



## Subaltern Consciousness in Postcolonial India: A Comparative Study of Bama and Mahasweta Devi

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores subaltern consciousness through the works of Bama, a Dalit Christian feminist from Tamil Nadu, and Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali writer advocating for tribal rights. Drawing on Gramsci's hegemony, Guha's subaltern historiography, and Spivak's critique of representation, it argues that both authors transform intersecting oppressions of caste, class, gender, and ecology into narratives of resistance. By comparing Karukku (1992) and Sangati (1994) with Draupadi (1978) and Aranyer Adhikar (1977), the study reveals how subaltern voices challenge Brahmanical patriarchy and state violence. Employing postcolonial feminist methodology, it posits that their writings forge an alternative canon, addressing Spivak's question: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" through embodied speech and corporeal defiance. This analysis underscores their relevance to contemporary social justice movements in India.*

### KEY WORDS

*Subaltern Consciousness, Dalit Feminism, Tribal Resistance, Postcolonial Literature, Comparative Studies.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Defining Subaltern Consciousness

Subaltern consciousness emerges as a critical lens in postcolonial discourse, capturing the fragmented agency of marginalized groups under hegemonic structures. Antonio Gramsci first conceptualized the subaltern as those excluded from dominant historical narratives, existing outside the intellectual and moral leadership of ruling classes (Gramsci 1971). Ranajit Guha extended this in the

Subaltern Studies Collective, positing subalternity as autonomous yet suppressed domains of peasant insurgency against colonial and elite nationalisms (Guha 1982).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak radicalized the term in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), interrogating how Western intellectuals ventriloquize the subaltern, particularly women, rendering their speech inaudible within epistemic violence. For Spivak, subalternity is not mere silence but a structural impossibility of representation.

Bama and Mahasweta Devi embody this lineage. Bama’s *Karukku* disrupts Tamil Brahminical histories with Dalit Christian testimonials, while Devi’s *Draupadi* elevates tribal women as militant subjects. A comparative re-reading is essential: Bama chronicles caste-class-gender intersections in rural Tamil Nadu, Devi tribal ecological displacements in Bengal-Jharkhand. Both challenge capitalist modernity and state power, necessitating a postcolonial feminist framework to trace their evolution from silence to self-articulation.

## Objectives

1. Analyzing intersecting subalternities;
2. evaluating speech and resistance;
3. Comparing stylistic strategies; and
4. assessing contemporary relevance.

## Hypothesis

Posit that their works affirm subaltern speech via bodily and collective narratives, contributing to an alternative Indian canon.

## Theoretical Framework and Methodology

### Postcolonial Feminist Methodology

This study adopts a comparative postcolonial feminist approach, integrating textual analysis, historical contextualization, and critical theory. Primary texts Bama’s *Karukku* and *Sangati*; Devi’s *Draupadi*, Aranyer *Adhikar*, and *Pterodactyl* undergo close reading for motifs of body, memory, and resistance. Secondary sources include Gramsci, Guha, Spivak, Dalit theorists like Sharmila Rege, and ecocritics like Rob Nixon.

### Research Questions

How do caste/tribe intersect with gender in subaltern formation? Does corporeal narrative enable speech? What stylistic innovations construct alternative historiographies?

Scope limits to English translations, focusing 1970s-1990s texts amid India’s Emergency and liberalization. Originality lies in bridging Dalit-tribal divides, often siloed in criticism. Limitations: translation losses in oral idioms; exclusion of untranslated works.

## Intersecting Structures of Subalternity: Caste, Class, and Tribe

### Caste-Class Oppression in Bama’s *Karukku* and *Sangati*

Bama’s *Karukku* (1992), written in Tamil and translated into English, shatters dominant narratives of Tamil social history. As a Dalit nun’s autobiography, it exposes caste humiliation within Christian missions and agrarian labor. Pain becomes political: “My body burned with shame” (Bama 2014, p. 45) narrates upper-caste taunts, transforming personal memory into collective consciousness.

Caste intersects class in coolie labor, where Dalit women endure double exploitation feudal landlords and missionary paternalism. *Sangati* (1994) documents this “lived epistemology” (Rege 2006), weaving everyday vignettes of sexuality, motherhood, and violence. A woman’s rape by an upper-caste man sparks community defiance, illustrating subalternity as relational: “We are not just bodies for their pleasure” (Bama 2009, p. 112).

