



Representations of Women's Labour and Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's Fiction: A Feminist Sociocultural Lens and Implications for Inclusive ELT Pedagogy

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Abstract

The chapter examines how the labour and resistance of women is represented in the writings of Mahasweta Devi through a sociocultural perspective of feminism with implications to inclusive English Language Teaching (ELT) pedagogy. The fiction of Devi frequently depicts women, particularly tribal and rural women whose labor is needed to support them but is also the subject of abuse by the patriarchal and colonial systems. At the center of the analysis are the means by which the characters in Devi fight against oppression with the help of defiant actions, solidarity, and self-reclaiming. Through the analysis of such texts as *Breast Giver* and *Rudali*, this chapter will explore the representation of the exploitation of the physical and emotional labour of women uncovering the many-layered intersectionality of gender, class, and caste in postcolonial India. Pedagogically, this study brings to light the possibilities of the works of Devi to be used in ELT curriculum as a tool of promoting gender equality, social justice, and critical thought. ELT can transform the traditional approach to language teaching by adding the history of women challenges, and their resistance, to provide students with awareness of virulent social problems and, consequently, inclusivity in education. The feminist socio-cultural approach to the reading of Devi texts can provide a new model of teaching that does not only focus on linguistic competence but also deals with socio-political contexts on the usage of language. Finally, this chapter provides value to the notion that ELT needs to include more and more feminist voices to break the patriarchal norms and foster a more inclusive and socially-aware pedagogy.

Keywords: Women's Labour, Feminist Pedagogy, Mahasweta Devi, Social Justice, Inclusive ELT

1. Introduction

Mahasweta Devi is a great Indian author and an activist who is well known due to the heart-rending depictions she has made of the underprivileged people especially women in the socio-economic and political arena of the postcolonial India. Devi uses her strong narratives to examine the brutalities women had to deal with and their working conditions, exploitation and opposing to this condition in rural and tribal areas. Her works, *Breast Giver*, *Rudali* and *Mother of 1084*, are reflective and intersectional of gender, class and caste in that the labour of women, both physical and emotional, is backbone of their living, but is underestimated and victimized by systemic oppression. Nevertheless, the characters of Devi are not in the role of passive victims; they also take action, disrupting the established systems of authority and sexism, which is why the books she wrote are a crucial point of feminist study. Gender, identity, and labour exploration is crucial in the context of the English Language Teaching (ELT) as it not only enables students to master language skills but also to interact with more general social problems that define the world they live in. Conventional ELT models tend to ignore the socio-cultural contexts under which language is used, that is, the gendering and class-based dynamics that affect the voice of women both in literature and in society. The writings of Mahasweta Devi offer a broad and detailed space on which to have these dialogues, and she can help those interested in such issues to understand what it was like to be a woman whose experience often was dismissed in the larger discourse. Using the stories of Devi to teach English as a second language, a teacher can develop a more inclusive, socially conscious pedagogy that transcends the mechanics of learning English to allow the students to critically address the issues of gender equality, labour exploitation and resistance.

2. Research Question(s)

1. In what ways have Mahasweta Devi portrayed the labour and resistance by women?
2. So how can such representations be built into ELT so as to foster inclusive, feminist pedagogy?

3. Literature Review

Gender and labour studies tend to research the influence of social conventions and the market on the position of women in the home and public arena. Researchers have demonstrated that the labour provided by women, whether at home, in the farm or in the factories, is largely undervalued, yet it plays a very significant role in the operation of the societies. In most of the societies, the economic contribution of women goes unnoticed because of the patriarchal conceptions that restrain their chances of social advancement (Cohen, 2015). The rural or marginalised communities especially in the postcolonial societies are subjected to compounded exploitation because of their gender, class, and in some cases, caste. This is a key element of interpretation when it comes to explaining the depiction of female labour as Mahasweta Devi does.

Feminist literary criticism has traditionally been critical of how literature portrays and supports gendered power relations. The importance of language and narrative in the development of the societal perception of gender and the body has been highlighted by such scholars as Judith Butler (1990) and Simone de Beauvoir (2011). When reading the works of Mahasweta Devi through feminist prism, one has a chance to examine how these gendered power relations are manifested in the lives of her female protagonists. The theme of women marginalization and the stand that Devi gives to women against the structure of society, as well as, the way they revolt against the established norms and are willing to make their own stories resonate with the central feminist concepts of discarding the conventional roles and giving women new narratives (Beauvoir, 2011).

