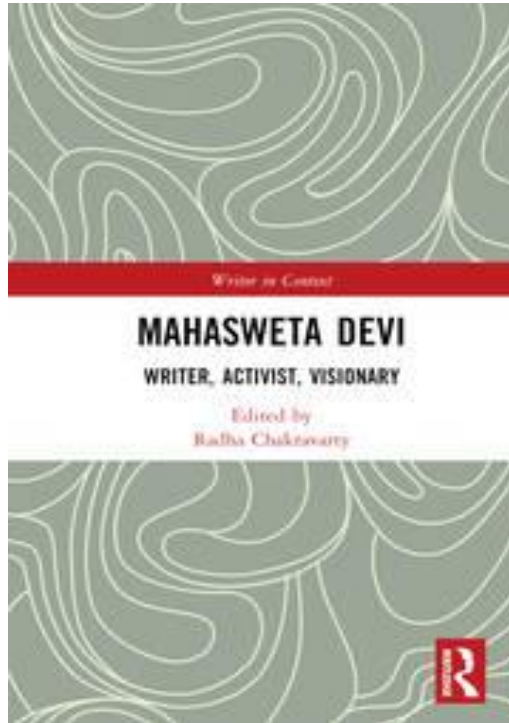


Radha Chakravarty, ed. 2023. *Mahasweta Devi: Writer, Activist, Visionary*. London and New York: Routledge, i-xv+1-262 pp. ISBN: 978-0-367-69776-1



*Mahasweta Devi: Writer, Activist, Visionary* edited by Radha Chakravarty is part of the Routledge “Writers in Context” series. Devi (1926–2016) wrote primarily in Bengali and her radical social vision, feminist consciousness, empathy for nature and nature’s children, and powerful literary style have long been appreciated by Bengali readers. Devi’s prolific creative works, critical writings and social activism, however, demand a wider global attention. With the translation of her works into different Indian languages from late 1970s, readers across India gradually became familiar with her works. When English translations of her short stories and novels began to be published from the late 1980s, her fame spread beyond India. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak’s English translations of her stories in *Imaginary Maps* (1995) and *Breast Stories* (1997) helped establish her as a powerful storyteller with a mission. Samik Bandyopadhyay’s translations *Five Plays* (1997/1986) and *Mother of 1084* (1997) further consolidated her position as an iconic figure. Spivak’s translation has been widely cited in the works of well-known critics such as Judith Butler and Neil Lazarus. In *Undoing Gender* (2004)

Butler in fact acknowledges Spivak's contribution by stating, "[I]hanks to Spivak, [Mahasweta Devi's work] appears in the academy, at least the English speaking one" (229).

Radha Chakravarty, a distinguished translator, academic and creative writer, compiles diverse categories of Devi's writings in the volume with care and competence. This volume will undoubtedly facilitate a better understanding of Devi's works and personality. While curating materials, Chakravarty considers certain key factors – Devi's multifaceted personality, the intersections between her creative works and activism, the ambivalence of her texts, the disparities between Devi's public image and her private personality, and the limited availability of translations for most of her works. She observes in the introduction, "Readers outside Bengal tend to have a limited, formulaic view of Mahasweta Devi, on the basis of the tiny fraction of her work available in English translation" (1). With these ideas in mind, she organises the book's materials into four well-thought-out sections: "Spectrum: The Writer's Oeuvre," "Kaleidoscope: Critical Reception," "Ablaze with Rage: The Writer as Activist," and "Personal Glimpses: A Life in Words."

In "Spectrum: The Writer's Oeuvre," Chakravarty attempts to provide a representative look to her selection of Devi's creative and critical works. She selects one piece for every genre and incorporates brief extracts from *The Queen of Jhansi* (fictionalised biography), *Mother of 1084* (novel), "Giribala" (short story), *Bayen* (drama), "Nyadosh, the Incredible Cow" (children's literature), and "Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay" (literary criticism). The last one is extracted from the monograph *Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay* (Makers of Indian Literature Series) published in 1983 by Sahitya Akademi. Here in the excerpt Devi examines the strength and weaknesses in Bandyopadhyay's literary representations. The creative pieces are translated from Bengali into English by different hands.

"Kaleidoscope: Critical Reception," by far the longest section in the book, records multiple critics' responses to Devi's oeuvre. These works were originally written in both Bengali and English and were published between 1985 and 2020s (years of publication are not available for some). They indicate the trajectory of paradigm shifts taking place in the critical studies of Mahasweta Devi's works. Arup Kumar Das points out that Devi's early fictional works elicited a lukewarm response. However, starting from the 1960s, as she developed an interest in representing socially vulnerable communities, delved deep into their history, and adopted a direct, bare style, she received better appreciation. This appreciation reached its peak in 1997 when she was honoured with both the Jnanpith and Magsaysay awards.

