

# Literature as Political Intervention: A Comparative Analysis of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy

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**Abstract**—Indian English literature has long functioned as a powerful medium of political intervention, interrogating structures of power, marginalization, and resistance. This article undertakes a comparative analysis of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy, two seminal writers whose literary and activist engagements foreground subaltern struggles and challenge dominant political discourses in postcolonial India. Drawing upon selected fictional and non-fictional works of both authors, the study examines how literature becomes a site of political consciousness, ethical resistance, and social critique. Mahasweta Devi's narratives emerge from grassroots realities, giving voice to tribal, Dalit, and dispossessed communities silenced by state violence and capitalist exploitation. In contrast, Arundhati Roy's writings combine literary imagination with overt political polemic, critiquing neo-liberalism, militarization, and democratic erosion from both national and global perspectives. While Devi's politics is rooted in lived experience and collective resistance, Roy's approach reflects a more discursive and transnational mode of dissent. The article argues that despite differences in narrative strategies, ideological positioning, and literary form, both writers deploy literature as an instrument of political awakening and moral urgency. By juxtaposing Devi's subaltern realism with Roy's activist cosmopolitanism, the study highlights literature's transformative role in confronting injustice and reimagining democratic possibilities. Ultimately, the paper asserts that their works reaffirm literature's enduring capacity to intervene in political discourse and inspire critical engagement with power and resistance in contemporary India.

**Index Terms**—Mahasweta Devi; Arundhati Roy; Political Literature; Subaltern Studies; Indian Writing in English; Resistance Narratives; Literature and Power; Social Justice; State Violence; Literary Activism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature in India has long functioned not merely as a reflection of society but as an active intervention in its political and ethical debates. From anti-colonial nationalist writings to post-independence critiques of state power, Indian literature has consistently engaged with questions of authority, resistance, and social justice. Within this tradition, the works of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy stand out for their uncompromising political vision and commitment to exposing systemic injustice. Their writings demonstrate how fiction and non-fiction can transcend aesthetic boundaries to become powerful tools of political awareness and intervention. Mahasweta Devi's literary career is inseparable from her lifelong activism among tribal and marginalized communities. Writing primarily in Bengali, she documents histories of oppression inflicted upon Adivasis, landless peasants, and bonded laborers, revealing the violence of feudal, capitalist, and state-sponsored systems. Texts such as *Draupadi*, *Aranyer Adhikar*, and *Mother of 1084* foreground resistance from the margins, dismantling dominant historical narratives and questioning the moral legitimacy of power. Devi's political engagement is rooted in lived realities, where literature becomes a means of bearing witness and demanding accountability. Arundhati Roy, writing in English and addressing a global readership, extends this tradition of resistance into the terrain of post-liberalization India. Her novel *The God of Small Things* and subsequent political essays interrogate issues such as caste oppression, gendered violence, environmental destruction, militarization, and corporate globalization. Roy's writing combines lyrical intensity with sharp political critique, positioning the writer as a public intellectual who actively contests state policies and ideological conformity. Unlike Devi's localized focus, Roy's

political imagination operates across national and transnational spaces, yet remains deeply anchored in Indian socio-political realities. This article undertakes a comparative analysis of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy to explore how literature functions as a form of political intervention. By examining their thematic concerns, narrative strategies, and ideological commitments, the study seeks to understand how both writers challenge hegemonic power structures while amplifying silenced voices. Despite differences in language, audience, and context, Devi and Roy share a common ethical impulse—to transform literature into a site of resistance and political awakening. Through this comparison, the article contributes to broader discussions on political consciousness in Indian literature and reaffirms the continuing relevance of literary activism in an era of increasing social and political polarization.

