

# State Oppression and Adivasi Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*

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## Abstract

The independence movement in India against the British colonizers was driven by the hopes of freedom of speech, freedom of life, and rights over the land. However, it can be argued that the fruits of independence, which India secured in 1947 after years of struggle, have not reached every corner of its multilayered society especially to the indigenous people. Mahasweta Devi in her Bangla novel *Chotti Munda Ebong Tar Tir* (1980), translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2003), exposes the hypocrisy of the West Bengal government that allows a systematic alienation of the subaltern tribes and the consequential threat of annihilation to their existence. This paper analyzes how the indigenous Munda community in the novel was forced to remain outside the narrative of national development and repeatedly experienced violence at the hands of the corrupt people in power. The aim of this paper is to discuss the hypocritical grand narrative of a national independence and how a national culture prompts marginalization and exclusion of the minority citizens in policy making in Mahasweta Devi's novel. The paper also explores various forms of struggle and resistance on the part of the adivasi to achieve their freedom in the already independent India and the way Devi's protagonist resists the repressive core by using the powerful cultural identity of the adivasi inhabiting the social periphery.

**Keywords:** national culture, power politics, marginalized, Munda, adivasi resistance

Mahasweta Devi's novel presents a nation hypocritical in its policy towards the people from the center and those from the peripheries. The narratives of a homogenous national culture and development for everyone turn into a tool of oppression on the minority communities, as they experience the severity of the authoritarian government without being given the fundamental rights as citizens of the state. The novel reveals the treatment of the Munda community as a failure of the independent nation.

To understand the failure of national culture in Mahasweta Devi's novel it is important to understand what a nation is. According to Timothy Brennan, "as a term, it [nation] refers both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous – the "natio" – a local community, domicile, family, condition



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of belonging” (45). In the case of colonization, the idea of nation provides the formerly colonized subjects an opportunity to understand their position in a newly formed state, to bind them together in a shared sense of nationalism and to form an identity of their own, separate from the colonizer. This ideal of a shared goal, a shared nation, functions as an apparatus to confront the colonizer, politically as well as ideologically. Neil Lazarus believes that, in the developing world, nationalism is vital because “it is only on the terrain of the nation that an articulation between cosmopolitan intellectualism and popular consciousness can be forged; ... it is only on the basis of such a universalistic articulation ... that imperialism can be destabilised” (qtd. in Sivanandan 49). British imperialism came to an end after a long and violent struggle with the Indian people. The moment that cherished freedom was secured, the already existing disconnectedness between two classes – the elite and the masses – started to grow more prominently, because of the “unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the mass of the people” (Fanon 119).

Mahasweta Devi looks at the “decolonised” Indian nation with suspicion, because of its incapacity to understand and meet the demands and needs of its citizens. Gayatri Spivak writes that the “colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous” (79) and the mainstream culture of the Indian nation cannot reflect the culture of its adivasi community. The illusion of the socio-cultural and economic freedom from the colonizer shatters soon after they leave, and the nation remains with a broken infrastructure requiring the cultivation of a national consciousness. Throughout history it is observed that in the wake of national consciousness the powerful classes subjugate the lower strata of the former European colonies by marginalizing them even further. No matter who is in power, be it the colonizer or the bourgeois nationalist, they deliberately ignore “the politics of the people”:

For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant group of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country – that is, the people. (Guha xiv)

Here, the critique is on the “failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the people” (Guha xiv). Apparently, the newly formed nation is not for the poor, the exploited, and the subaltern. The marginalized groups in many independent nations remained where they were, on the farthest possible periphery of society, forced to accept the truth behind failed promises. These people grapple to find a way to avoid a slow extermination of their way of life and voice a resistance against the oppressive elite classes.

The setting of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* appears to be a police state even though an elected constitutional government is in power. The Munda tribe in their own villages are oppressed by the landowners and the law enforcement agencies. The upper caste Hindus perpetuate bond slavery, which is a form of signed contract that binds the peasant as a slave to the landlord, ensuring cheap labor and allowing an exercise of power over the tribals generation after generation. In reality, the debts of the tribal subjects never get repaid and their next generations go on working in the landlord's fields without any wages. Villagers of Chotti accept every injustice done to them because they had long ago realized that they have no one to turn to in their alienated adivasi struggle. The landlords handle any adivasi concern or complaints with the only treatment they know – repression. Such a tendency to employ violence had been inculcated in the minds of the people in power from the colonial period. Goons employed by the landlords indiscriminately kill the adivasi, the police beat them up, unjustly imprison them; and to make matters worse, the hunger from famine emaciates the subalterns and eventually ends their lives. The actions of the oppressive upper classes in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* point to their prejudice against the adivasi peasants who are considered to belong to a realm of superstition and myth outside that of modernity and reason. This form of subalternity of the tribal people is a historical and political condition that needs to be discussed in relation to the discourse of the dominant knowledge system and power structure:

Subalternity erupts within the system of dominance and marks its limits from within, that its externality to dominant systems of knowledge and power surfaces inside the system of dominance, but only as an intimation, as a trace of that which eludes the dominant discourse. It is this partial, incomplete, distorted existence that separates the subaltern from the elite. This means that the subaltern poses counterhegemonic possibilities not as inviolable otherness from the outside but from within the functioning of power, forcing contradictions and dislocations in the dominant discourse and providing sources of an immanent critique. (Prakash 288)

This means the subaltern are not outside the domain of the power politics of the dominant groups but are firmly situated inside it and engaged in a constant clash with the arguably tyrannical discourse of elitism.

Indian nationalist movements against the British and the eventual independence did not touch the lives of the tribes in any substantial way. In other words, “this independence is for the rich only” (Rushdie 104). The rural adivasis struggle all their lives to feed their families doing back-breaking work in the Hindu master's fields while the Hindus or Diku – a term denoting intruder in the Munda language – take advantage of the poor. For these subalterns, the outside world of progress,

development, and modernity remains an illusion. The omniscient narrator in the story paints the reality of the protagonist Chotti Munda's life in this way:

The August movement did not even touch the life of Chotti's community. It was as if that was the Dikus' struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle. In war and Independence the life of Chotti and his cohorts remained unchanged. They stand at a distance and watch it all. (96)

Chotti's people are just onlookers, never being included in the apparent change in a modern society. This division between the adivasi in the peripheries and the people in the center had only intensified during colonial rule. Mahasweta Devi, in an interview, discussed the history of this class division: "The bonded labor system was introduced by the British. They created a new class, which took away tribal land and converted the tribals into debt-bonded slaves" (Spivak, "Interview" xii). The Indian government introduced the Bonded Labor System Abolition Act in 1976, but the fruits of this law did not reach the "backward, feudally oppressed districts" (Spivak, "Interview" xii) like Chotti's village.

How the nation neglects the predicament of the adivasi and fails to take the necessary steps to improve their condition is represented in the novel. At one point the Munda leader Chotti becomes concerned when he is informed that, "by the Ordinance of 24<sup>th</sup> October, 1975, the bonded labor system is at an end" (237). But he realizes the façade of this law, "If boss-moneylender accepts t' law, no problem. But will they so?" (240). His fear is actualized when the landowner Tirathnath refuses to set the laborers free. He uses bond slavery as his only means of business and it would be a sign of weakness for him if he stands down and accepts the adivasi claims to freedom. That is why, in front of Chotti, he forcefully proclaims, "The law's there and bonded labour's there" (277). The sham of law and national development is undeniable as the upper classes break the law, ignore human rights, and continue their regime of corruption, while the poor suffer with no scope for justice in the corrupt state. Gradually, the rights of citizens become limited and the state's control multiplies. This notion of sovereign power was apparent during the colonial era and, as can be seen in Devi's narrative, still flourishes at the hands of the postcolonial government.

In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* the police, the landowners, and the Youth League goons hold the power to dictate the lives of the adivasi. To the oppressor, the village is a backward place in need of a cleansing force that comes from state ammunition. Political theorist Achille Mbembe, in his essay "Necropolitics," talks about tactics that are introduced by the colonizers to maintain control over the natives are often passed on to the formerly colonized state, "Colonial occupation itself was a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area – of

writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations” (27). The new social relations of power and oppression turn into the dynamics of the independent state such as India. The British regime strategically planted seeds to continue colonial rule even after independence through the creation of decorative titles, such as Raisaheb, for the elite classes, and people like Tirathnath were at the receiving end of the gift. The elite then became servile to the colonial masters to the extent that they would willingly further the imperial agenda of extracting land revenues by employing stringent measures. The landowners like Tirathnath do not provide fertile lands for shared cultivation to the peasants. Instead, the adivasi “are given stony land, barren land,” but they “nourish even such land with their heart’s blood” (123).