Dipendu Chakraborty sees Devi as a progressive writer who refused to be dictated by any political party. Devi, according to him, gradually developed a style which resembled the well-known features of the ‘Documentary Theatre’ today (71). Dilip Kumar Basu observes that *Hajar Churashir Ma* was published at a time when nation and nationalism began to play a significant role in Bengali novels. Partha Pratim Bandyopadhyay discusses how in Devi’s works “[t]he forest appears again and again, as metaphor and subject” (82). Sujit Mukherjee’s review of *Bashai Tudu* [and *Draupadi*] translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an incisive analysis of the two works. He thinks that the first phase of Devi’s works was concerned with the reconstruction of the past, while the second phase, starting with *Hajar Churashir Ma* (1973/4), focused on the reconstruction of the present. Mukherjee feels that “*Bashai Tudu* seems to represent a third *stage* rather than [a] phase, a stage of maturation which probably merges the two phases” (89 [emphasis added]). Similarly, “Reading ‘Pterodactyl’” by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an in-depth reading of the story. She informs us that the article is a response to ‘a fierce disciplinary opposition’ from most of the members of the Subaltern Studies collective – all historians – who were not comfortable with bringing ‘literary considerations into the work’ of the collective. Jaidev argues that the novella *Douloti* may be considered as an allegory of the nation – the nation, however, should be “be defined by the victims rather than by the ruling, parasitic groups” (105). Shreerexha Subramanian examines Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Amrita Pritam’s *Pinjar* (1950), and Mahasweta Devi’s story “Giribala” (2004) through the lens of the “maternal logic of care, nurture, and self-sacrifice against a context of multiple histories of violence that intersect at the crossroads of nationalism, colonialism, development, patriarchy, casteism, and capitalism” (110). Shreya Chakravorty compares translations of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Samik Bandyopadhyay, arguing that Spivak’s metropolitan Marxist feminist approach and Bandyopadhyay’s closer proximity to Devi’s location determine the ideological shape of their translated texts. Anjum Katyal argues that despite Devi’s plays failing to reach the target audience, they still have the potential to be staged today. Arunabh Konwar critically explores Mahasweta Devi’s *Queen of Jhansi* and Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakbri Tehsildar* both of which belong to the potentially disruptive genre of ‘fictionalised biographies.’ Benil Biswas approaches stage and screen adaptations of Mahasweta Devi’s works through the lens of ‘Sahitya’ (togetherness) which is linked with the term ‘kinesis.’

Section 3 (“Ablaze with Rage: The Writer as Activist”) contains five essays, the first three of which are written by Devi. In the first, she passionately argues in favour of recognising tribal languages and introducing awards by

government agencies. The second essay is a scathing attack on the government's decision to plant Eucalyptus instead of traditional trees. She lays bare the nexus between the corporate sectors and the government agencies. This policy of forestation, she argues, ruins all possibilities of economic sustenance for the tribals. In the third essay titled "Palamau Is a Mirror of India," she makes a programmatic statement: "For I believe in anger, in justified violence, and so peel the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the Government, to expose its naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation; and place this India, a hydra-headed monster, before a people's court, the people being the oppressed millions" (169). This anger is also evident in most of her creative works. In "Adivasi Mahasweta," Ganesh A. Devy provides an intimate portrayal of the iconic activist author – her strong, uncompromising, and often unpredictable, personality, her dedication to the Adivasi cause, and her relentless efforts to address the factors that lead to the exploitation of the tribe. This section ends with Mary Louisa Cappelli's essay "Haunted Landscapes: Mahasweta Devi and the Anthropocene" which analyses "the destructive human activity of the Anthropocene that has wreaked havoc on India's ecosystems and her tribal peoples" as evident in Devi's works (177).

Section 4 begins with an excerpt from *Our Santiniketan* (2022) where Devi recalls her Santiniketan days and describes how teachers used to impart important lessons about nature to the children. Devi's interview with Navin Kishore (2004) reveals multiple aspects of her life and personality – her relationships with her husbands and son, personal struggles, her resilience against disillusionment and pessimism, her commitment to connect with ordinary people through her writing, impact of Gandhi's death, environmental concerns, and so on. The first interview with Radha Chakravarty (1999) elicits some sharp comments from Devi – "I write for the general reader, the common reader" (196), "I always say I am an Indian writer because I have been translated into many regional languages" (196), "I write of class exploitation, class resistance" (196), "I believe in Marxism.... But I am not a theorist" (196). The second one (2009) reveals other aspects such as literary influences on her, and how she gleans history from real life. In "Family Reminiscences," Devi's younger sisters Soma Mukhopadhyay and Sari Lahiri, his son Nabarun Bhattacharya, and niece Ina Puri speak of the family environment, children's impression of Devi as a storyteller, and the like. Among those outside the family circle, Anita Agnihotri recounts her encounter and subsequent friendship with Devi. Anand (P. Sachidanandan) interestingly informs us about Devi's strong reaction to someone's comment on the necessity of integrating the tribal people into the 'mainstream' – according to Devi, the deprived mass is "a sea [meaning 'greater than a stream'] quiet on the outside but

boiling inside” (222). Ranjit Kumar Das (Lodha) reminisces about Devi’s relationship with the Shobor tribe and recounts incidents of how she helped the community in multiple ways. Similarly, Dakxin Bajrange provides a first-hand account of how Devi, whom he, along with other members of his community, called ‘Amma’ [mother], “dared us to dream” (231). He provides a touching description of how passionately she wanted to be buried at the ground of the Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh, Gujarat under the shade of a Mahua tree (229).

Students, scholars, and informed readers must have been waiting for such a book to appear. It offers an overall view of Mahasweta Devi’s creative oeuvre, social activism, and the author as an individual. Selection of Devi’s creative and critical works and the choice of the essays on the author and her work are immaculate. Chakravarty’s Introduction is insightful. Readers will also be grateful to the editor for bringing to the global notice some essays originally written in Bengali both by Devi and some well-known critics. The quality of translation in the entire book too is of high quality. In the absence of such a work on Devi, Chakravarty’s book will be of immense use to all and sundry.

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