#### Theoretical Framework and Critical Perspective:

This study adopts an interdisciplinary critical framework drawing primarily on Postcolonial Theory, Subaltern Studies, Marxist/Neo-Marxist criticism, and Feminist Political Theory to examine literature as a form of political intervention in the works of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy. These approaches are particularly relevant because both writers foreground marginalized voices and challenge dominant power structures embedded in postcolonial Indian society. Postcolonial theory provides a crucial lens for understanding how Devi and Roy interrogate the unfinished project of decolonization in India. Rather than focusing solely on colonial oppression, both authors expose the persistence of neo-colonial power relations through state machinery, corporate capitalism, development discourse, and cultural nationalism. Their narratives critique how post-independence India reproduces forms of domination against Adivasis, Dalits, women, and the rural poor, thereby revealing the contradictions of the postcolonial nation-state. Closely allied with post-colonialism, Subaltern Studies offers a vital framework for reading Mahasweta Devi's sustained engagement with tribal resistance and Arundhati Roy's representation of silenced communities. Devi's fiction—particularly stories like *"Draupadi"* and *"Breast Giver"*—centre the subaltern not as passive victims but as agents of resistance. Roy similarly

foregrounds voices excluded from official histories, questioning elite narratives of democracy and development. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential question, *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"*, is especially relevant here. While Spivak warns against romanticizing subaltern speech, Devi and Roy attempt to ethically mediate these voices, using literature as a space where silenced histories can be articulated and contested. The study also draws upon Marxist and Neo-Marxist criticism to analyze class conflict, exploitation, and material conditions underlying social inequality. Both writers depict the workings of economic power—land dispossession, labour exploitation, and corporate-state nexus—as central to political oppression. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is particularly useful in understanding how consent is manufactured through ideology, law, education, and cultural narratives. Devi and Roy expose these hegemonic processes by portraying how dominant classes normalize injustice while marginal communities resist through counter-narratives. Feminist Political Theory is essential for examining gender as a critical site of political struggle in the texts. Devi's portrayal of women's bodies as battlegrounds of caste, class, and state violence intersects with Roy's critique of patriarchy embedded within both private and public spheres. Their works challenge liberal feminist paradigms by situating women's oppression within broader socio-political and economic structures, thereby aligning with intersectional feminist thought. Together, these theoretical frameworks enable a nuanced reading of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy as politically engaged writers who transform literature into an act of resistance. By combining postcolonial, subaltern, Marxist, and feminist perspectives, this study demonstrates how their narratives function not merely as representations of injustice but as interventions that challenge hegemonic power and reimagine political consciousness in contemporary Indian literature.

#### Political Commitment in Indian English and Regional Literature:

Indian literature has historically functioned as a powerful medium of political consciousness and social critique. From the anti-colonial writings of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, and Premchand to post-Independence literary

engagements with caste, class, gender, and state violence, Indian writers have consistently responded to the nation's evolving socio-political realities. Literature in India has thus not merely reflected social conditions but has actively intervened in political debates, exposing structures of oppression and questioning dominant ideologies. Both Indian English and regional literatures share this legacy of political engagement, though they differ in linguistic reach, readership, and modes of resistance. Mahasweta Devi occupies a central position within Bengali protest literature and activist writing. Writing primarily in Bengali, Devi dedicated her literary career to documenting the lives, struggles, and resistance of India's most marginalized communities—tribals, Dalits, bonded labourers, and landless peasants. Her fiction, including works such as *Hajar Churashir Maa*, *Aranyer Adhikar*, and *Draupadi*, emerges from a deep engagement with grassroots activism and fieldwork. Devi's political commitment is inseparable from her role as a social activist; her literature exposes the violence of the postcolonial Indian state, the exploitation embedded in feudal and capitalist structures, and the silencing of subaltern voices. Rooted in the radical tradition of Bengali literature influenced by Marxist thought, peasant movements, and leftist politics, Devi's writings transform literature into a form of resistance and ethical responsibility. Arundhati Roy, on the other hand, represents a significant voice in contemporary Indian English fiction and non-fiction, combining literary aesthetics with overt political dissent. While her Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* critiques caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and historical injustice, her essays and polemical writings—such as *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* and *Listening to Grasshoppers*—directly confront issues of state power, neoliberal development, militarization, environmental destruction, and human rights violations. Roy's position as an Indian English writer allows her to address both national and global audiences, transforming Indian socio-political issues into matters of international concern. Her work reflects the political anxieties of post-liberalization India, where democracy coexists with displacement, surveillance, and corporate dominance. The writings of both Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy are deeply shaped by their historical and socio-political contexts.