Past research work devoted to Mahasweta Devi and her description of women usually revolves around the theme of exploitation, oppression and resistance. In *Breast Giver* and *Rudali*, as an example, women are depicted as victims of physical and emotional exploitation, but they also create the spaces of the ability to act in ways of their own resistance. The body of the subaltern woman has been pointed out by scholars like Bandyopadhyay (2018) and Ghosh (2016) as an area of resistance Devi employs and this can be seen as one of the criticisms of both the patriarchal and the capitalist exploitation. Such studies contend that the fiction novels of Devi elevate the voices of the subordinate females to the centre of focus, highlighting their agency throughout the exploitative systems.

The idea of inclusive education has been discussed over the recent years and has been preoccupied with the idea of making education more accessible and attentive to various social identities including gender, class and ethnicity. Inclusive pedagogy in ELT entails the inclusion of resources and instructional practices that disrupt the traditional gender roles and allow the marginalized voices to be heard. According to scholars such as Kumaravadivelu (2003) and Canagarajah (2005), it is important to bring the local, socio-cultural issues to ELT in order to make sure that students are exposed to the real-life issues. This method is particularly paramount in the postcolonial situation where students can be highly challenged in the areas of gender inequality and social justice.

Intersectionality, as the initial concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is essential as the discussion of ELT intersection of gender, identity, and social class. Other scholars such as Pennycook (2010) and Rizvi and Lingard (2010) have stressed that the problem of power and privilege is constructed by various factors such as gender, race, and socio-economic status and thus, there is need to consider the varied identities that the students present to the classroom. Intersectionality framework in ELT implies that linguistic competence is not the only area that language teaching should concentrate on, but also to specifically include the socio-political challenges that students encounter in their daily lives such as gender-based discrimination and exploitation.

4. Significance of the Study

The given work is an important contribution to the feminist literary studies because it allows gaining a better insight into the way Mahasweta Devi portrays the labour, exploitation, and opposition of women. Although it is true that other scholars have addressed the general social and political issues in the work of Devi, this research chapter is dedicated to the discussion of how her stories can be of use in understanding the intersectional relations between gender, classes and caste. Examining the fiction of Devi in a feminist socio-cultural perspective, this study highlights the importance of women labour as a place where women are exploited and as a resistance. The representation of women and in particular those belonging to marginalized groups issued by Devi questions the traditional roles of gender and emphasizes on their agency against the systemic oppression. This view adds to the richness of feminist literary criticism by preempting the importance of the everyday plight of women and resistance against the mainstream literature. The chapter also reveals the way in which the subaltern women of Devi is a wider feminist commentary on the patriarchal and capitalist systems which adds to the current debate of the feminist theory regarding the depiction of marginal voices.

With respect to the implications of the research to English Language Teaching (ELT), the chapter shows how socio-

cultural issues like gender, labour and resistance should be incorporated in the curriculum of ELT. The presence of the work of Devi in language teaching allows teaching not only the language, but also the questions of social justice, equality, and human rights to the students. This study supports the idea of including the marginalized voices in ELT where the students are encouraged to reflect on the power relationships, gender disparities, and social-political realities that influence the use of language. This would lead to more inclusive and socially-conscious pedagogies which will empower students to be active agents of change in the society. ELT can transcend the traditional linguistic objectives of ELT by using the lens of feminism and social-cultural approaches to develop a more balanced and transformative learning process.

Lastly, this study is socially relevant outside of the classroom. The discussion of women labour and resistance in the fiction by Devi is directly related to the general concerns about gender equality, employee rights and empowerment of marginalized groups. Providing a voice to the people that are usually marginal to the mainstream discourse, the works of Devi question the social and economical systems that reinforce inequality. This chapter does not only support the idea of using these kinds of narratives in the learning process but also urges that we need to live in a more inclusive society where the roles of marginalized women are appreciated and important. In such a way, the study highlights the relevance of literature as a social change instrument, which can also be used to initiate a discussion on gender justice, economic equality as well as the abolishment of oppressive structures.

5. Objectives of the Study

- ❖ To examine the feminist sociocultural perspective on women in terms of their labour, resistance and exploitation in Mahasweta Devi.
- ❖ To investigate how the works by Devi could suggest the inclusive and socially-conscious pedagogy in ELT.
- ❖ To determine how ELT could use socio-cultural narratives, particularly marginalized women narratives, in the language teaching process.
- ❖ To consider how the work of Devi can provide challenges to the conventional gender and classes discourse in education and create more inclusive and equitable classrooms.

