's mother, a character who symbolizes subalternity. Drawing on key concepts from subaltern historiography, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the subaltern's inability to "speak" and Ranajit Guha's critique of elite-centered historiography, this analysis critiques Devi's handling of identity politics in the novel. The narrative's emphasis on Sujata's grief and personal awakening underscores the challenges elite mediators face in genuinely representing subaltern voices, as exemplified by the noticeable silencing of Somu's mother and her lack of agency. By examining both the strengths and weaknesses of *Mother of 1084*, this study engages with broader debates in subaltern studies and postcolonial literature about the ethics of representation, the intersection of class and feminist storytelling, and the critical need for self-representation in subaltern narratives. Ultimately, it advocates for a more nuanced approach to understanding subalternity that moves beyond elite perspectives.

Keywords: Subalternity, Mahasweta Devi, *Mother of 1084*, Representation politics, Postcolonial feminism.



Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* is set against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement of the 1970s in West Bengal, a period of violent clashes between marginalized rural peasants and the oppressive state apparatus. The novel explores the intersection of class, gender, and political resistance through the perspective of Sujata, a middle-class mother grappling with the death of her revolutionary son, Brati. While Devi critiques systemic inequalities and state violence, the narrative's focus on Sujata marginalizes the voices of subaltern characters like Somu's mother, whose silence reflects the broader erasure of marginalized groups in literature.

The Naxalite movement, rooted in peasant uprisings against feudal and capitalist systems, serves as a critical backdrop. Despite its radical aims, the movement's representation in elite-driven narratives often neglects the voices of rural and working-class participants. Scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha critique such mediated portrayals, emphasizing the need to recover subaltern agency and resist the epistemic violence of elite historiography. Within *Mother of 1084*, this tension is evident in the sidelining of Somu's mother, whose lived realities remain unexplored, overshadowed by Sujata's grief and awakening.

This study critiques the politics of representation in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*, arguing that the narrative centers Sujata's privileged, middle-class perspective while marginalizing the voice of Somu's mother, a figure who embodies true subalternity. By analyzing the erasure of Somu's mother, the paper highlights the limitations of elite mediation in authentically representing subaltern experiences within literature.

Review Of Literature

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

In her seminal essay, Spivak interrogates the ability of subaltern subjects to have their voices heard within dominant discourses. She argues that the structures of power and knowledge production inherently silence marginalized groups, rendering their perspectives inaccessible or misrepresented. Spivak emphasizes the need for intellectuals to recognize their positionality and the limitations it imposes on understanding subaltern experiences.

Ranajit Guha's "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India"

Guha critiques traditional historiography for its elitist bias, highlighting the neglect of subaltern agency in historical narratives. He advocates for a historiographical approach that centers the experiences and actions of marginalized groups, challenging the dominant narratives constructed by colonial and nationalist historians.

Spivak's "Deconstructing Historiography"

In this work, Spivak critiques the methodologies of the Subaltern Studies, questioning their ability to truly represent subaltern voices. She emphasizes the complexities involved in attempting to recover subaltern agency and cautions against oversimplified approaches that may reinforce existing power structures.

"Body, Speech and Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's Narratives"

This study examines how Devi portrays subaltern women's resistance through their bodies and speech. It discusses the limitations of theoretical frameworks in capturing the lived realities of subaltern women and emphasizes the importance of narrative in conveying their experiences.

"Subaltern Representation in the Writings of Mahasweta Devi"

This research paper delves into Devi's literary works, analyzing how she brings to light the experiences and struggles of subaltern characters. It discusses the role of literature in fostering empathy and understanding towards marginalized communities.

"Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography"

In this chapter, Spivak critiques the Subaltern Studies collective's use of the concept of subaltern consciousness. She questions the methodologies employed and emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of subaltern agency.

"Subaltern Voice in Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi'"

This study analyzes how Devi's protagonist in "Draupadi" challenges traditional gender roles and asserts her agency. It discusses the significance of her actions in the context of subaltern resistance.