To aggravate the tribal people further, the state government with their colonizer’s mindset unleash its hegemonic power, its “cultural bomb” (Thiongo 3) as a result of which the masses face psychological trauma. N’gugi wa Thiongo writes about the tendency of the colonial power to disregard the native cultural identity and produce a hybrid people to further the colonial rule even after the independence of the states, “The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves” (3). It can be argued that the primary objective of the European colonizers was to champion “ideological, moral, cultural, and intellectual support for colonialism,” and their manifest targets for “colonial hegemonisation” were the “national or (sometimes) regional elites” (Lazarus 77). Lazarus writes:

[A]lthough the imposition and consolidation of colonial rule obviously had cumulative and long-term effects on the way in which subaltern populations lived, worked, and thought – inherited subaltern cultural forms (language, dance, music, storytelling) were able to retain both their traditionality and their autonomy from most forms of elite culture (colonial and “national”).  
(77)

Surprisingly, during the British colonial regime, the minority communities were able to maintain their traditional cultural identities. But in independent India, the struggle of heritage is faced by the indigenous Munda community and Chotti Munda accepts that their identities as adivasi will remain only a spectacle because of the cultural bomb dropped by the outsiders in the name of national development. The encroaching hegemonic culture of the colonial era persisted after independence in 1947 and intensified in the hands of the elite nationalists as the postcolonial nation arguably started imposing its newly acquired notion of culture and development on the repressed classes on the tribal belts in the novel. Devi portrays how the narrative of a homogenous national culture becomes a way of suppressing the ancient

traditions of the minority communities, threatening to annihilate them altogether.

The possibility of museumization of tribal entities troubles Chotti's mind, "The day is coming. Mundas will not be able to live with their identity...Then the 'Munda' identity will live only at festivals – in social exchange" (290). In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* the Christian Missionaries also take advantage of the adivasis' desperation and give them aspirations for a desirable time ahead, with food, shelter, and education. Many tribes are forced to leave their villages, their cultures, their identities, and become Christians to escape the oppression of the upper classes. This subjugation systematically can erase a whole society.

During the Emergency declared by the Indian government from 1975-77 and the subsequent years the country suffered the "criminalisation of politics, letting the lumpen loose on the lower caste and tribal belts" (*Chotti ix*). In the novel, this event marks a crucial time for the Mundas when the Youth League ruffians enter the village. The League comes ready to suppress any tribal resistance against the dominant classes. The League's leader, Romeo, is the one who appears to be able to rape, kill, and destroy property with a sense of immunity and without facing any repercussions. He bluntly asserts, "Keep the untouchable and the tribal under your shoes. They live well that way. Everyone gets cheap labour. ... The glory of the castes remains high" (207). This forceful observance of caste purity is a strategy to dehumanize the subaltern. In the novel, the adivasi are so far below the social strata that their death at the hands of the powerful poses no inconvenience to the central government. Even though the government does not kill the peripheral classes directly, they turn a blind eye when the rights of the adivasi are blatantly violated by many governmental authorities as Chotti repeatedly exposes the hypocrisy of the law enforcers, "As long as Diku has t' power to make t' law work, so long will Diku watch Diku's rights" (240). In the text, the corrupt state apparatuses apparently find ways to crush any and every possibility of peace and prosperity in the village.

Parallel to the history of violence and exploitation in the lives of the Mundas in the novel, there is also a history of resistance. Resistance against the oppressors has long been portrayed and glorified in literature and the term "resistance literature" attests to that. According to Barbara Harlow, "The resistance novels seek different historical endings, and these endings are already implicit, contained within the narrative analysis and construction of the conditions and problematic of the historical situation itself" (79). Resistance literature primarily discusses the fight against colonialism and outside aggression on a nation or culture but additionally includes the resistance of the people of an independent state who face oppression from their own government. Staying true to the form of a resistance novel, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* seeks to create a new identity for the oppressed to write the

disregarded history of the tribals and tell a tale of how the adivasi rise against the homogenous national culture that excludes them. Their history from below had never been written, never been told. But it did not stop the people of Chotti from narrating their own story as they are able to do this through their culture. Their unique identity as tribals is their power. In the novel, Devi provides details of the armed resistance of Birsa Munda, who led the Ulgugan movement or the great tumult in south Ranchi during 1899-1900. This fight was to gain independence from British reign and establish Munda rule. Birsa and his followers fought for years to change the fate of the tribal community, save them from the Dikus. Though this historical revolution did not change the fate of the villagers as they scrape through life in a continuous struggle as subalterns, this revolution inspired Chotti who, in time, becomes the legend the adivasis needed to forge their cultural identities as a people.