6. Methodology

Approach:

A blend of the feminist theory, the postcolonial theory, and the socio-cultural theory formed the basis of this research and offered a solid framework of analyzing Mahasweta Devi works. The gendered experiences of the female characters of Devi were analyzed using the feminist theory especially how they were exploited through labour and their resistance. The analysis used postcolonial theory because it tackled the socio-political situations of postcolonial India by emphasizing on how colonialism was intertwined with class, caste, and gender to make a difference in the lives of the marginalized women. The socio-cultural theory was used to look into the ways in which the fiction written by Devi depicted the actual conditions that women lived in rural and tribal societies and the ways in which cultural norms and social structure affected their labour and resistance. This multi-theoretical model created a subtle insight into the multifaceted ways through which Devi criticized the patriarchal and capitalistic systems as well as anticipating the agency of women who maneuvered amid these oppressive structures.

Research Design:

The study was qualitative in nature considering that the research was literary and socio-cultural in nature. It was focused on a deep analysis of literature but not numbers because of the desire to obtain meanings, patterns, and themes of Mahasweta Devi. The qualitative method was especially appropriate in this study because it gave the researcher an opportunity to dig deeper into the symbolic, social, and cultural aspects of the narratives of Devi. This study implied close analysis of main writings, the development of repetitive themes and important aspects concerning the labour of women, exploitation and resistance.

Data Collection:

The key reading materials to use in this study were the Breast Giver by Mahasweta Devi, Rudali, and Mother of 1084 to mention but a few. They were selected as they produced bright images of woman experiences in the socio-economically marginalized communities, their labour, emotional baggage and fight against exploitation. The secondary sources were scholarly works, journal articles and books that interpreted the writing of Devi focusing on feminist, postcolonial and socio-cultural perspectives. These secondary sources gave the background and theoretical background to the analysis of the fiction of Devi. Moreover, the knowledge about the socio-cultural and political systems that formed the narratives was supported by critical essays on gender, class, and caste.

Data Analysis:

The key data analysis technique was feminist textual analysis in which the gendered aspects of labour and resistance of women in the works of Devi were identified and unpacked. Close reading was used in order to show certain

passages, symbols and motifs that depicted the exploitation and agency of women characters. The analysis was conducted with the help of a thematic approach that helped to cluster similar patterns like emotional labour, commodification of women bodies, and resistance. This critique allowed to establish some parallels between the lived experience of the characters and the socio-political environments of gender, class, and caste. Through the feminist and socio-cultural approaches, the study was also aimed at analyzing the ways in which the works of Devi defied the traditional gender roles and also focused on the invisible, yet crucial, role of women in society.

ELT Pedagogical Implication:

The results of the study were very important to the English Language Teaching (ELT) practices. With the Mahasweta Devi works included in the ELT curriculum, the teachers would be able to expose the students to gender equality, social justice, and labour exploitation issues, which were very appropriate in the globalised world. The research proposed pedagogical approaches that included these themes in language classes, including the use of the texts of Devi to have a discussion on the issue of power relations, representation of women in literature, and the socio-cultural reality which influenced language and identity. Critical analysis of the actions of characters, discussion of feminist theories of resistance, and activities which prompted the students to consider the implications of gender-based exploitation in the real world were specific lesson plans. Moreover, ELT curricula designs might be structured to facilitate empathy, critical thinking, and social responsibility which would engage the students not merely in learning the language but also in supplementing socio-political issues which it presented. Through this, the study helped to promote an inclusive pedagogy where gender inequality was realized and understanding of it was created and given as well as a socially just approach to language teaching was promoted.

7. Findings

Themes of Labour and Resistance:

The main conclusions of this chapter were that the labour of women is always shown in the works by Mahasweta Devi as the place of extreme exploitation as well as a strong resistance. Women in the fiction of Devi, particularly women of marginalized groups are presented as the pillars of their families and communities, and as the women often find themselves working physically and emotionally to support the social and economic systems surrounding them. Their input is however undervalued and misused by the patriarchal and capitalist systems. In *Breast Giver*, a similar thing happens to the main character, Jagati, who is forced to put up with the commodification of her body as a source of livelihood to others, yet she stands up to this through the renegotiation of her agency and control over her body. The main character, a professional mourner in *Rudali*, is in control of the emotional and social pressures that are forced on her, as the author employs this role to defy gender and social roles. These characters show how invisibility of women labour can be achieved through various means such as silent rebellion, recovering autonomy or even through unity with other women, they subvert and topple the oppressive systems that they are subjected to. The representation of resistance in women by Devi brings out the resilience and the agency of women even in the context of a highly patriarchal society.

