

Can the Subaltern Speak? Voice, Representation, and Adivasi Agency in Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is a powerful postcolonial novel that centres on Chotti Munda, a tribal person whose resistance to the symbols and institutions of authority becomes a powerful critique of colonial and postcolonial structures of domination. Through Chotti's memory, collective consciousness, resistance to landlords and state power, and changing relationship with history, the novel suggests that while the subaltern may be structurally and institutionally prevented from speaking, subaltern communities still produce alternative forms of knowledge, memory, resistance, and collective speech. This paper examines Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and its interrogation of subalternity, representation, and epistemic exclusion. The paper investigates the conditions under which subaltern speech becomes socially, politically, and epistemically intelligible. The paper concludes that *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* both confirms and complicates Spivak by demonstrating that, although subaltern voices remain mediated by structures of representation, subaltern communities still manage to generate alternative forms of knowledge, memory, resistance, and collective agency.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi; *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*; Gayatri Spivak; Subaltern Studies; Representation; Adivasi Agency.

Introduction: The question of who has the authority to speak, and whose speech is recognised as meaningful, remains central to the postcolonial studies. During colonial period indigenous communities were frequently described, classified, and interpreted by colonial administrators, anthropologists, and missionaries, rather than being recognised as producers of their own histories. Even after the end of colonial rule, structures and institutions of power continued to restrict their political representation, questioned their cultural legitimacy, and doubted their forms of knowledge. The problem, therefore, is not simply whether the oppressed possess a voice, but whether their voices can enter dominant structures of representation and acquire social, political, and epistemic authority. This raises a fundamental question for postcolonial literary studies: who speaks for the marginalised, and under what conditions can their voices become historically and politically meaningful?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" assumes particular significance here. Spivak raises the issue that the intellectual or institution that attempts to represent the marginalised may inevitably mediate, translate, or speak on behalf of the subject being represented (Spivak 275–76).

Her discussion of epistemic violence further demonstrates that dominant systems of knowledge can erase, distort, or subordinate alternative forms of knowledge (Spivak 280).

Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* traces the experiences of the Munda community across a period. The community faces colonial domination, economic exploitation, landlordism, hostile political structures, and the expanding presence of the modern state to their disadvantage. But Mahasweta Devi's novel moves beyond a simple representation of Adivasis as victims of colonial and postcolonial oppression and instead presents them as historical subjects capable of remembering, interpreting, resisting, and negotiating the structures that seek to dominate them.

Spivak and the issue of Subaltern voice and representation: Spivak's essay posits that the subaltern undoubtedly possesses language, consciousness, desires, memories, and experiences. The problem is that speech does not automatically become politically or epistemically effective (Spivak 271–313).

A subject may speak, but if the institutional and epistemic structures through which knowledge is produced do not recognise that subject as an authoritative speaking subject, speech may fail to achieve political intelligibility. The subaltern is positioned outside or at the extreme margins of the structures. Consequently, the problem of subalternity is closely connected with structural exclusion. The intellectual who claims to “give voice” to the oppressed may inadvertently reproduce the very hierarchy that the intervention seeks to challenge. Spivak therefore asks; who is speaking, from what position, through which discourse, and with what authority?

The concept of epistemic violence is central to this argument. Epistemic violence refers to the ways in which dominant systems of knowledge produce, classify, interpret, and sometimes erase subordinated subjects. This insight is particularly relevant to Adivasi representation. The Adivasis' cultural practices and systems of knowledge may be treated as backward, primitive, irrational, or irrelevant when measured against dominant standards. A community may therefore be physically present and verbally expressive while remaining structurally excluded from the systems that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge. When Mahasweta Devi writes *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, she does not simply reproduce an already existing subaltern voice, she selects, organises, narrates, and interprets the experiences of the Munda community. Chotti's experiences reach the reader through Devi's narrative language, characterisation, and historical imagination.

The important questions that stare in our face become: Does the text reduce the Munda community to passive victims? Does it reproduce dominant colonial stereotypes? Does it present Adivasis merely as objects upon whom history acts? Or does it allow them to appear as subjects who remember, interpret, resist, and act within history?