Devi's work emerges from post-Independence India marked by tribal dispossession, Naxalite movements, and state repression, particularly in eastern and central India. Roy's political vision is informed by the era of globalization, ecological crisis, communal violence, and the shrinking space for dissent in contemporary India. Despite differences in language, form, and audience, both writers share a commitment to exposing injustice and amplifying marginalized voices. Together, Devi and Roy exemplify how Indian regional and English-language literatures function as sites of political intervention. Their writings demonstrate that literature in India remains a vital force for challenging hegemonic narratives, interrogating power structures, and envisioning possibilities of resistance and transformation.

## II. MAHASWETA DEVI

### Writing Resistance from the Margins:

Mahasweta Devi's literary oeuvre stands as a powerful testament to writing as an act of political resistance. Deeply rooted in lived realities, her fiction foregrounds the voices of India's most marginalized communities—tribals, landless laborers, Dalits, and oppressed women—who are systematically silenced within dominant socio-political discourses. Devi's commitment goes beyond representation; her writing functions as a form of activism that interrogates state power, class exploitation, and entrenched structures of oppression. In *Draupadi*, Devi exposes the brutal mechanisms of state violence exercised against tribal insurgents. The protagonist Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal woman, becomes a site where gendered violence intersects with political repression. Subjected to custodial rape by state forces, Dopdi's violated body transforms into a weapon of resistance when she confronts her oppressors naked and unbroken. Here, gendered suffering operates as a potent political metaphor, challenging patriarchal and state authority while redefining agency from the margins. Devi subverts conventional narratives of victimhood by presenting resistance not as armed retaliation alone, but as a moral and corporeal defiance of power. Similarly, *Breast Giver* critiques feudal exploitation and patriarchal commodification through the life of Jashoda, a wet nurse whose body is relentlessly used by an upper-caste household. Jashoda's gradual physical decay mirrors the systemic exploitation of

women's reproductive labor under feudal capitalism. Devi politicizes motherhood itself, revealing how maternal sacrifice—traditionally idealized—is co-opted and exploited by oppressive socio-economic structures. The narrative exposes how gendered suffering is normalized within both familial and socio-political systems. In *Mother of 1084*, Devi turns her attention to middle-class apathy and the ideological violence of the state during the Naxalite movement. Through Sujata's gradual political awakening following her son's death, the novel critiques bourgeois complacency and exposes the dehumanizing logic of the state that reduces revolutionary lives to mere statistics. The maternal perspective becomes a conduit for political consciousness, linking personal grief with collective injustice. A defining feature of Mahasweta Devi's resistance writing is her use of documentary realism. Drawing upon her extensive fieldwork, journalism, and activism among tribal communities, Devi blurs the boundaries between fiction and reportage. Her narratives often incorporate historical events, legal records, and ethnographic detail, lending authenticity and urgency to her political critique. This realism is further enriched by her engagement with folk and oral traditions, which allows marginalized voices to speak in culturally rooted idioms rather than elite literary registers. Songs, myths, and oral histories function as counter-narratives that challenge dominant historiography. Devi's political vision is the articulation of subaltern consciousness. Rather than speaking *for* the marginalized, Devi attempts to create narrative spaces where subaltern voices assert their presence, albeit within the acknowledged limitations of representation. Her characters are not passive sufferers but agents of resistance whose lives expose the contradictions of democracy, development, and nationalism. In this sense, Mahasweta Devi's writing exemplifies literature as political intervention—an unflinching engagement with injustice that insists on ethical responsibility from both the writer and the reader.

### III. ARUNDHATI ROY

Political Dissent and Narrative Intervention: -

Arundhati Roy emerges as one of the most significant political voices in contemporary Indian English literature, whose fiction and non-fiction consistently

challenge structures of power, exclusion, and violence embedded within the Indian nation-state. Unlike writers who maintain a separation between aesthetics and activism, Roy deliberately collapses this divide, transforming narrative into a potent site of political dissent. Her literary interventions interrogate dominant narratives of nationalism, development, and democracy, foregrounding voices marginalized by caste, class, gender, and state militarism.