"Remembering Mahasweta Devi: A Saga of Writing on Subalterns"

This article reflects on Devi's contributions to literature and her focus on marginalized communities. It discusses how her works have brought attention to the struggles of subaltern groups and the importance of her legacy.

"Subaltern Studies"

This overview discusses the aims and projects of the Subaltern Studies collective, highlighting their efforts to rethink Indian colonial historiography from the perspective of marginalized groups. It also addresses critiques of their methodologies and the challenges inherent in representing subaltern voices.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography"

Chakrabarty reflects on the historiographic agenda of Subaltern Studies, emphasizing its postcolonial outlook. He discusses the collective's efforts to produce historical analyses where subaltern groups are viewed as subjects of history, challenging traditional elitist narratives.

"Mahasweta Devi's Mother of 1084: The Traumatic Journey of a Mother in Search of Self-Identity" by Prabir Kumar Sarkar

This paper examines Sujata's journey as a critique of institutionalized history, portraying her search for truth and self-identity within the backdrop of her son's revolutionary life.

"The Reflection of Subaltern Voice in Mahasweta Devi's Mother of 1084"

This highlights how the novel amplifies marginalized voices, revealing the realities of the Naxalite movement and critiquing societal oppression.

"The Awakening of an Apolitical Mother in Mother of 1084"

This article explores Sujata's transformation into a politically conscious individual, symbolizing the recognition of subaltern struggles and aligning with subaltern historiography.

"Mahasweta Devi's Mother of 1084: A Subaltern Reading" by Celestene Theres Philip

This paper provides a subaltern analysis of the novel, focusing on the erasure of marginalized voices in mainstream narratives and Devi's critique of socio-political power structures.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Epistemic Violence and Subaltern Silencing

In her essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explores how dominant discourses systematically erase the voices of the subaltern, particularly subaltern women. Spivak critiques elite-driven frameworks, they may be colonial, nationalist, or feminist, for perpetuating epistemic violence, which she defines as the silencing of marginalized groups by denying them access to representational systems.

Spivak distinguishes between two forms of representation

- **Political Representation** (*Vertretung*), in which elites speak on behalf of the subaltern.
- **Aesthetic Re-presentation** (*Darstellung*), in which subalterns are depicted in literature or art.

In both forms, the subaltern's voice is mediated by elite frameworks, often distorting or completely erasing their agency. Within *Mother of 1084*, Sujata's grief narrative functions as an act of *Vertretung*, where her middle-class perspective frames and distorts the struggles of Somu and his family. Spivak's critique highlights the impossibility of Somu's mother "speaking" within such a narrative; her voice is oppressed under Sujata's privileged gaze.

This framework will be employed to analyze how Sujata's narrative enacts epistemic violence, transforming Somu's mother into a symbolic figure of loss rather than a fully realized subject. Furthermore, the analysis will explore the implications of this erasure for feminist and revolutionary discourses.

Ranajit Guha: Dominance Without Hegemony

Ranajit Guha, a pioneer of subaltern studies, introduces the concept of dominance without hegemony to examine how power functions in colonial and postcolonial contexts. In *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Guha argues that elite historiography erases subaltern agency, framing marginalized groups as passive objects of history rather than active participants.

This concept resonates with the dynamics in *Mother of 1084*, where Sujata's narrative reinforces middle-class ideology's dominance over the revolutionary consciousness represented by Somu's mother. Sujata's inability to fully comprehend the motivations and struggles of Somu's revolutionary comrades mirrors how elite narratives suppress subaltern agency. Guha's framework helps unpack how the novel's depiction of the Naxalite movement privileges elite perspectives while sidelining the lived realities of rural, working-class women like Somu's mother.

Antonio Gramsci: Hegemony and Subalternity

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci offers a good understanding of hegemony and its role in perpetuating social hierarchies. Hegemony refers to the ideological dominance of ruling classes, which is internalized by subordinate groups, while subalternity describes those excluded from access to political, economic, and cultural power.

