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## 2. Place, People & The Disabled Subalterned: A Case Study Of Chosen Texts Of Mahashweta Devi

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### **Abstract**

*The backdrop and setting of a literary narrative have always held a paramount role within the storytelling realm. To a perceptive reader, the seemingly inanimate locale often takes on a life of its own, evolving into a vital 'character' that engages with the plot and the story's protagonists. Long before the advent of eco-criticism, which began to exert its unique interdisciplinary influence on literature in the late twentieth century, the placement of a narrative held profound importance for the writer. If literature serves as a mirror reflecting life, then the canvas upon which that narrative unfolds represents the physical embodiment of the world in which life thrives. This unfolding of life can be perceived through multiple lenses. One facet involves the representation and discourse of the cultural identity expressed within the text. The literature of a particular land not only speaks of the land itself but also constructs an image of it within the minds of its readers. The second facet delves into the manifestation of ideas and concepts through the narrative's chosen locale within the text. These two facets are intricately intertwined, mutually enhancing and complementary in their influence on the narrative. For the purpose of examining these two facets of locale, we turn our attention to two literary works by the acclaimed author Mahashweta Devi: "The Mother of 1084" and "The Witch." These texts serve as compelling examples of how the setting and backdrop in literature can transcend mere physical description, becoming integral components that shape and enrich the narrative, all while engaging the reader in a profound exploration of culture, identity, and ideas.*

**Key words:** *Locale, Literary Narratives, Literary Characters, Eco-Criticism, Cultural Identity*

Location and background of a literary narrative has always been a crucial aspect of it. So much so that in the mindscape of a sensitive reader the inanimate locale often comes to life and becomes an important 'character' of the text who interacts with the plot and the protagonists. Even before

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the ideas of ecocriticism started to influence the field of literature in its unique interdisciplinary way in the late twentieth century, the positioning of a narrative was of vital importance for the writer. If literature is a representation of life, the canvas of that narrative is physical manifestation of the world where life enfolds. This unfolding can be perceived in multiple ways. Representation, and thereby discoursing, of the cultural identity that the text gives expression to, is one easpect of it. The literature of a land discourses the land and creates an image of it in the mind of its readers. The other aspect is the manifestation of the ideas and concepts through the locale of the narrative in the text itself. In fact these two aspects are interdependent and mutually enriching and complementary. For analysing these two aspects of locale I have chosen two texts of Mahashweta Devi. *The mother of 1084* and *The Witch*. Though my work focuses more on the *Mother of 1084* and the multiple aspects of representation of human live there, I will try to explore various interconnetced and multidimensional aspects of the representation of place and people in the both the texts.

Mahashweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* centers around an incident of death. As that incident unfolds through the narrative, a sense of life-in-death gradually takes shape and expresses itself through a long line of diseases; physical and psychic, chronic and corroding, diseases apparently unseen but gnawing from inside. This sense gets so perceptible that it almost becomes a character in the text; a shadowy but multi-faceted and omnipresent one, one that follows all other characters everywhere they go. One that hovers over empty roads and busy markets with equal ease. It is unseen but the reader can always sense its ominous presence. Sujata's ever worsening gangrenous appendix stares the readers in the eye and leaves them with a constant premonition that tomorrow may be too late. Nandini's blinded eye and damaged optical nerves document intense oppression, and the denial of it. Unlike the open and gaping wounds of Brati, Kush or Somu the progressively worsening condition of Sujata and Nandini is apparently hidden from the common eyes. But instead of numbing premonition that Sujata's condition conveys, Nandini's is a message of resistance, even if remote, because, unlike Sujata, Nandini is determined to get her eyes treated. The symbolism of active determination of Nandini becomes complementary to that of passive indifference of Sujata. This twin metaphor of disease with opposite approach towards it provides a dialogue in itself with its two faces representing the two hemispheres of this textual sphere. It is this dialogue that digs out and unearths many tales of power and resistance. Together, they form a repertoire to the narratives of power that ironically term the rise of the margin as 'cancerous growths' in society. The consciousness of an ever-festering infection at the heart of the social and political system of the milieu defines the figures and actions in this text.