Social and Cultural Context:

The stories of Mahasweta Devi are heavily integrated with the social-cultural, economic, and political environment of postcolonial India. Her stories put the plight of women in context and in the light of what is viewed as the intricate cross-cultural interactions of gender, status, caste and the history of colonialism. The oppression of women in the fiction by Devi is not only a consequence of patriarchy but it is also related to the ex-colonial occupation and the socio-economic system of post-independent India. In the case of *Mother of 1084*, the socio-political setting of the Naxalite movement is employed to demonstrate how political instability and the social imbalance serve to increase the victimization of the sidelined groups, particularly women. The harshness of the reality of class and caste discrimination informs Devi in her portrayal of the labour of women especially in rural and tribal settings. Devi points out that socio-economic inequalities determine the labour relations of women with the help of her characters and that, in spite of all these difficulties, they can find a means of resisting and affirm their identity. Socio-cultural background of Devi works therefore offers critical discourse on which readers can realize the varied nature of oppression and resistance in the postcolonial societies.

Feminist Pedagogical Practices:

The results also reveal that the narratives of Devi have great potential of educating feminist pedagogical practice in the ELT classroom. Including her works in language teaching, teaching can help the educators involve students in the discussion concerning gender equality, social justice, and the exploitation of female labour. The stories of Devi provide a good source of writing about gender, social classes, and caste as well as make them a perfect one to encourage critical thinking and empathy in students. In the ELT setting, instructors may utilize the texts that Devi created in order to create the lesson plans that would not only break the traditional stereotypes surrounding gender but also make students reflect on the issues of power, whether in literature or real-life contexts. As an example, it is

possible to discuss how female characters of Devi bargain their positions in patriarchal systems and how the instances of their resistance are perceived as empowerment. The activities may consist of group discussions, role-plays, or creative writing activities on a topic that explores ideas related to gender-based exploitation, solidarity, and empowerment. By incorporating the works of Devi into the ELT curriculum, the educators will have an opportunity to foster the notion of inclusive education, which mitigates social inequalities and makes students think about the more socio-political context in which the usage of the language is embedded. This would not only assist the students to gain better language proficiency but also enable them to get to know significant problems in society, making them more socially conscious and aware of gender.

8. Discussion

Interpretation of Findings:

The critical discussion of the writings of Mahasweta Devi shows that the authors provides an intense investigation of female labour and uprising, having its roots in the socio-cultural and political situations in postcolonial India. The fact that Devi presents women as victims of exploitation and resistance agents is itself a direct address to feminist theory issues of the cross-cutting of gender and class with power. Through the feminist lens, her characters are examples of how the female body and labour is commodified by patriarchal and capitalist systems. Nevertheless, Devi also brings out the opposing aspect where the same women manage to undermine and fight against these oppressive systems asserting their agency even when challenges are overwhelming.

Devi in *Breast Giver* and *Rudali* among other novels explains how women labour (physical and emotional) has never been valued and it has never been seen but this is the basis on which a whole community lives. In one way or another, these women resist, either by staying silent, forming solidarity or by reasserting their control over their bodies against a system that is meant to oppress them. The feminist perspective gives more insight into the way Devi exploits the labour of women not only to survive, but as a form of resistance. Moreover, her works also overlap with socio-cultural realities, namely the ones related to caste and class, which explains the cumulative levels of oppression of marginalized women. This intersectionality is in line with feminist and postcolonial theory, which criticizes the interconnected systems of exploitation which are unique to women in particular situations.

The opposition manifested in the works of Devi disputes the conventional explanations of passive victimhood. Rather her characters show that resistance may be low profile and silent and ordinary as well as being transformative. The work of Devi demands the reconsideration of the role of women in historical or the contemporary life, and it is important to note the strength of the marginalized women moving through the inequality system and struggling with its mechanisms.

Implications for ELT:

The results of this chapter imply that the works of Mahasweta Devi can be important as a pedagogical resource in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in terms of building inclusiveness and social justice. The incorporation of the stories about Devi into the ELT curriculum can be used as the means of discussing such thorny questions like gender disparity, the oppression of classes, and the exploitation of labour among the female population. Through reading the works of Devi, students can be interested in understanding the socio-cultural backgrounds of the life of women in postcolonial societies, which is especially relevant to the students who may live in other socio-political backgrounds.

