Article

Decolonization through Language and Culture in the Writing of Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract: This paper examines how Mahasweta Devi's oeuvre performs decolonization through acts of language and culture: dismantling imperial epistemologies, reanimating subaltern knowledge systems, and refunctioning myth and official archives. Through a qualitative close reading of selected works—Draupadi ("Dopdi"), Breast-Giver ("Stanadayini"), Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha, Aranyer Adhikar (Right to the Forest), and Mother of 1084, the analysis maps three intersecting strategies. First, Devi mobilizes multilingual registers (Bengali, Hindi, English, and Adivasi lexicons) to unseat colonial and upper-caste-nationalist authority over meaning. Second, she centres indigenous cosmologies, labour, and land relations to contest colonial-capitalist extraction and its postcolonial afterlives. Third, she retools mythic and documentary forms—Mahabharata figures, police dossiers, medical records exposing how the empire and the modern state weaponize narrative control. The paper argues that Devi's writing is about the subaltern; it is written with subaltern language practices that enact decolonization at the level of form, style, and ethics. The conclusion reflects on implications for translation politics and decolonial pedagogy.

Introduction

Decolonization is more than the juridical transfer of power from empire to nation-state. It is a long struggle to unlearn colonial hierarchies of language, knowledge, and culture, while rebuilding worlds otherwise. Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) wrote within and against this history. A journalist, activist, and Bengali author, she chronicled peasant and Adivasi life under the combined pressures of colonial residue, bureaucratic neglect, and capital. Her narratives are about dispossession; they propose alternative grammars of dignity and repair. The present study investigates how Devi's writing enacts decolonization through language and culture. Rather than treating "decolonization" as a metaphor for diversity, the paper follows a materialist understanding: undoing structures of extractive power and epistemic dominance, including the literariness of the colonial language order. Devi's work stages this undoing in style (register shifts, code-mixing), in content (forest rights, women's labour, Adivasi cosmologies), and in narrative ethics (refusal of the omniscient colonial gaze). By reading representative texts across genres and decades, we show that Devi's decolonial practice is both aesthetic and infrastructural, producing new relations among speakers, listeners, and archives.

Objectives of the Study:

- To analyse how Mahasweta Devi employs multilingual registers to challenge colonial and caste–nationalist hierarchies of meaning.

- To examine the refunctioning of myth and oral traditions in Devi's texts as tools of cultural resistance and decolonial memory.

- To investigate how Devi critiques colonial and postcolonial archives through counter-narratives of testimony, rumour, and affect.

- To explore how Devi foregrounds Adivasi cosmologies, labour, and land relations as alternative epistemologies.

- To assess the ethical and political implications of translation in rendering Devi's subaltern-cantered literary practices.

Literature Review:

Scholarly debates on decolonization and language have long emphasized how linguistic hierarchies reproduce structures of colonial domination. Frantz Fanon underscores the psychic violence of adopting the colonizer's tongue, observing that "to speak a language is to assume a world, a culture" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 2). For Fanon, language is a neutral medium and a site of subjugation, in which colonized subjects internalize inferiority. Building on this critique, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o advocates for literary production in indigenous languages as a radical practice of cultural sovereignty, arguing that "the domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations...was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized" (*Decolonising the Mind* 16). Both thinkers highlight language as an instrument of control and a potential tool of liberation.

Homi Bhabha complicates this binary by theorizing hybridity and mimicry as strategies of resistance within the colonial discourse itself. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha contends that colonial authority is destabilized by the ambivalent and hybrid practices of the colonized, who "translate and reinscribe" the signs of power (162). This perspective is particularly relevant to Mahasweta Devi's polyphonic style, which braids bureaucratic, subaltern, and mythic registers to unsettle singular meanings.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak extends the debate to the politics of representation and translation. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she demonstrates how subaltern voices are persistently mediated or erased by dominant structures, raising ethical questions for scholars and translators. Spivak's translations of Devi's *Draupadi* and *Breast-Giver* embody her own argument: she retains opacity and untranslated terms to resist domesticating subaltern speech (*In Other Worlds* 183). Spivak thus situates Devi's oeuvre within a decolonial ethics of language, were opacity and interruption challenge metropolitan readerships.