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The novel *Mother of 1084* opens with preparations of birth, Sujata, is getting ready for her delivery. A life is going to begin. But this birth has an uncanny relation with death, it is as if the beginning is only a moment away from end. Eager acceptance is mixed with strong rejection. An unwilling mother who was coerced into conceiving, felt more and more violated and defiled with the growth of the life inside her through out the nine months. At the culmination of those 9 months when it is finally time to shed that weight and get 'separated' from it, it brings in pain and fear; fear for the child, fear of losing it. This shift from one to another has never been a straightforward one though. The tone of the novel is set right in the beginning where beginning and end, acceptance and rejection, craving and loathing, have been almost inseparable from each other. Life and death have always been overlapping here. The incident of 17<sup>th</sup> of January, that of Sujata, gripping the bedsheet in pain, gradually losing consciousness and then gaining it and getting to know about Brati in a 'half awakened daze' happened not only once. It happened twice, 20 years apart. In both the days Brati was lying there for Sujata to gaze on. First on hospital bed and then in the morgue. Brati was killed on his birthday.

This 'half awakened daze' has never really left Sujata or the readers for that matters through out the course of novel. It is through this daze that a sensitive reader can see walking deads crowd the canvas of the text. All kinds of deads. The likes of Brati and Somu who are officially marked to be so and are allotted numbers to identify their bodies in morgue, the likes of Jyoti and Nipa, Brati's siblings, whose empty celebrations of life fail to make an impression of living in true sense, the likes of Dibyanath and Saroj pal who are as good as dead in the eyes of Sujata as well as the likes of Nandini and Somu's sister who are made to be as inert as dead but refuse to be so from within. The habitual expectation of readers to perceive life and death in exclusive terms with clear demarcation between them is denied fulfilment by the author in this text. All we get is an uneasy in-betweenness. This sense of in-betweenness is always there in every scene and every part of the novel, always present like unseen entity hovering over the plot. It is trailing right behind the unsuspecting characters like their shadow. The central consolidation of such in-betweenness in this text happens mainly through the symbolism of disease. The central character Sujata is constantly in a state of pain. We almost fail to notice when the pain of contraction and operation in the labor room silently slides into the pain of appendix. The nerve racking long wait for the baby to come out transforms into the wait for the appendix pain to subside after taking the Beralgan tablet. Sujata's fresh lime and water to keep the pain of appendix in check recurs in the novel as a temporary quick fix to a problem which is too deep rooted to be

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addressed at this stage. The author makes it clear that an appendix should be treated on time. If it has to be cured it should be removed before it starts festering. But Sujata's appendix is already inflamed, already gangrenous. It can burst any time. And more over Sujata is anemic and has a weak heart, she may not survive the operation even if she manages to have one before it bursts.

Such a sense of helpless apprehension gets only worse when it is constantly brushed under the carpets again and again and glossed over with fake smiles. Such an approach to it denies a closure to it and prolongs the silent sense of suffering and fear. A grin on outside and an obvious death inside is more fearsome than a visible death. It is this fear that the author has used through the text to drive her point home.

Mahashweta Devi's emphasis on the glossy appearance of the lives of upper middle class people in the 70's Bengal makes the ever festering rot in the heart of the society even more perceptible to the readers. It is this contrast between the appearance and reality which is important in this text. And the symbolism of various life threatening diseases of different internal organs perfectly conveys this contrast. This strong symbolism along with the form and structure of the novel, with its economy of expression and back and forth narration, makes the text itself as a representative of a diseased body. As in this covid times we often say that an invisible virus is more frightening than a visible snake or tiger, so is the case in this novel. The wails of Somu's mother, the grim picture of rampant corruption, violence, denial and brutality are pitted against the shining parties and big talks of the rich. It is these cover ups that don't allow a closure to the pain and it keeps smoldering and gnawing the body of the text from within. That is why just as Sujata's appendix is never treated, it is always there all through out these years, the killers of Brati and Somu are always there, going about freely, chatting at the tea shop, teasing Somu's sister and observing Sujata's activity in their area.

The disease is never addressed. It is left there to thrive, unseen to callous eyes, but growing with every passing day and ready to devour the entire system at any moment. Bodies, as sights of control, wash up on the banks of time, Somu's head banged against something when his body was being dragged in front of his gasping and panting father; Kush was flung down in front of his house and then shot, his eye balls were melted; Brati's skin turned blue around the small holes made by the bullets, his mutilated face presented to his mother represent the sight of control, control in the hands of people who flaunt it as a tool of power. Same is the case of the bodies of those who still refuse to die like that

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of Nandini. In fact the case of Nandini provides a different angle of the process of control. The cigarette burn injuries inflicted by the interrogator on her skin have healed with ointment. But the trauma and injuries of her young heart have not. They are still burning. They are unseen and untreated and are almost denied their existence because the screams of torture could never escape the sound proof interrogation room.