In *The God of Small Things* (1997), Roy offers a scathing critique of caste hierarchy and social exclusion through the tragic fate of Velutha, an Untouchable carpenter whose transgression of caste boundaries leads to brutal state-sanctioned violence. The novel exposes how institutional systems—law, police, family, and religion—collude to preserve social hierarchies. Roy's portrayal of the "Love Laws" that dictate "who should be loved, and how, and how much" serves as a metaphor for the rigid ideological frameworks governing Indian society. Personal trauma, especially the suffering of women and children, becomes inseparable from political oppression, revealing how power operates within intimate and domestic spaces.

Roy's later novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), expands this political vision to a broader national canvas. The narrative moves across fragmented geographies—Delhi, Kashmir, Gujarat—bringing into focus issues of militarization, majoritarian nationalism, and systemic erasure of minority identities. Characters such as Anjum, a Hijra, and Musa, a Kashmiri rebel, embody lives rendered disposable by the state. Kashmir, in particular, emerges as a central site of political critique, where militarized nationalism and surveillance suppress dissent and normalize violence. Roy resists official histories by foregrounding unofficial, wounded, and fragmented lives that challenge the myth of a unified, democratic nation.

Environmental degradation and human rights violations also occupy a crucial place in Roy's political imagination. Her sustained critique of large-scale development projects, displacement of indigenous populations, and corporate-state nexus—evident both in her essays and fictional narratives—reveals the human cost of neoliberal capitalism. Roy presents "development" not as progress but as a violent process that marginalizes the poor while

legitimizing ecological destruction and social inequality. Roy's narrative strategies significantly enhance the political force of her writing. Her use of fragmented, non-linear structure disrupts conventional realist storytelling, mirroring the fractured realities of the marginalized communities she represents. This disjointed form resists closure, refusing the comfort of neat resolutions and compelling readers to confront unresolved injustices. Her lyrical prose, marked by poetic intensity and irony, coexists with sharp political urgency, creating a distinctive style where beauty amplifies rather than softens critique. Most importantly, Roy's work exemplifies the intersection of fiction and activism. Her novels do not merely represent political issues; they actively intervene in public discourse, questioning the ethical foundations of nationalism, democracy, and progress. By blending storytelling with dissent, Roy positions literature as an act of resistance—an alternative archive that preserves suppressed histories and challenges hegemonic narratives. In this sense, Arundhati Roy's writing aligns closely with Mahasweta Devi's activist literary tradition. Both writers employ narrative as a tool to confront power, restore silenced voices, and expose the violence underlying social and political institutions. However, while Devi writes primarily from the margins through subaltern realism, Roy operates within a global English literary space, translating local struggles into transnational political critique. Together, their works reaffirm literature's enduring role as a site of political intervention and ethical responsibility in contemporary India.

#### Points of Convergence: Shared Political Vision:

Despite differences in language, narrative form, and historical location, Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy converge powerfully in their shared political vision, using literature as a sustained critique of structural injustice and institutional violence in India. Both writers position their creative work as a form of ethical intervention that confronts dominant power structures and exposes the silencing mechanisms of the nation-state.

**Challenging Dominant Power Structures:** Both Devi and Roy consistently challenge hegemonic systems of power—state authority, upper-caste dominance, patriarchal control, and capitalist exploitation. Mahasweta Devi's fiction interrogates feudal,

bureaucratic, and military apparatuses that perpetuate the marginalization of tribal and lower-class communities. Similarly, Arundhati Roy critiques neoliberal governance, militarized nationalism, and the moral contradictions of India's democratic claims. In their works, power is never abstract; it is enacted through law, development projects, armed forces, and social hierarchies, making oppression a lived and embodied reality.