Gramsci's distinction between hegemonic and subaltern groups illuminates the power dynamics in *Mother of 1084*. Sujata's narrative operates within a hegemonic framework of middle-class grief and urban feminist consciousness, marginalizing the subaltern perspective embodied by Somu's mother. Using this lens, the analysis will reveal how Sujata's attempts to "understand" the revolutionary movement ultimately reassert her privileged worldview, silencing subaltern voices in the process.

Feminist Intersectionality: Ania Loomba and Chandra Talpade Mohanty

Postcolonial feminist scholars Ania Loomba and Chandra Talpade Mohanty critique feminist movements for often privileging elite, urban women's experiences while neglecting the specific struggles of rural and working-class women. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Loomba discusses how gender, class, and colonial hierarchies intersect to shape subaltern identities. Similarly, in *Under Western Eyes*, Mohanty critiques Western feminist discourses for universalizing women's experiences, thereby erasing the struggles of subaltern women in the Global South.

These critiques go in line with Sujata's feminist awakening in *Mother of 1084*. Her narrative focuses on her personal grief and guilt, but it sides with Somu's mother's intersectional oppression as a rural, working-class woman.

James C. Scott: Everyday Resistance and Hidden Transcripts

In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, James C. Scott introduces the concept of hidden transcripts, which means the subtle, covert acts of resistance by marginalized groups that often go unnoticed by dominant powers. Scott challenges the assumption that silence means passivity, emphasizing that resistance can take place everyday, less visible forms.

This perspective is valuable in reinterpreting the silence of Somu's mother in *Mother of 1084*. Although she seems voiceless within the narrative, her silence can be understood as a hidden transcript of resistance, reflecting the limitations given on subaltern women by both revolutionary and elite structures. The analysis will explore how the text's erasure of her voice critiques the constraints of elite-driven narratives.

Dipesh Chakrabarty: Subaltern Pasts and Elite Historiography

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in *Provincializing Europe*, critiques the universalizing tendencies of Enlightenment historiography, which often excludes subaltern experiences. He emphasizes the importance of recovering subaltern pasts, that is, histories and narratives that resist or challenge assimilation into elite frameworks. In *Mother of 1084*, the story of Somu's mother represents a subaltern past who is overshadowed by Sujata's middle-class narrative. Chakrabarty's insights will be used to investigate how the novel's structure reflects the exclusionary practices of elite historiography, centering Sujata's perspective while marginalizing the subaltern consciousness embodied by Somu's mother. The combined insights of Spivak, Guha, Gramsci, Loomba, Scott, and Chakrabarty provide a framework for analyzing the erasure of Somu's mother in *Mother of 1084*. These theories will guide the exploration of how the narrative silences subaltern voices, support elite dominance, and expose the limitations of feminist and revolutionary discourses in representing marginalized voices.

International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

Discussion

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* places Sujata at the center of the narrative, presenting her grief as the lens through which the story progresses. As a grieving mother going through the trauma of her son Brati's death in the Naxalite movement, Sujata's middle-class, urban worldview frames the text's exploration of societal injustice. This perspective, reflecting her privileged position, contrasts sharply with the lived realities of figures like Somu's mother, a rural, working-class woman whose story is narrated almost invisible.

Sujata's journey of self-awareness dominates the narrative, making her personal grief the vehicle for examining the human costs of political movements. However, this emphasis on Sujata unintentionally sidelines the voices of others, particularly those like Somu's mother, who represent the subaltern. Sujata's reflections, shaped by her middle-class sensibility, prioritize individual loss over the collective struggles at the heart of the Naxalite cause. This mirrors the tendency of elite narratives to center their own experiences, often at the expense of marginalized perspectives.

When Sujata interacts with the families of Brati's comrades, these dynamics become even clearer. For instance, her visit to Somu's family is filtered through a lens of pity and discomfort rather than genuine understanding. Sujata perceives Somu's mother as a symbol of poverty and suffering, reducing her to an object of observation rather than engaging with her as a person with her own voice and agency. This aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of representation, where elite discourses depict subaltern figures in ways that erase their subjectivity.