But unlike Sujata she is not losing it all. It is these aches and burns that have sharpened her senses even more. Her right eye, totally blinded due to forced exposure to the glare of lamp for seventy two hours at a stretch, bear the sign of oppression and the denial of it, no doubt. But it does not point to the end of hope, or the slow and inevitable march towards the eventual end. Unlike Sujata she knows that she must get her eyes treated, she must become strong again, because for her, the fight is still not over, for her nothing is normal, she knows she will have to fight in another way and she will.

These two different approaches to different forms of physical ailment are symbolic to two different worlds in this novel and these two different worlds are represented through two different landscapes in this. The novel that deals with the concepts of injustice, deprivation, unequal distribution of resources, oppression of the voice from the margin and most importantly appropriation of reality from the vantage point of power, hinges heavily on the representation of this difference to drive its central point home. The world of Sujata, Dibyanath, Jyoti, Tony or Mrs Kapadia is stark opposite to the world of Somu, his mother and sister, Bijit, Partha, Kush or Nandini. the dilapidated house of Somu which deteriorated even more after his and his father's death makes Sujata feel ashamed of her wealth. Somu's mother's tattered Sari makes her self-conscious about her costly sari when she meets her. She becomes aware of the existence of a whole new world when she meets Nandini.

Sujata's hesitation to hold Nandini's hand; Somu's sister's hatred for Sujata; the stark contrast in the reaction of Somu's and Brati's fathers to the incident of their son's death, makes the incompatibility of these two worlds clear. While Somu's father rushed to police station and begged them to save his son, Brati's called the newspaper office to ensure his name does not get mentioned in next day's breaking news. Somu's mother's loud wails in public makes Sujata conscious of the fact that she can only cry secretly. This difference between the two worlds is the central point of this novel, because it is this difference that gave rise to the cause Brati died for in the first place. And his death does not destroy the cause. It only makes it stronger.

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The concept of disease and death used to denote deviation from 'normal' makes an interesting case here. More so because it is used from the perspective of both these worlds. On the one hand the normalized reality of elite life is "like a festering, malignant cancer. The dead pretended to live within relationships that are long dead and thus keep up a masquerade of life." (Devi 115). On the other hand custodians of this life like Saroj pal call the likes of Brati "a cancerous growth on the body of democracy" (Devi 29) because they represent deviation. According to Foucault, political order in a system is maintained through the production of "docile bodies"--passive, subjugated, as well as useful individuals, useful for the system. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault talks about the power in the hands of the discipline of medicine of defining reality through the creation of disease categories. And that happens on the basis of their definition of what is "normal" and what is "deviation". This process of normalization is understood to be a major tool in the hands of the system and its authority. It is interesting to note that in this text, which is a voice against an oppressive system, the same tool is used from the authorial position as well, though in a different way.

It is used to mark the 'deviation' from the ideology the text represents. In an interesting case of role reversal we see the world outside that of Brati, Somu, Bijit, Partha, Nandini and likes is categorized as 'sick' and infected. The infection is so raw and bad that they stink. Sujata feels if she stands too close to them then the stench of their infection will overwhelm her. The culmination of this representation happens when Sujata, in a party chocked full of such 'sick' people, feels the sharpness of the poignant question "Did Brati die so that these corpses with their putrefied lives could enjoy all the images of all the poetry of the world?...Did he die for this? To leave the world to these corpses?" (Devi 126 ). It is the same concept of deviation from normal that is used by the other side as well. In the same party the likes of Jishu Mitter and Molly mourn the 'deviation' of the likes of Brati and its consequences.

However, the important part that 'self surveillance' plays in Foucault's proposition is problematized in the context of both of these sects of allegedly 'sick' people here. The likes of Amit and Nipa are incapable of understanding their own disease and the likes of Nandini refuse to accept it as disease. The bodies in this case are not 'docile' in the strict sense because they are not passive to their definition and categorization here. But the author has used the indifference and more importantly incapability of the upper class society to fathom the depth of their 'disease' to emphasize the degree of their deviation. On the other hand, the likes of Nandini or Brati represent the resistance to power

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through their refusal. The overall idea of indifference to the presence of an infection in the system is an important tool in the hand of the author in this text. This idea gives rise o many questions and does not provide any answer.