#### Giving Voice to the Silenced and Oppressed People:

The central key point of the convergence lies in the commitment to recover suppressed voices around the state by her novels. Devi foregrounds the experiences of tribal women, landless laborers, and political prisoners who are excluded from mainstream historiography into her novels. Her characters speak from the margins, often in defiant, unsettling tones that disrupt elite narratives. Roy, likewise, amplifies the voices of caste-oppressed communities, religious minorities, displaced populations, and victims of state violence. Through polyphonic narratives and fragmented storytelling, Roy allows marginalized perspectives to contest official versions of truth.

**Exposing the Violence of the Nation-State:** Both the writers explore the modern nation-state legitimizes violence in the name of development, security, and unity. Devi's portrayal of custodial torture, fake encounters, and forced displacement reveals the brutality underlying state power. Roy extends this critique by interrogating surveillance, counter-insurgency operations, and the criminalization of dissent. In their works, the nation-state emerges not as a protective entity but as a coercive force that disciplines and erases inconvenient populations.

#### Literature as Ethical Responsibility and Resistance:

For Devi and Roy, literature is not merely representational but deeply ethical and resistant. Writing becomes a moral obligation—to witness suffering, to question authority, and to refuse complicity. Devi's insistence on "writing as activism" and Roy's seamless movement between fiction and political essays reinforce the idea that literature must intervene in public discourse. Their works challenge the reader to confront uncomfortable realities rather than consume literature as aesthetic pleasure alone.

**Gendered and Marginalized Bodies as Sites of Political Struggle:** Another crucial convergence is their emphasis on gendered and marginalized bodies

as sites where political violence is inscribed. In Devi's fiction, the violated female body often becomes a symbol of collective resistance, as seen in *Draupadi*. Roy similarly represents women's bodies as battlegrounds of caste, religion, sexuality, and state power. These embodied narratives reveal how political oppression operates through everyday acts of control and humiliation, transforming personal suffering into a broader political critique.

**Conclusion of Convergence:** Thus, Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy share a radical literary vision that transforms storytelling into an act of political defiance. By challenging hegemonic power, centering marginalized voices, and exposing state violence, both writers redefine literature as a space of resistance, responsibility, and transformative political consciousness.

#### IV. POINTS OF DIVERGENCE

**Ideology, Language, and Narrative Strategy:**

Despite their shared commitment to political dissent and social justice, Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy diverge significantly in terms of ideological orientation, linguistic medium, narrative technique, and modes of activism. These differences are shaped by their distinct socio-cultural locations, intended readerships, and literary traditions, resulting in varied forms of political articulation. One of the most prominent points of divergence lies in language and literary medium. Mahasweta Devi primarily wrote in Bengali, deeply rooted in regional idioms, folk expressions, and oral traditions. Even in translation, her prose retains a stark, unembellished quality that reflects lived realities of tribal and subaltern communities. Her audience is largely domestic, grounded in local histories and immediate political struggles. In contrast, Arundhati Roy writes in English, addressing both national and global audiences. Her choice of language enables international circulation and visibility, allowing Indian political crises—such as caste violence, militarization, and ecological destruction—to enter global discourses of human rights and democracy. Consequently, Roy's work often negotiates between local specificity and global intelligibility. The writers also differ in their modes of activism and political engagement. Mahasweta Devi's activism is fundamentally grassroots-oriented. Her long-term

