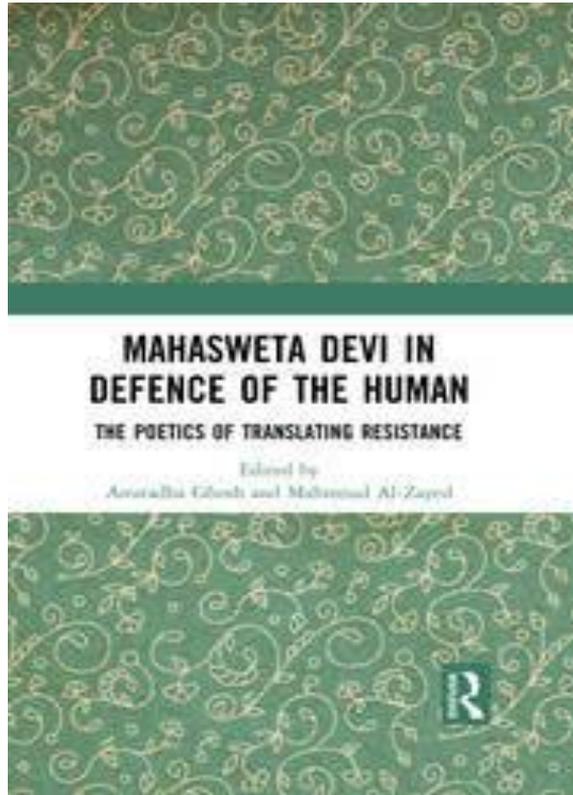


Anuradha Ghosh and Mahmoud Al-Zayed (eds), *Mahashweta Devi in Defence of the Human: The Poetics of Translating Resistance*, Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2025, 214 pp, ISBN: 9781032955094.



Mahashweta Devi (1926–2016) straddled two important worlds – literature and social activism. These two worlds were not bound into distinct compartments of her life, rather they were closely intertwined. Humans, particularly those living on the margins and unheard, the natural world and life in all its ramifications – all of them were important aspects of these two worlds. Unwritten histories, untold stories, and retelling of myths are central ideas that find a way into her writings as they did in her activism as well. Her writings are not just literary works but important social documents as they focus on the subaltern, the marginalised, the oppressed, the voiceless, and the unnoticed. The book under review brings all these aspects of Mahashweta Devi’s writings, thought and world into critical discussion.

*Mahasweta Devi in Defence of the Human: The Poetics of Translating Resistance* edited by Anuradha Ghosh and Mahmoud Al-Zayed is a collection of essays that bring in several aspects of Mahasweta Devi's work under the critical lens. In the Introduction, the editors note that "engaging with Mahasweta Devi's oeuvre and the aesthetics of activism that she gives shape to, is an act of cultural transcreation, reflecting a creative praxis that is critically embedded in a social ethic, which in turn foregrounds an idea of liberation in defence of the human" (2). They argue that the resistance that one notices in her works is a "kind of translation" as it brings out lived experiences and histories that have been mostly unknown. The causes that she stood for and strongly advocated become part of her literary oeuvre. "Her writings," the editors argue, "embody and enact the very process of how that engagement becomes a cultural register, one that linguistically maps the little-known worlds of people, their modes of negotiating with oppressive forms of power, and the manner in which they resist the annihilation of their identities as individuals and communities, and is no longer an action in itself" (3).

The volume is divided into five parts – "Translating the World of Mahasweta Devi's Writings," "Subversive Retellings from *Mahabharatam*," "Visual Aesthetics and the Politics of Translation and Adaptation," "Reading in Comparative Frames," and "On the Poetics of Translating Resistance" and within them the chapters discuss Mahasweta Devi's writings and the activism that is so much a part of it. As the very titles of the sections suggest, the essays in the volume traverse a great range of critical thought, from subaltern history, to translation, to comparative study, and social activism.

Three chapters, namely, "Many Other Tongues: Translating Plurality: Mahasweta Devi" by Ipsita Chanda, "Engaging with the Representation of the Subaltern in Select Short Stories by Mahasweta Devi in English Translation" by Sarmila Paul form Part 1 of the book and engage with the idea of cultural translation as a creative praxis to demonstrate how both the author and the translator must be true to the spirit of the text. This part also includes Somdatta Mandal's translation of Mahasweta Devi's short story "Teer" translated as "The Arrow." As the editors rightly observe, this is "a fitting tribute to the author whose personal convictions and commitment to the cause of social and ecological justice is much like the timeless old arrow that penetrates the gathering darkness, just as her writings do" (9).