In the context of Indian literature, critics have noted how Devi's writing exposes the afterlives of colonialism in postcolonial state structures. Samik Bandyopadhyay, in his introduction to *Mother of 1084*, highlights Devi's "unsparing realism" in portraying the bureaucracy's dehumanizing language (xii). Scholars such as Radha Chakravarty argue that Devi's narratives reconfigure myth and oral traditions into counter-archives that resist state historiography ("Mahasweta Devi and the Politics of Translation" 45). Together, these readings situate Devi at the intersection of literature, activism, and decolonial thought. This body of scholarship frames the present study, which examines how Devi enacts decolonization in theme and at the level of form, style, and cultural practice. By engaging with Fanon's critique of linguistic domination, Ngũgĩ's call for indigenous language politics, Bhabha's hybridity, and Spivak's translation ethics, this research locates Devi's oeuvre within a larger transnational discourse of decolonial aesthetics. Postcolonial and decolonial writing has emphasized language's centrality to domination and liberation. Fanon highlights the psychic and social disciplining embedded in the colonizer's language; Ngũgĩ calls for decolonizing the mind through indigenous languages; Bhabha foregrounds hybridity and the ambivalence of mimicry; Spivak interrogates the politics of representation and translation.

These frameworks illuminate Devi's practice in at least three ways:

1. **Language as hierarchy and counter-practice.** Colonial modernity ranks languages by proximity to European norms. Devi counters by braiding bureaucratese, street idiom, Adivasi terms, and lyrical Bengali into a dynamic polyphony that refuses a single "proper" register.

2. **Myth as a living archive.** Mythic figures in Devi as Draupadi, maternal archetypes, ancestral spirits—are not decorative; they are refunctioned to articulate contemporary state violence and collective memory, converting myth from hegemonic continuity into insurgent discontinuity.

3. **Archive and counter-archive.** The colonial and postcolonial state accumulates files: police reports, medical charts, land records. Devi reproduces and deranges these

genres to demonstrate how paperwork erases lives and how testimony, rumour, and song rebuild them.

This study adopted a decolonial hermeneutic: it privileges community-centred knowledge, land-based relations, and multilingual textual practices as sites of resistance. While engaging with established theory, the argument proceeds from Devi's textual strategies rather than forcing the texts into ready-made conceptual boxes.

Methodology:

The study employs qualitative textual analysis with three steps: (a) close reading of language choices as diction, code-switching, narrative voice; (b) thematic mapping of cultural practices as rituals, kinship, labour, land; and (c) genre analysis of how Devi appropriates documentary, mythic, and oral forms. Primary texts are consulted in translation with reference to Bengali originals where possible, while treating translation as a co-authored field requiring ethical attention. The aim is interpretive adequacy rather than exhaustive coverage.

Language, Activism, and the Postcolonial Present:

Devi's journalism and activism among Adivasi communities, peasants, and bonded labourers form the ground of her fiction. Her writing refuses the metropolitan Bengali centre as the normative vantage point. Instead, authority is distributed to characters whose speech registers often lie outside "standard" Bengali: Adivasi idioms, Hindi-inflected Street speech, and the formal jargon of police and welfare offices. This linguistic ecology mirrors the social one: forests, quarries, tea gardens, bustees, and prisons. The narrative insists that decolonization must reckon with both state and market continuities of colonial extraction through dams, mines, and security regimes.

Decolonization through Language and Culture:

Naming, Unnaming, and the Refusal of Capture in *Draupadi* ("Dopdi"):

In *Draupadi*, the insurgent protagonist Dopdi Mejhen is repeatedly renamed by the state: in wanted notices, in police briefings, as a body to be captured. Devi's textual economy mimics and exposes the state's obsession with cataloguing: aliases, measurements, marks. However, the story pivots on Dopdi's reclamation of self through refusal, a naked, language-shattering confrontation that denies the agents of the state the satisfaction of recognition on their terms. The decolonial move is twofold: de-authorizing the carceral archive and asserting bodily autonomy as a counter-discourse. Crucially, Devi's prose breaks with polite realism; rhythmic repetitions and abrupt imperative lines puncture narrative decorum, making language answerable to embodied defiance.