Chotti Munda: From A Subaltern Subject to A Historical Agent: In Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Chotti becomes a subaltern subject not because he lacks history, consciousness, or agency, but because the structures surrounding him determine the extent to which his community can control land, labour, political institutions, and the production of knowledge about itself. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* does not allow this structural marginalisation to be equated with complete powerlessness. The novel's central achievement lies in its representation of Chotti as a subject who remembers, interprets, negotiates, and resists historical change. His subalternity is real and structurally produced, but it does not eliminate his

capacity for agency. Chotti's agency emerges through memory, community, cultural continuity, resistance, and historical consciousness.

Memory is one of the principal ways through which Chotti resists the reduction of his community to an ahistorical or passive population. The novel's broad temporal structure is particularly significant because it follows Chotti across decades, moving through colonial rule, independence, and the political unrest of the 1970s. Chotti consequently becomes a figure through whom historical time is experienced from below. His memory creates continuity between different historical periods. Colonialism may formally end, but the consequences of colonial structures do not disappear automatically. Memory therefore becomes a means of recognizing historical continuity. This is important because official history frequently privileges institutions, political events, administrators, governments, and national leaders. Chotti's memory introduces another historical perspective: the history of the community that experiences these transformations at the level of everyday life. His historical consciousness challenges the assumption that history belongs exclusively to those who write official records. Through Chotti, the novel constructs a form of subaltern historical memory. The Munda experience becomes something that must be remembered, interpreted, and transmitted. Memory consequently becomes connected with agency.

Chotti's agency must not, however, be interpreted exclusively at the level of individual consciousness. His experiences acquire meaning through collective memory, inherited practices, social relationships, and cultural continuity. The novel consequently shifts the reader from the idea of an individual subaltern voice to that of a collective subaltern consciousness. He becomes a representative figure through whom the experiences and transformations of the Munda community become visible. This collective dimension is essential to understanding the significance of his cultural identity. The arrow, his skill as an archer, and the traditions surrounding this skill cannot be reduced to individual talent. They belong to a cultural world in which knowledge is transmitted across generations. The arrow thus links Chotti to the community that produced him and to a history that extends beyond his individual lifetime.

The official historical record may describe a community through administrative, economic, or political categories. Devi's narrative instead foregrounds relationships, memories, cultural practices, and forms of collective knowledge. This movement from the individual to the collective also complicates Spivak's question about the subaltern's voice. If the subaltern is imagined only as an individual speaking subject, the problem of representation remains confined to whether one person's voice can enter dominant discourse. But *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* suggests that subaltern agency can also operate through collective cultural forms. The Munda community therefore becomes more than the object of external representation. It possesses a historical identity that is continuously reproduced through memory and cultural practice. Chotti's agency emerges within this collective world rather than outside it. His individual identity is inseparable from the community's history.

Chotti's resistance therefore operates on more than one level. He resists material domination, but he also resists the cultural erasure that accompanies it. To retain a cultural practice under conditions of social transformation is itself a form of persistence. Chotti is not simply a witness. He interprets the changes around him. His historical consciousness allows him to recognise differences between forms of power and to understand the consequences of social transformation for his community. The subaltern is thus no longer merely an object to be described by the historian, administrator, or intellectual. Chotti becomes a subject who experiences history from within and whose consciousness becomes part of the historical narrative.

Yet it would be misleading to conclude that Chotti simply escapes subalternity. He remains situated within structures of unequal power. His agency does not eliminate his marginalisation. Instead, the novel demonstrates that subalternity and agency can coexist. This is precisely where *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* can productively complicate Spivak. The novel does not refute the structural difficulty of subaltern representation; rather, it demonstrates that structural exclusion does not exhaust the subjectivity of the excluded. Chotti Munda is therefore neither simply a silent victim nor an entirely liberated political subject. He occupies the contradictory position of a historically marginalised subject who nevertheless remembers, acts, resists, and carries forward a collective cultural identity. In this sense, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* transforms the question of subalternity from a question of whether the marginalised can speak into a question of how marginalised subjects produce and sustain forms of historical agency under conditions of structural exclusion.

One of the most important features of Munda cultural life represented in the novel is the significance of oral transmission. In communities whose historical experiences have not always been preserved within dominant written archives, oral traditions become important repositories of collective memory. Stories, legends, songs, cultural practices, and inherited narratives enable knowledge to move from one generation to another. Such forms should not be regarded merely as supplementary to written history. They constitute alternative modes through which a community understands and preserves its past. The novel's engagement with oral cultural forms allows Devi to place community memory alongside official historical narratives. The history of the Munda is not available only through the records of the colonial state or postcolonial government. It also survives through the stories and cultural practices through which the community understands itself. Deepak Sedai's study of the novel similarly emphasises Devi's incorporation of Munda oral narratives and argues that the novel constructs an alternative history in response to mainstream historical narratives (Sedai 2018).