The conclusion of the novel too, only has a “massive question spread through all the houses of the city” (Devi 127), but no answer. After letting out a long drawn cry, Sujatas ‘body’ fell to the ground. As her cry before collapsing is said to be carrying a smell of ‘blood and protest’, it becomes a war cry. It is all set to exterminate all the germs in the system. It is all set to burst out. it is exactly what every system of oppression and deprivation must prepare itself for. An eventual burst. The appendix that threatened to burst all through out the novel has finally burst, or so Dibyanath says. Whether it is an actual eruption of the infected internal organ leading to Sujata’s death or yet another full blown expression with half formed thought by Dibyanath, is never clear.

The significance of the place and locale is further associated to the politics of identity. Politics of identity and feminist theoretical concerns, have always been entangled with each other in a paradoxically interdependent relation. And we see that in both the texts in question. Just like a *Mother of 1084*, *The Witch* too deals with women who are often in the margin of all these discourses. Sujata is the city counterpart of Somri in *The Witch*. Like Sujata, Somri too is at the receiving end of the capitalist, patriarchal system of oppression. Unlike Sujata, Somri’s wounds are visible, her cries are audible. But her palamou is as unforgiving as the calcutta of Sujata. When Sujata succumbs to the hidden rot, Somri’s rot is written large on her naked body, her bloodstained mouth and her animal like behaviour. But one thing is common among them. That is the de humanization of an individual. Both the texts are replete with incidents of such attempts to rob individuals or groups of their identity. When in *Mother* we see a desperate attempt on their part to reclaim it, the mass in *The Witch* are lost in their ignorance and superstition.

The poor, superstitious villagers are easily fooled by the money lenders, landlords and by their own primitive and uncontrolled instincts. When patriarchy joins the equation, what we get is innocent women burnt, killed, stoned as part of witch hunt rituals. In *The Mother* Sujata has never known herself as the lady of her own household, as a wife or even as a mother except for her youngest child Brati and in *The Witch* the Somris, the Sanicharis and the Budnis are too lost in their cloud of poverty, illiteracy and superstition to even realize the existence of something called individual identity.

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The themes of Naxalite movements, police brutality, indifference of a section of society towards all the evils of it and most importantly the portrayal of that section of the system that actually benefits from all the chaos is common in both the texts. As we know, the Naxalite movement that had its roots in the tribal region of Naxalbari in the state of West Bengal in the 1970s, the tribal belt in the surrounding areas of Hazaribag or Darbhanga has often found its place in the works of Mahashweta Devi as well.

When we focus on the text of *The Witch*, the significance of the locale takes a different appearance though. Unlike the *Mother of 1084*, the text of *The Witch* is set in rural background. The strong ecocritical or rather eco feminist connections are visible from the beginning itself. The premonition of something evil is directly conveyed through the dry and hot climate in a tribal village. Though both men and women are exploited here, the denigration of women reaches a new height with the introduction of the ideas of witchcraft and witch hunt in this. Both nature and women are exploited, deprived and denigrated. Description of physical nature is intrinsically connected to that of human nature.

The story is a deep thesis on human mind and nature which find apt representation in its physical counterparts. The dry and sterile wind and soil of the tribal village sets the stage for the unfolding of equally deplorable mental landscape of its characters. While the cunning Hanuman Mishra cleverly puts the idea of a new kind of witch into the minds of the villagers in his vested interest, it will not be right to say that he is totally responsible for that. The ignorance of the Pahaan and his people has already been steeped in the crime of de-humanising women, or even men at times, for the phenomena as natural as that of flood, famine or drought. It is as if the barren and hostile landscape has fueled the primitive thirst for blood in the mind of these people.

Whether it is Mishra who brands Somri as 'daini' just to cover up his son's crime or Pahaan who feels it is his 'ancient right' to stone a designated 'daini' to death, whether it is greed and tyranny of the rich and powerful or stubborn illogicality of the men of the forest, it is always women who are at the receiving end. And this victimhood is etched as clear in nature as the water of Karura river turning into snakes. While all these go on uninterrupted because no one can do anything if an adivasi is 'not killed by a Brahmin or a Rajput' but by a fellow adivasi only, the characters become prominent in front of the readers one by one. A man's fear that he has become a *dain* simply because he cannot see his shadow

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in a dark room, sets the tone of ignorance and ignominy quite high in the text. The continuous exploitations, perpetrated sometimes by monetary fraud, sometimes caste complications and almost always by the unthinking chauvinist and primitive mindsets of the adivasis themselves only end up fueling the discourse building process of the onlookers, both at home and abroad. Honest reporting on the issues also get overshadowed by dramatic portrayals of the situation.