The second part of the book focusses on retellings of the epics and myths and has two essays - 'Retelling of the Epics in Mahasweta Devi's Short Stories: A Study of "The Five Women" and "Kunti and the Nishadin"' by Nandini C. Sen. 'Reading Mahasweta Devi's "Kunti and the Nishadin" as a Political Transcreation

of the *Mahabharata*’ by Diamond Oberoi Vahali is a critique of “Kunti and the Nishadin”, a story in which caste and violence feature as an important part of the narrative. The story reveals the ways in which violence and discrimination has been a part of the ancient world and hence the need for the stories to be written and read. Both the essays reveal the ways in which Devi subverts the conventional ideas of the epic tradition to present the perspectives of women living on the margins of society.

“The Politics of Visual Aesthetics and Resistance in Contemporary Picture Books by Mahasweta Devi,” by Devika Mehra engages with the politics of adapting Mahasweta Devi’s writings for children in the form of picture books. She closely analyses two picture book adaptations of Devi’s writing for children - *The Why-Why Girl* illustrated by Kanyika Kini, and *Our Incredible Cow*, illustrated by Ruchi Shah - and critically engages with the politics and visual aesthetics of these two texts and their adaptations. The two other essays in Part III of the volume examine the way Mahasweta Devi’s works have been adapted and recreated in different media - ‘Photographs, Fame and Fantasies: Performative Self-contradiction and *Gangor*, Italo Spinelli’s Film Adaptation of Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Behind the Bodice’ by Hiba Aleem, and ‘Politics of Transcreation: A Study of Select Cinematic Adaptations of Mahasweta Devi’s Fiction’ by Saba Mahmood Bashir. Bashir’s essay is a study of film adaptations of two of Devi’s works *Rudaali* and *Mother of 1084*. A film adaptation brings in the idea of transcreation, of recontextualizing the source text as the film is a completely different media and one that brings in a new interpretation of the fictional work. As an important part of popular culture, film adaptations, while working with a different set of cultural registers, also bring the literary texts works to a larger audience.

The two essays in Part IV – “Writers as Activists: A Comparative Study of Mahasweta Devi and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni” by Shubi Abidi and ‘Exploring Gendered Subalternity in Bessie Head’s “The Collector of Treasures” and Mahasweta Devi’s *After Kurukshetra*’ – by Madhumita Chakraborty examine Devi’s works in relation to other women writers. Both authors whose works are examined in the two essays are located in different geographic locations and while Divakaruni is an author of Indian origin who lives in the United States, Bessie Head belongs to South Africa/Botswana. The only thing that links them is that they are all part of the Global South. In the case of Divakaruni, there is an engagement with the retellings of myths and the idea of the gendered subject kept as marginalised as seen in Bessie Head. While at first the comparison might seem a bit far-fetched, the essays nevertheless reveal the new ways to look at Devi’s corpus vis-a-vis the larger canon of women’s writing.

The last section focusses on the need to examine Devi's oeuvre using *bhasa* literatures and aesthetics rather than the Western critical canon. Much of Devi's writings have to do with those living on the margins, the various tribes, and hence the language that she uses is not the urbane Bengali. It has its own registers that create the world that she represents in the best way possible. The two essays in this section, written by the two editors themselves, focus on these aspects – "Ethical Literary Experiments: Thinking through Mahasweta Devi about the Aesthet(h)ics of Liberation" by Mahmoud Al-Zayed, and "The WOR(L)D of Mahasweta Devi and her Poetics of Translating Resistance" by Anuradha Ghosh reveal the way in which language, culture, and resistance work in Mahasweta Devi's oeuvre.

*Mahasweta Devi in Defence of the Human: The Poetics of Translating Resistance* is a volume that examines the writings of Mahasweta Devi in the light of her literary, social, and activist concerns. In the case of Devi, these concerns are all intertwined and the lived, experience life that she was witness to, the lives of the marginalised that she saw at close quarters, their concerns and difficulties become part of the literary texts. Whether she is using myths, legends, or known stories, she subverts and reworks them all, thereby making the reader question and rethink. The Adivasi, the Dalit, the poor, and the dispossessed are her protagonists. The several essays in the volume, arranged into meaningful sections, give a much-needed critical perspective of Mahasweta Devi's literary output and her thinking. They offer insights of looking at the texts and the several ways in which the texts have travelled.

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