Culture is defined by Edward Said as a shared experience, mainly found between the anti-colonial struggles, where the imperial colonizer and the colonized people are involved. He believes that culture is universal but does not only mean “ownership,” “borrowing and lending,” rather it is a culmination of “appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures” (98). But this paper argues that, even though the adivasis live in the country, they are never made a part of the nation itself; instead they are discriminated against because of the differences in their traditions and culture from that of the people from the core. The discourse of national culture does not necessarily apply to the marginalized tribes since their authentic identities are misunderstood and neglected by the mainstream nationalist groups. While analyzing race, ethnicity, and culture, critic Vinita Damodaran discusses culture as “a medium in which power is both constituted and resisted”:

One is thinking here of political separatist movements in a global context which use the notion of a separate ethnic identity to challenge the notion of a homogenous national culture. Instances of dramatic resistance to cultural hegemony and power of a particular class or group or western capitalism show also that culture need not always be on the side of power. Indigenous peoples’ movements strikingly demonstrate this. (2)

The concept of homogeneity or uniformity of culture is therefore a misguided one and national identity in a postcolonial state cannot be forged with this assumption. Power then is not limited to only the elite groups and the ability to oppose injustice but also rests within the people belonging to different social classes and cultures.

The indigenous community of Chotti constructs their cultural identities separate from the outsiders or Dikus, and invariably perceive them as the Other. The Munda

history is based on their culture which provides them with a unique power to resist the outsider's domination. It is significant to note how the omniscient narrator in *Chotti Munda* uses the epic storytelling mode of the Mundas to create a narrative of power and resistance. Instead of using the medium of written literature, Mundas employ oral literature and produce songs as a means of keeping their stories alive for generations: "Munda language has no script. So, they turn significant events into story, and hold them as saying, as song. That's their history as well" (Devi 18). The author sees the tradition of creating songs as a way of resisting cultural and other forms of domination on the adivasi, "[T]hese songs are sung here and there – that it continues to live, this is also resistance. Thus, they are making the thing alive. Chotti here is a symbol or representation of tribal aspiration" (Spivak, "Interview" xi). As Stephen Daniels writes, "Identities are often defined by legends and landscapes, by stories of golden ages, enduring traditions, heroic deeds and dramatic destinies located in ancient or promised homelands with hallowed sites and scenery" (5). These sentiments give shape to the imagined community of the nation (Daniels 5) and in an imagined community, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members ... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 124). However, in Devi's novel the nation itself excludes the adivasi in its imagined community. For this reason, the Mundas survive by holding on to their own communal bonds and their conscious resistance against submitting to a different culture.

In Munda lives, "amidst a lot of pain and poverty, some variety enters in the form of half-Hindu festivals such as Karam, Sohrai, or Holi – the colour fest – or at the time of the worship of Haramdeo" (Devi 48). These collective festivals of all the adivasi and untouchables bring the minority population together in a sense of brotherhood. The struggle and the culture are their lifeblood, this "solidarity is resistance" (Spivak, "Interview" xiii). The things that have kept the tribal people alive are their sense of self, responsibility towards community, and love for nature. Leaders like Dhani and Chotti try to keep the legends of adivasi resistance alive while the stories of their everyday life become an epic, a kimbadanti, or legend. It is then true that, "cultural form of resistance is no less valuable than armed resistance itself" (Harlow 11). This statement reflects how Chotti's culture provides a unique authority to its people; their legends steer them through their everyday struggles.

The power of tribal tolerance and their aversion to violence make them more civilized than the people in the core holding all the political and economic power. The humanity of the Munda people is their power. The restraint in taking up the bow and arrow to take a life is a show of resistance in adivasi culture which comes from their ancient culture, their ancestry. The novel enlightens the reader with the breaking point of the tribal people when they turn to violence and how they deal with

the outsider's dominating hands, "They use weapons, but they are not bloodthirsty. They are basically gentle, polite, highly civilised, and this innate blood civilisation runs back thousands of years. A tribal traditionally lives in harmony with the nature around him, with human beings, even intruders. With everyone. So, when he kills, it is a necessary killing" (Spivak, "Interview" xix). The concept of unavoidable violence comes into the discussion when Chotti's people finally decide to take up arms against tyranny. Frantz Fanon discusses the notion of necessary violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* which exposes "the naked truth of decolonization," that there comes a time when violence becomes essential in the struggle for autonomy:

At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect. ... Illuminated by violence, the consciousness of the people rebels against any pacification. ... The action which has thrown them into a hand-to-hand struggle confers upon the masses a voracious taste for the concrete. (74)