White women, painted black and dressed up as a 'daini's complete with chicken in hand to simulate the live bird supposedly eaten by the 'daini', appeals more to the audience than the real story of an innocent girl with speech and hearing impairment who is easily preyed upon and then branded as 'daini' to be disposed of by unsuspecting villagers.

It generates more capital through the sell of magazines or movies based on the 'real life' incidents of witch hunting, while the tribals of Palamau continue to reel under the load of this capitalism; while more and more 'daini's continue to fall victim to the vicious loop of patriarchy capitalism and castism. When Somri is raped and impregnated by Misra's son, the consequences of this crime is easily avoided by instilling the terror of witch in the minds of the people in the village. Not that the villagers are particularly worried about Somris anyway. They, in their ignorance and entitlement, can stone, strangle or burn the women of their own families at will. If someone's old mother is made to walk around to see if she is hovering, someone else's wife loses her nose that is cut off just to see if the blood is red or black.

While the old lady is lucky to survive the slight cut in her skin, the young one could not survive the damage to her face. Even a cow or a female porcupine is not outside the gambit of suspicion. A black cow is killed by its intoxicated owner for being black even though losing this only source of income directly refers to his own loss of life too. While a pregnant and mentally unstable somri runs around in the wild and is forced to feed on live birds or insects, her family is too engrossed to search for any sign of being cursed in women to actually go out in search for her out there. Or may be what stops them is not so much their pre occupation with 'signs' after all and is more about the power equation in larger sphere, because when Pahaan goes to enquire about his daughter, he gets a 'shoe to his face'.

As the disability theorists point out, one of the important approaches to disability is through the moral model of it in which disability is connected to morality. It can either deify disability or demonize it by [www.theresearchers.asia](http://www.theresearchers.asia)

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connecting it to different forms of supernatural interventions or at least extraordinary human feat and moral depravity respectively. Somri is 'slow witted and voiceless'. Her disability has clearly brought in the extraordinary or extra human dimension of her existence in a fatally negative way. Her non verbal cries of 'An han hann' mingles with the mysterious forest sounds and darkness of night and reduces her to the state of an animal.

But while animals like jackals and hyenas actually end up helping the villagers by eating the bodies of the victims of their chauvinism, this particular 'animal' only troubles them with her closeness to the human form and refusal to quiet down. The figure of Somri can only be perceived, in terms of neither a bear, nor an ox and definitely not human. Only her scream rend the sky and boil the blood of the scared villagers. Such is the mood of 'vengeful violence' that her own father, the pahaan, fails to recognize his daughter's voice, a father's heart fails to acknowledge the crying of the child. It is, as Devi calls it, 'the stone age' existing 'somewhere deep within them'. Though Mathur, the research scholar cum reporter realizes that it is a human being and not a 'daini', it is not a time for him to speak that out.

As somri takes shelter in a cave, hundreds of villagers create fire at the mouth of it. By the time Pahaan realizes the reality, it is too late. The snapping and crackling of branches under fire go simultaneously with the cry for help by the hapless girl..anh anh anh anh. The longing to burn down the forest, to challenge the forest department or the police on part of Prasad only shows the reckless cruelty of the unthinking mind that, ironically, feeds on fear for being alive.

'With amazing swiftness, with terrible violence, they cut down trees and bushes'.

In the absence of fear that mind becomes limp. The destruction of nature is strongly connected to the unabated exploitation of the doubly marginalized members of these communities in margin, the women. By the time the frenzied war cry of the mob ends, the sound of burning trees and burning Somri also stops. What lies is a new life 'between her legs' still connected to her senseless body with the umbilical cord on the floors of a smoked and burnt cave. While on the one hand nature, bent on destroying the villagers, refuses to pour rain, it, on the other hand, refuses to stop the primordial process of life begetting life, even if it has to happen in the midst of the all round onslaughts of death.

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Though Mahashweta Devi has never declared herself as an eco feminist in clear terms, her work, specially the text of *The Witch* clearly shows the association of women with nature. On the other hand her novella *The Mother of 1084* connects the city scape of Calcutta with the moral corruption and the internal rot of the apparently sophisticated human civilization. In both cases the locale of the texts plays a crucial role in bringing the points home. The representation of the people is always connected to the representation of the place, primarily because people grow out of their place. And from the people, grows their mirror image in literature.

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