Regarding the ELT curriculum development, the fiction writing by Devi can be used to create the lesson plans incorporating gender-sensitive discussions, promoting critical thinking, and making students discuss social justice. These texts can help teachers to present the theme of resistance, power relations, and gender and identity complexity. As an illustration, one might discuss the question of what resistance may appear like in various situations in the classroom, which will enable the students to ponder over the actual application of gender-based exploitation. Besides language skills, this would also foster an understanding of social injustice and empathy that would stimulate students to reflect on what they can do to make the world a more moral place.

Moreover, studying the texts of Devi in ELT would result in more culturally relevant pedagogy since the texts of this author are concerned with the problem of caste, class, and postcolonial identity that many students of the Global South or the diaspora can connect with. When the language learning process is organized in cooperation with the critical and real-life issues, the educator will have the opportunity to build the climate that will develop not only language proficiency but also social awareness.

Critique of ELT Practices in Existence:

The contemporary ELT practices are usually not effective enough to handle gender concerns as well as the larger socio-cultural realities that define the life of the students. In conventional English language pedagogy, there has not been much space to discuss gender equality, social justice, or the exploitation of women labour, particularly in the postcolonial or marginalized setting. Most of ELT materials and teaching practices are still based on the traditional gender norms thus not yet giving full attention to the dynamics of power and resistance that women have in their lives especially in the non-western societies.

An evaluation of the existing strategies shows that there are no diverse materials and points of view used in the classroom. Sexual exploitation is not a topic of effective deepening and the voices of the oppressed women, especially in postcolonial or rural, setting are not heard. In this manner, the current ELT practices are under the danger of reinforcing old stereotypes and not providing students with the means of critical thinking that could help them solve real-life challenges of gender inequality and social justice.

To fill in these gaps, the study suggests more participatory approach to ELT, which involves inclusion of a variety of literature including the works of Mahasweta Devi, which will help to engage in critical thinking regarding gender, class, and caste issues. Teachers must focus on the texts that emphasize the mode of marginalized women, and literature should serve as a way to subvert the conventional gender roles, as well as to show students the intricacies of societal inequality. This not only brings ELT to a more inclusive part, but also enables the students to relate language learning to the bigger social concerns that plague their lives.

Through ELT, through incorporating feminist and socio-cultural values, teachers can create classrooms that are more representative of the wide world within which they exist, and which prompts them to view language as not only a means of communication, but of participation, and resistance to the world they inhabit. This will allow teaching language to become a social change agent, where equality and empowerment within and without the classroom should be encouraged.

Suggestions for ELT Pedagogy

1. With the help of works by Devi, discuss, engage in role plays, and creative tasks on gender and labour problems.
2. Integrate different voices, and in particular marginalized women, in the curriculum via literature and media that is reflective of their experiences.
3. Promote gender and power critical thinking through the challenge of stereotypes and gender roles in the text.
4. Employ collaborative initiatives (social justice) to foster cohesiveness and emphasize community opposition as in the works of Devi.
5. Relate language learning to real-world problems through texts on the topics of exploitation and resistance to take action and promote action.

9. Conclusion

The chapter has found out that Mahasweta Devi has provided an influential representation of women labour and resistance, emphasizing on the intersection of gender, classes and exploitation. Her female characters, who represent parts of the marginalized communities, are forced to struggle with oppressive socio-cultural systems and find solutions to fight against them by resorting to resilience and agency. These revelations highlight the need to have gender inequality and use of women labour as themes in English Language Teaching (ELT) as a way of instilling critical thought and social justice. Using the stories of Devi to teach students within the ELT program, the educators will be able to equip them with skills to be more critical of social problems, oppose patriarchy, and increase the inclusivity of education.

Such a study also gives an insight to feminist literary criticism by further enriching the knowledge of how Mahasweta Devi criticizes the exploitation of women through her narrations, and the use of the subtle and undervalued forms of resistance. Also, it highlights the possibility of the works of Devi to inform and enrich more inclusive ELT practices based on the need to have an education system that acknowledges more of the marginalized voices and encourages gender equality.

It may be considered that future studies will look into the works of other feminist authors in the ELT field to investigate the applications of their works to gender and social justice. Future research could also examine the role of feminist pedagogies in other cultural settings and especially the influence of feminist pedagogies on student interest in gender matters and the development of an inclusive, socially aware learning experience.

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