### **Tribal Marginalization in Mahasweta Devi's Works**

Devi's *Draupadi* (1978) features Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal tribal rebel. Arrested post-Naxalite uprising, her gang-rape by army officers becomes revolutionary aesthetics: she confronts Senanayak naked, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but my humiliation?—try stripping that" (Devi 1995, p. 195). Caste-class fuse with tribal identity against state counterinsurgency.

Aranyer Adhikar (1977) and Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha (1995) address ecological subalternity. In Aranyer Adhikar, Birsa Munda's descendants fight land grabs by industrialists, embodying displacement: "The forest is our history" (Devi 2002). Pterodactyl layers adivasi displacement with guilt-ridden elite narratives, critiquing capitalist modernity's violence on land-bodies.

Both authors reveal subalternity as intersectional: Bama's caste-religion-gender triad parallels Devi's tribe-state-ecology nexus.

### **Subaltern Speech, Silence and Resistance**

Spivak's query—"Can the Subaltern Speak?"—resonates profoundly. Bama's autobiographical voice answers affirmatively: Karukku's raw Tamil-English hybrid defies elite literacy, channeling collective pain into "counter-narrative" (Pandian 2008). Silence ruptures into speech via memory fragments, as Dalit women reclaim history from Brahmin annals.

Devi's protagonists embody militant speech. Dopdi's scarred body "speaks" when words fail, inverting colonial gaze. In Pterodactyl, Pirtha's tribal murals voice ecological resistance, countering elite historiography.

**Yet resistance varies:** Bama's is testimonial realism, Devi's revolutionary fiction. Both use women's bodies as protest sites Bama's laborers birthing amid toil, Dopdi's nudity as weapon—challenging patriarchal erasure.

### **Dalit Feminism vs. Tribal Agency**

Bama distinguishes Dalit feminism from mainstream variants (e.g., Phule-Ambedkar lineage vs. Savarna-led movements). Caste-religion-gender converge: Christian Dalits face double alienation. Devi portrays tribal women as agents, not victims Dopdi leads armed struggle, transcending pity narratives.

### **Narrative Strategies and Stylistic Innovations**

#### **Oral Tradition and Fragmentation**

Both employ oral idioms for subaltern assertion. Bama's Sangati mimics village gossip "sangati" means events blending folk songs and non-standard Tamil to democratize narrative. Fragmentation mirrors oppressed consciousness: short vignettes evoke collective voice, akin to testimonio.

Devi integrates Ho-Munda dialects in *Draupadi*, with staccato prose mimicking insurgency. Aranyer Adhikar uses mythic allusions (Birsa Munda as avatar), fusing oral epics with realism.

#### **Autobiography vs. Revolutionary Fiction**

Bama's autobiography politicizes the personal, constructing alternative historiography. Devi's fiction elevates individuals to symbols, critiquing state power. Together, they document subaltern India across caste-tribe divides.

Comparative Analysis: Chroniclers of Marginal India

Aspect	Bama (Karukku, Sangati)	Mahasweta Devi (Draupadi, Aranyer Adhikar, Pterodactyl)
Primary Oppression	Caste-class-gender in Dalit Christianity	Tribe-state-ecology in adivasi struggles
Resistance Mode	Testimonial memory, collective voice	Corporeal defiance, revolutionary aesthetics
Stylistic Tool	Oral gossip, autobiographical fragments	Dialectal prose, mythic realism
Theoretical Echo gendered subaltern	Guha's peasant autonomy, Spivak's Nixon's slow violence	Gramsci's counter-hegemony,
Body as Site	Labor pain, sexual humiliation	Rape scars, land-body metaphor

This table highlights synergies: both challenge Brahmanical patriarchy and modernity, forging cultural resistance.

## CONCLUSION

Bama and Devi's works resonate amid 2020s India farmers' protests echo Aranyer Adhikar's land struggles; #DalitLivesMatter mirrors Karukku's caste violence; Adivasi displacements persist in mining corridors.

Their contribution crafts an alternative canon in translated Indian literature, amplifying subaltern voices globally. Subaltern writing evolves from Spivakian silence to self-articulation: Bama speaks from within, Devi arms the voiceless.

Critically, full autonomy remains contested state censorship and epistemic barriers linger. Yet, their legacy affirms: subalterns not only speak but rewrite history.

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