Ultimately, the narrative centers Sujata's middle-class consciousness, using the revolutionary struggle as a backdrop for her personal awakening. This framing exposes the limits of elite perspectives in representing subaltern realities, as Sujata's grief overshadows the broader structural inequalities that the Naxalite movement sought to confront.

The marginalization of Somu's mother in *Mother of 1084* reflects a broader pattern of subaltern erasure in both literature and history. Despite her importance in understanding the revolutionary struggles of Brati and his comrades, her perspective remains largely absent from the text. This absence exemplifies what Spivak describes as epistemic violence, the systematic silencing of subaltern voices by dominant discourses.

Somu's mother's erasure is particularly striking because her story could serve as a crucial counterpoint to Sujata's middle-class grief. As the mother of a revolutionary, her experiences would provide a vital lens on the Naxalite movement's impact on rural, working-class communities. Instead, the text frames her entirely through the perspectives of others, reducing her to a shadowy figure in her own narrative. This dehumanization reinforces the dominance of elite frameworks in shaping the story.

Even in the few moments when Somu's mother is mentioned, her portrayal is limited to surface observations about her poverty and hardships. For example, during Sujata's visit to Somu's family, the focus is on their living conditions rather than on giving Somu's mother a voice or agency. This echoes how subaltern women are often excluded from revolutionary and feminist discourses; their experiences are irrelevant or too inconvenient to fit within elite narratives.

Moreover, this erasure reflects the patriarchal and classist structures within the revolutionary movement itself. Although the Naxalite cause aimed to dismantle systemic inequities, it often neglected the unique oppressions faced by women, especially those from rural, working-class backgrounds. Somu's mother's silence thus symbolizes a broader exclusion, both within the text and in the revolutionary and feminist discourses it critiques.

Although Somu's mother appears silent and voiceless within the narrative, her silence can be reinterpreted as a subtle form of resistance. Drawing on James C. Scott's concept of hidden transcripts, her silence may signify subversive resistance against the systems of power that oppress her. In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott argues that marginalized groups often resist domination through everyday acts that are invisible to dominant groups, challenging the assumption that silence or compliance equates to passivity.

In this light, Somu's mother's silence in *Mother of 1084* can be understood as a rejection of the elite frameworks that seek to define and objectify her. By narrating her voice, she resists being reduced to a symbol of suffering or revolutionary struggle, disrupting the narrative's attempt to fit her into a character. This interpretation aligns with Spivak's assertion that subaltern voices cannot truly "speak" within dominant discourses, as their words are mediated and distorted by elite systems.

Her silence also critiques the patriarchal structures of the revolutionary movement, which often ignored the specific struggles of subaltern women. By refusing to conform to the expectations placed upon her, whether by the movement or by Sujata's gaze, Somu's mother asserts her autonomy in a quiet but powerful way. This perspective challenges the notion that subaltern figures are passive victims, instead emphasizing their agency in navigating and resisting oppression.

Somu's mother's erasure underscores the intersectional nature of subalternity, where factors such as class, gender, and rural identity constitute her marginalization. Postcolonial feminist scholars like Ania Loomba and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have critiqued feminist and postcolonial discourses for centering elite, urban women's experiences while neglecting the struggles of rural, working-class women. In *Mother of 1084*, this dynamic is evident in how Sujata's feminist awakening overshadows the intersectional oppression faced by Somu's mother.

Literary Theories

Sujata's narrative focuses on her own grief and guilt, using her experiences to critique patriarchal and classist structures. However, this focus marginalizes women like Somu's mother, whose lives are shaped by the intersecting oppressions of gender, class, and rural identity. By centering Sujata's perspective, the text privileges an elite, urban feminism that fails to account for the realities of subaltern women.