The novel thus creates what may be called a counter-memory: a form of remembering that challenges the dominance of official historical narratives. This does not mean that Munda memory should automatically be treated as a pure or uncontaminated alternative to official history. Such Rather, the importance of Munda memory lies in its ability to introduce experiences and perspectives that dominant historical structures have marginalised. The question of knowledge in the novel is also inseparable from the question of land. Bosudha Bandyopadhyay argues that *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* presents tribal resistance as rooted partly in an alternative ecological worldview and connects land alienation with the disruption of cultural identity and environmental balance (Bandyopadhyay 408–26). Similarly, Antara Saha's discussion of indigenous ecologies in the novel stresses the relationship between tribal survival, history, and closeness to nature (Saha). The same principle can be extended to other cultural practices represented in the novel.

However, the novel does not provide an uncomplicated solution to the problem identified by Spivak. Once Munda knowledge enters literature, it is inevitably mediated through the language and narrative structure of Mahasweta Devi. The novel therefore cannot claim to reproduce a completely autonomous or unmediated indigenous epistemology. Its achievement lies elsewhere: it makes visible the existence of knowledge systems that dominant structures have historically undervalued. The question consequently shifts from: Can the subaltern speak? to: What forms of knowledge does the subaltern possess, and why are some forms of knowledge more easily recognised than others?

The significance of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, therefore, lies in its ability to shift the discussion from voice to knowledge. The novel consequently suggests that the struggle of the subaltern is not only a

struggle to be heard but also a struggle to have one's ways of knowing recognised as meaningful. In this sense, challenging epistemic violence requires more than allowing the subaltern to enter dominant discourse. It requires questioning the epistemological structures that determine whose knowledge is heard in the first place.

Mahasweta Devi and the Ethics of Representation: The question of subaltern representation ultimately turns back upon the writer herself. If the subaltern's speech is structurally mediated by dominant systems of knowledge and representation, then a further question must be asked: **who speaks when Mahasweta Devi writes the story of Chotti Munda and his community?** The question is particularly significant because Mahasweta Devi writes from outside the Munda community while attempting to narrate its history, cultural practices, suffering, and resistance. Her novel therefore occupies a complex position between advocacy and representation. Mahasweta Devi is not simply recording an existing Munda narrative in a transparent manner. She is transforming Munda history and experience into a literary narrative intended for readers who may themselves belong to social and cultural worlds outside the community represented. Chotti's experience consequently reaches the reader through a chain of mediation.

The ethical question, therefore, is not whether Mahasweta Devi has the right to write about the Munda. A more productive question is: what kind of representation does her writing produce? Does it appropriate the Munda experience into a familiar literary framework, or does it challenge the categories through which the community has historically been represented? Mahasweta Devi provides the narrative structure through which the reader encounters Chotti, his community, their history, and their forms of resistance. This mediation should not be regarded as a defect that can simply be eliminated. Every literary representation involves selection and organisation. The important issue is whether the text acknowledges or conceals that mediation. Mahasweta Devi's representation is significant because Chotti is simultaneously oppressed and active, marginalised and conscious, culturally threatened and culturally persistent.

Conclusion: The ethical achievement of the novel lies less in claiming to “give voice” to the Munda than in challenging the conditions under which the Munda have historically been represented. This is an important distinction. The phrase “giving voice to the voiceless” can itself be problematic because it implies that the marginalised possess no voice until an intellectual give them one. Spivak's intervention warns precisely against such a paternalistic model. Mahasweta Devi's novel places Munda history, memory, cultural knowledge, and resistance within a literary narrative where they can no longer be dismissed as historically insignificant. Mahasweta Devi's achievement is not that she somehow disappears as author and allows an untouched subaltern voice to speak directly. Her achievement is that she uses her position as writer to expose the historical processes through which the Munda have been marginalised while refusing to reduce them to passive victims.

In this sense, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* both confirms and complicates Spivak. It confirms Spivak's warning that there is no transparent access to an authentic subaltern voice. But it complicates any interpretation of subalternity that reduces the marginalised to silence. Chotti remembers; the community preserves knowledge; cultural practices transmit history; the arrow carries identity; resistance produces agency. Devi's literary mediation does not erase these forms of expression, even though it necessarily shapes their representation.

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