Fanon sees violence as an inevitable consequence of oppression, albeit in the context of national independence. But in the novel similar emotions can be found as the adivasi reach a tipping point of being oppressed in their own nation. Chotti is a very patient and forgiving man, an epitome of non-violence or ahimsa, which is a core philosophy in Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. With the long adivasi tradition of peaceful coexistence with the outsiders the Munda community struggle to exist in their own land. But the people of Chotti's village are disillusioned at one point that no matter how hard they try to resist the outside oppression by non-violence the intruder will always exploit them. This realization occurs to the villagers when Chotti's economic autonomy gets threatened by the Youth League. The representatives of the Youth League, Romeo and Pahlwan, "are determined to reinstitute the system of compulsory labour. Devi's depiction of the struggle between the adivasis and the Youth League is articulated as a struggle between the subaltern and the representatives of the elite" (Morton 165). This eternal struggle of the subaltern, to live their lives in peace, to protect the honor of their women, and to hold their heads high amidst the oppression from the corrupt power, unites the adivasi in their fight.

Tribal people do not know how to exploit each other, and they have immense respect for their own people. At one point in the novel, when the tyrants are finally gone, dead with arrows in their hearts, it becomes a matter of grave concern for the police, while the narrator expresses the hypocrisy of the state politics, "If Romeo and Pahlwan had killed every adivasi in the area, no one would have found it 'unexpected'. There are adivasis, there are subcastes, the Romeos kill them, it happens like this. ...

Under all regimes” (283). Chotti’s son Somchar and his cohorts – Disha, Upa, and Lal – take part in the killing of these oppressors. They have suffered enough at the hands of these men who wreak havoc on the tribal communities. Silent resistance does not suffice at one stage and violence becomes essential for the survival of the villagers. When there is a rupture in their fabric of the adivasi lives, they take up arms in defense. The notion of heroism that is widely understood, executing the enemies, while “holding one’s own death at a distance” (Mbembe 37), does not quite fit into the actions of Chotti’s group of rebels. They have taken a decisive stance against the oppression by ending the constant threat because it is either to kill or be killed for the Mundas at this point. Making this choice to sacrifice themselves is an act of resistance against the repressive state apparatus.

Heroism and resistance appear in various forms in the story, but Chotti and his arrows are the most significant and powerful symbols of resistance. The final image of Chotti Munda raising his arrow marks a significant incident in the history of subaltern resistance. Traditionally, the arrow has been a symbol of Munda culture, their festivities, and their struggle. But this time, it embodies the whole history of their people. As Chotti invokes the legend of Dhani Munda and shoots the target, the magic of nature and timeless Mundari culture come to life, “[H]e mingles with all time and becomes river, folklore, eternal. What only the human can be. Brings all adivasi struggle into the present, today into the united struggle of the adivasi and the outcaste” (Devi 287). In the narrative, Chotti’s “but that one arrow” turns into “a thousand bows upraised in space” (Devi 288) as the people shake off their inhibitions to fight for their rights. The outsiders stand in awe of a new beginning in the wake of the Munda rebellion. The ending of the story is suspended as the readers are invited by the narrator to feel the magic resonated in the resistance of the neglected people who are rising up as warriors.

The independence of India has failed the adivasi in more than one way. History is witness to how the Indian state never treated the adivasi as valued citizens. The draconian treatment of the adivasi by the state shows the corruption of a developing India. With limited means of survival, the subalterns have never known a decent life in which they were respected by the outsiders. Chotti Munda and his people endure abuse and accept the injustice done to them by the police, the government authorities, and the Diku, and tolerate everything because their ancient culture promotes peace and harmony. Their history and cultural identities have been repeatedly threatened by the powerful outsiders, but the subalterns realize at one point that the time has come for them to stand against the oppressors, and they refuse to remain silent anymore. Now the Mundas take up their arrows in retaliation and seek to write their own history. The novel presents the concern that, from the very beginning of their coexistence with the non-adivasi, the lives and the identities of

these subalterns were always under the threat of extinction; and for as long as leaders like Birsa, Dhani, or Chotti could, they tried to save the adivasi ways. Now all hands join to resist the attempts of the state to bring the adivasi into the corrupt ways of the central authorities and eliminate their uniqueness as indigenous communities. Mahasweta Devi has woven a tale as old as time where the powerful ruthlessly suppress the vulnerable and use the grand narratives of development and progress to justify atrocities committed against their fellow human beings. Yet, what makes the story powerful is the way the subaltern speaks – with their songs, stories, legends, and arrows to resist the encroaching hands of a hypocritical national culture. The readers are provided with a glimpse of hope for a better tomorrow, a just tomorrow, as the curtain falls on the thousand raised hands.

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