This critique aligns with Mohanty's concept of "under Western eyes," which examines how feminist discourses often universalize women's experiences, erasing the voices of marginalized women in the Global South. In *Mother of 1084*, Somu's mother's absence from the narrative highlights the limitations of such elite-driven discourses. Her silence serves as a reminder of the need for more inclusive, intersectional approaches that amplify subaltern voices rather than erasing them.

The analysis of *Mother of 1084* demonstrates how the narrative prioritizes Sujata's middle-class perspective while marginalizing subaltern figures like Somu's mother. Through Spivak's critique of epistemic violence and Scott's concept of hidden transcripts, Somu's mother's silence can be reinterpreted as a form of resistance, challenging the limitations of representation within elite narratives. By centering Sujata's feminist awakening, the text highlights the need for intersectional approaches that address the oppressions faced by subaltern women. This exploration reveals the broader implications of elite dominance in literature, calling for a more nuanced understanding of marginalized identities.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* operates as both a critique of systemic oppression and a reflection on the challenges of representing subaltern experiences through elite-centered narratives. The novel, while highlighting Sujata's grief and her journey of awareness, inadvertently marginalizes figures like Somu's mother, whose intersectional struggles as a rural, working-class woman remain underexplored. This prioritization of Sujata's perspective perpetuates the epistemic violence that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques, where subaltern voices are overshadowed or appropriated by dominant frameworks.

This dynamic reveals a central tension in storytelling: the balance between making subaltern experiences *accessible* to broader audiences and preserving their *authenticity*. Sujata's urban, middle-class lens mediates the revolutionary struggles of Somu's family, reducing their lived realities to abstract symbols of suffering and loss. Figures like Somu's mother are stripped of agency, their silence reflecting a broader exclusion of subaltern women from both revolutionary and feminist discourses. However, drawing on James C. Scott's idea of "hidden transcripts," this silence could be viewed as a subtle form of resistance, a refusal to conform to the narratives imposed by hegemonic structures.

The novel's dependence on Sujata's perspective raises important ethical questions about representation. Can literature truly amplify subaltern voices while functioning within the confines of elite narrative frameworks? As scholars like Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty suggest, subaltern experiences often resist incorporation into dominant discourses, requiring self-representation to restore agency. *Mother of 1084* exemplifies this paradox: it critiques systemic injustices but also reproduces the structural hierarchies it critiques. Ultimately, the text advocates for a shift toward grassroots narratives, where marginalized voices are centered, transforming their erasure into expressions of agency and resistance.

As scholars like Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty have emphasized, subaltern voices are often excluded from elite historiography and literature. To counter this exclusion, self-representation and Counter-narratives become essential. By prioritizing the perspectives of marginalized communities, self-representation challenges the hierarchies of power that shape traditional storytelling and offers a more authentic understanding of subaltern lives.

For figures like Somu's mother, whose silence in *Mother of 1084* reflects both systemic marginalization and potential resistance, self-representation is a way to reclaim agency and voice. It transforms invisibility into presence and ensures that subaltern experiences are not mediated or distorted by elite frameworks.

At the same time, this raises important questions about the role of literature in addressing subalternity. While literature can critique systemic oppression, it must also confront its own structural biases. It should strive to create spaces where subaltern voices can emerge authentically. Authors and writers must move beyond speaking for the subaltern and instead facilitate conditions where subaltern individuals can speak for themselves.

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* is a powerful exploration of systemic oppression and its human cost. However, the narrative's reliance on Sujata's middle-class perspective underscores the inherent challenges of representing subaltern voices in elite-driven frameworks. While the novel critiques class and gender inequalities, it also highlights the limitations of mediated storytelling, where figures like Somu's mother remain marginalized.

Literary Theories

To address these limitations, the focus must shift toward self-representation in subaltern narratives, allowing marginalized individuals to articulate their experiences without elite mediation. Literature, while valuable for raising awareness of systemic injustices, must also face its structural biases to ensure that subaltern voices are authentically represented. In doing so, it can help transform narratives of erasure into acts of resistance.

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