Labor, Milk, and the Political Economy of Care in *Breast-Giver* ("Stanadayini"):

Breast-Giver satirizes nationalist and philanthropic discourses that sanctify maternal sacrifice while exploiting women's reproductive labour. Jashoda's body is a site of extraction, sacralised and consumed by the middle-class household, medicine, and media. The text stages collisions among registers: devotional idiom, medical

terminology, and domestic accounting. By forcing these languages to cohabit uneasily, Devi exposes how colonial biopolitics persist in postcolonial institutions. Decolonization appears as a reclamation of naming—refusing euphemisms that mask exploitation and as a cultural critique of the household as a microcosm of extractive modernity.

Subaltern Cosmologies and the Nonhuman in *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha:*

Set in a famine-stricken Adivasi region, this novella centres on an ancient creature's apparition, a pterodactyl seen as a fantasy and a cosmological sign. The narrative aligns with Adivasi epistemologies that conjoin human, ancestral, and geological time. The journalist-protagonist learns to listen rather than "collect data," and the prose slows to accommodate storytelling, gesture, and silence. The decolonial intervention lies in validating more-than-human kinship and temporalities dismissed by developmentalist rationality. Language here yields space to pauses, untranslated terms, and ritual sequences, resisting the ethnographic compulsion to domesticate the other.

Forest as Law- Land, Sovereignty, and *Aranyer Adhikar* (*Right to the Forest*):

These historical novel recounts the Birsa Munda movement, centring collective claims to the forest as law, not mere resource. Devi's narration intersects oral history with colonial records, revealing how codified law criminalized customary rights. The novel's documentary fragments, petitions, and proclamations are recontextualized within community narrative time, displacing the colonial archive's authority. Culture and language converge in the political slogan, the song, and the oath; sovereignty is imagined as relational stewardship rather than territorial abstraction.

Memory, Mourning, and State Documents in *Mother of 1084:*

Here, a middle-class mother reconstructs her revolutionary son's life through encounters with files, morgue records, and former comrades. The story demonstrates how official paper trails sanitize violence while mothers and lovers hold affective archives. Devi's prose alternates between clipped bureaucratic phrases and intimate recollection, making visible the friction between documentary closure and living grief. The decolonizing gesture is methodological: the text instructs readers to distrust the "complete file" and attend to broken testimonies.

The Work of Language- Polyphony, Code-Switching, and Translation Ethics:

Across texts, Devi crafts a polyphony that refuses linguistic purity. Adivasi words remain untranslated or footnoted sparingly, asking readers to dwell in opacity rather than demand instant intelligibility. Bureaucratic idiom is quoted to be ironized. Street speech interrupts elite Bengali fluency. This is not aesthetic seasoning; it is a political decision that reassigns authority. Translation becomes an ethical practice of accountability, not domestication. The translator's visibility (via prefaces, glossaries, or strategic retention of source terms) is part of the decolonial apparatus, foregrounding the labour and limits of crossing languages.

Conclusion:

Devi's cultural worlds, festivals, funerary rites, hunting practices, and songs are static remnants of a bygone past and living practices of social reproduction and governance that resist the homogenizing thrust of modernity. Her fiction demonstrates that these cultural forms embody ethical and political values of interdependence, reciprocity, and collective stewardship, offering a counter-modernity that challenges the extractive logic of both colonial and postcolonial states. Devi transforms inherited symbols into insurgent discourses that speak to contemporary violence and subaltern resilience. Similarly, through her reworking of bureaucratic and archival genres, she destabilizes state authority over memory and meaning, foregrounding oral testimony and embodied knowledge as valid epistemologies. Thus, Devi's oeuvre enacts decolonization at the thematic level and through its formal innovations, linguistic polyphony, and ethical commitment to marginalized voices. In this sense, her writing is both literature and praxis: a decolonial pedagogy that unsettles dominant epistemes and reimagines cultural sovereignty.

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