involvement with tribal movements, bonded laborers, and displaced communities informs her fiction, which often functions as testimonial literature. Devi does not merely represent the marginalized; she actively participates in their struggles, blurring the boundary between writer and activist. Arundhati Roy, by contrast, operates largely as a global public intellectual, intervening through essays, speeches, and international platforms. Her activism is discursive and transnational, combining literary production with outspoken political commentary on state power, neo-liberalism, and nationalism. Both the two authors adopt contrasting aesthetic strategies. Devi's realism is raw, confrontational, and documentary in nature, often eschewing stylistic ornamentation to foreground material suffering and systemic violence. Her texts emphasize collective resistance, portraying communities rather than individuals as agents of political change. Stories such as *Draupadi* and *Mother of 1084* expose institutional brutality through compressed, intense narratives that demand ethical engagement from the reader. In contrast, Roy's narrative style is lyrical, fragmented, and symbolically rich, blending poetic language with political urgency. Her fiction foregrounds individual dissent, often mediated through personal memory, affect, and trauma. While collective suffering remains central, Roy's protagonists negotiate politics through intimate, subjective experiences. This aesthetic allows Roy to fuse emotion with ideology, creating a politically charged narrative that appeals to a wide, diverse readership. Ideologically, Devi's work reflects a sustained commitment to Marxist and subaltern politics, emphasizing class struggle, material exploitation, and collective mobilization. Roy's political vision, while equally radical, is more intersectional, addressing the overlapping dynamics of caste, gender, environment, and state violence within a late-capitalist, globalized framework. Thus, while Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy share a common ethical impulse to confront injustice, they diverge in language, audience, narrative form, and activist strategy. These differences do not weaken their political significance; rather, they underscore the multiplicity of ways in which literature can function as a powerful site of resistance within—and beyond—the Indian socio-political landscape.

### Literature as Political Intervention:

The comparative reading of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy reveals literature not merely as a representational art but as a powerful mode of political intervention. Both writers transform narrative into a site of resistance where silenced histories, marginalized lives, and suppressed truths are forcefully articulated. Their works move beyond aesthetic contemplation to function as political testimony, recording lived experiences of violence, dispossession, and injustice that are often erased from official narratives. As counter-histories, the writings of Devi and Roy challenge the dominant versions of nationhood, development, and democracy propagated by the state and its ideological apparatuses. Mahasweta Devi documents the brutal realities of tribal displacement, custodial violence, and economic exploitation, thereby exposing the failure of postcolonial India to fulfill its democratic promises to its most vulnerable citizens. Similarly, Arundhati Roy interrogates the moral contradictions of the Indian nation-state by foregrounding caste oppression, militarization, environmental destruction, and human rights abuses. In doing so, both authors reclaim history from below, centering those voices traditionally excluded from mainstream historiography. Literature also emerges in their works as a moral intervention, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable ethical questions about power, privilege, and complicity. Devi's stark realism demands an ethical response rooted in collective responsibility and social action, while Roy's lyrical yet confrontational narratives provoke critical reflection on individual conscience within larger political systems. Their texts refuse neutrality, insisting that writing itself is an act of political positioning. In the context of contemporary India—marked by rising authoritarianism, deepening social inequalities, and intensified debates around nationalism—the relevance of Devi and Roy remains undiminished. Their works continue to illuminate the persistent structures of domination and resistance, reminding readers that literature can serve as a vital space for dissent, remembrance, and transformative political imagination. Through their committed writing, both authors affirm the enduring power of literature as an instrument of ethical engagement and socio-political change.

### V. CONCLUSION

This comparative study has argued that the writings of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy function as powerful forms of political intervention, transforming literature into an ethical, historical, and moral act of resistance. Despite differences in language, audience, and narrative strategy, both writers demonstrate a deep political commitment to exposing structures of power that perpetuate inequality, violence, and exclusion in postcolonial India. Their works challenge the complacency of dominant discourses and insist on confronting uncomfortable truths about the nation-state, development, and democracy. Mahasweta Devi's relentless focus on tribal lives, gendered suffering, and state brutality foregrounds the experiences of those pushed to the margins of history. Her raw realism and activist intent turn storytelling into an act of witnessing and solidarity. Arundhati Roy, on the other hand, combines lyrical experimentation with sharp political critique, addressing caste oppression, militarization, environmental devastation, and human rights violations through both fiction and non-fiction. Together, they reveal how literature can operate as counter-history—recovering suppressed narratives and questioning official versions of progress and nationalism. In times of increasing political polarization, democratic erosion, and social injustice, the relevance of Devi and Roy becomes even more urgent. Their writings remind readers that literature is not merely aesthetic expression but a form of moral responsibility—capable of resisting silence, normalizing dissent, and imagining alternative futures. By centering marginalized bodies and voices, both authors redefine the role of the writer as an engaged intellectual and ethical agent.

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