

Sanatan Bhowal: *The subaltern speaks: Truth and ethics in Mahasweta Devi's fiction on tribals*. Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2016, xxiv + 184 pp., price not mentioned (hb). ISBN 978-81-250-6279-0

The work relooks into the contribution of Mahasweta Devi's fictional writings on tribals and correlates them with juxtaposition of leading thinkers including Badiou, Levinas, Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan and Zizek. In the foreword to the work, Shail Mayaram emphasises how certain writers and genres of literature can potentially do much the same as anthropology and help us think through the 'meta-physical' which signals the play of forces in this world and processes of human subject formation.

Largely speaking, this book focuses mainly on, and in response to, the Spivak work: 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' What this book manages to do is productively re-present Spivak's argument, adventurously as the author likes to say, through an engagement with both European theory and the short stories of the great Bangla writer, Mahasweta Devi. This work brings into focus just how central Spivak's intervention has been to clarifying the stakes of representations for some of the most oppressed in India today and just how difficult it is to find Subalterns who can speak through over-determined narratives. Over and over again, Devi shows just how much the subalterns in her stories resist the abilities of their interlocutors. And this book zeroes in on those moments when adivasi

characters uncannily stare back at their usually upper-caste, upper-class male counterparts and refuse attempts at making themselves legible.

Experience as also the wounds of history are narrated at the juncture of history and the humanities. In India, mobile peoples including former hunters-gatherers and criminal tribes, now denotified, have been the primary victims of both democracy and development. Adivasis have only seemed to appear in recorded history when resisting the state and their consciousness has been reduced to this identity along with their politics.

The chapters in this book first takes a look at the major issues involved in representing the subaltern, the various challenges that historians of the Subaltern studies collective faced in locating a sound theoretical basis in general and the failures of representation in particular that have provoked Spivak to summarily dismiss the possibility of any authentic representation of the subaltern. It proceeds to look into literary representation in the light of Spivak's critique and picks up key concepts so as to trace their resonance with those implied in Devi's fictions under critical scrutiny. These include critical concepts like – subject, agency, other, consciousness, resistance, alienation identity, difference, continuity, violence, insurgency, domination etc. To Bhowal, these are deeply linked to the literary representation of the subaltern and that as such, the appreciative and explanatory defence of such representation by Spivak, strange in isolation, creates a gap which this book seeks to fill.

As emphasised, the subaltern in Mahasweta Devi's fiction on tribal life speaks in many voices, neither in unison nor in any unified form. The author's choice: "In the Right of the Forest", "Bashai, Tudu, Hulmaha", "To the call of Shalgira and Draupadi" represents the voice of aggression and revolt, whereas in "Pterodactyl", "Puran Sahay" and "Pirtha" the voice of despairing withdrawal. "Chotti Munda and his Arrows", speaks of practises resistance of restricted action. In 'Douloti the Bountiful', the subaltern voice is one of silent and passive suffering, while in Dhoulí and 'Shanichari' they are voices of resolution for resistance. Having acknowledged Devi's fascination with the irreducibility of adivasi speech and being, Sanatan Bhowal nicely documents the works about a writer who never ceases to shock and whose cast of characters is unforgettable, which includes Jashoda and Dopdi, but also Chotti Munda and Bashai Tudu. The work thus quickly moves into the discussion of ethics and how one is to relate to the powerless and disenfranchised.

No doubt, the spirit of the book is about justice, humanity and freedom. It begins with the recognition that adivasis, especially adivasi women, live in such precarious condition and with little or no access to power or resources, and invites us to reconsider how we make ethical claims in the world. The insanity of the current neoliberal quest in India

for development at any cost is ravaging the lives of adivasis, dispossessing them of what little they have and turning them into some of the most exploited people in the country. This book is important, then, as a reminder of just how important our ethical obligations are.

In all, the work reflects how subaltern speaks in a different language, in the language of songs that embodies their dreams, fears, desires and their emotions. The songs are symbols of effective resistance and the subalterns speak through them, the work highlights how Mahasweta Devi's sense of duty towards society makes her approach radically different from that of the Subaltern studies historians. Devi's duty towards society is her fidelity towards the truth process and by bearing this fidelity she becomes the subject of truth.

Explicitly, this book looks at the ideas of different thinkers with respect to selected texts of Mahasweta Devi's fiction on tribal life a non-committal way, without making any attempt to synthesise them. Sanatan Bhowal's work revolves around the heterogeneous assemblage of eclectically chosen inconclusive ideas. Emphasising the need to unthink conventional discourses, this book leaves open the possibilities of many such studies that can begin from anywhere within the trajectories it has made. The work will be of immense interest to South Asian scholars on subaltern studies and comparative literature.

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