



## Body and Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's The Queen of Jhansi



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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines how the struggle and ideological transformation in hegemonic Indian society are reflected in the bodily experiences of the underprivileged people during colonial era of Bengal during 1850s. The dominated peoples' bodily transformation allows them to attain their autonomous selves via agency and bodily resistance. This study examines why and how Devi's protagonist Lakshmibai undergoes bodily transformation, why Mahasweta Devi portrays such experiences in her novel The Queen of Jhansi (1956). By undergoing the body's transformational rites, the character acquires the agency to oppose injustice. To examine bodily transformation as a site of resistance against colonial and societal oppression, the research incorporates theoretical insights of Victor Turner, Michael Garnett, and Antonio Gramsci to explore themes of liminality, agency and bodily transformation. Lakshmibai preserves her identity and dignity while establishing her own agency and solidarity following liminality, a political process that turns the self into agency in order to fight against social injustice. Communitas is a harmonious space where individual reclaims identity through liberty. Devi's The Queen of Jhansi (1956) depicts the protagonist Lakshmibai's massive physical repression and reintegration into a new community, as well as the rituals of bodily alteration as a site of resistance. Through the protagonist's transformation from a state of powerlessness to an empowered quest for autonomy, the notion that subalterns cannot speak is dismantled.*

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### Introduction

This article studies the struggle of the Indian people and their ideological shift portrayed in their bodily experiences in the contemporary bourgeoisie Indian society during the 1850s. This study observes bodily transformation of the protagonist Lakshmibai. Such a

physical transformation in novelistic narratives operates with Lakshmibai in the use of Mahasweta Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi* (1956). This narrative depicts the rituals of bodily transformation and self-discovery as a means of fending off social injustice and character dehumanization. She

develops her *own agency* and solidarity after undergoing liminality—a political process that transforms the self into agency to fight against injustice, segregation, and disorder. She maintains her identity and dignity in a new community where equality and justice prevails. Additionally, this study examines how Indians overcome their physical subjugation in order to become autonomous.

Antonio Gramsci defines the word *subaltern* as any “low rank” person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation (66). A ruling class's hegemonic dominance causes suffering for subalterns. The elite's hegemonic dominance denies them the fundamental right to take part in creating their own history and culture. They are not seen as contributing members of the country. Gramsci uses the phrase to describe the subjugated and controlled workers and peasants under Benito Mussolini and his National Fascist Party members. For Gramsci, “The history of the subalterns was as complex as the history of the dominant elite class” (67). The subaltern has a disjointed past and is constantly impacted by the actions of elite organizations. Despite the fact that subalterns rebel against aristocratic groups, the Subaltern Politics since consciousness lacks a past to establish its identity, it is

unable to achieve total autonomy.

Devi, a postcolonial historical writer, raises the voice of subalterns of Jhansi against western hegemony during the British rule and against the elitist government and stratified societal structures of Bengal during 1850s. Devi critiques the social structure of caste, gender and British colony that deconstruct the official history and reclaim history of the people Indian society. Her work is a testament to the resilience and agency of those women who resist the forces that seek to silence them.

Devi uses the technique of rewriting of Indian subalterns historiography in order to create a new reality that can transform the backward people of modern-day Bengal and Jhansi, as well as their subjectivities and identities. This helps to address issues such as caste and class-based discrimination, injustice, violence, imperial and state-governed hegemony, trauma, and other problems. Understanding how identity, history, trauma, and narrative connect to the changing process of seeking justice and peace in modern Indian society is crucial in the case of such disparities. Indian people's experiences have been shaped by many historical periods and generations. Such individuals' hostile and painful path can be traced back over many years to the present. Classism, casteism, imperial hegemony, and gender discrimination have all affected subaltern people in India at various points in time. They continue to live on the periphery of society, socially excluded and with limited

possibilities.

Lakshmibai falls after becoming trapped by gunshots while riding a horse. Under British authority, the Rani consciously chooses death over life. Her compatriots will never forget that she lived and died for her country, despite whatever flaws she may have had in the sight of the British. She inspires herself to rebel by mistreatment she faces. Her physical sacrifices are a fitting testament to her unrivaled bravery, courage, and fighting spirit.

In this article I research how the protagonist develops into enlightened and experienced individuals experiencing separation, liminality, and reintegration through rituals. Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi* depicts the process of bodily transformation and liminality as a site of resistance.

## Literature Review

Critics praise Devi and her novels in a variety of ways. Devi's novels are studied against the backdrop of the enduring psychological effects of hegemony, caste-based discrimination and exploitation as a source of fear for the Indian community, and their attempt to escape these evil practices through a physical act of resistance. Devi uses her work to give voice to the voiceless in an effort to elevate their position. As she notes, Devi has "always been driven by a strong sense of history" (321). Ludden admits that Devi writes "histories from below" (15). The subaltern voice is

presented by Devi in her writings. Devi states, "To evaluate a war in history one has to take into account the views of the people who pay for that war; emotionally, physically and financially" (320-321).

Radha Chakravarty admires Devi as a prolific Indian writer of modern era. Her literary creativity remains immortal as inspiring manuals for new generation to withstand domination, exploitation and injustice. She further illustrates:

*The Queen of Jhansi* presents a spectacular blend of fact and fiction, history and myth. This novel was the beginning of a long and prolific writing career, spanning more than 50 years to date. But Mahasweta Devi's talent for combining the real and the imaginary, the facts of history with the promptings of a visionary imagination, of construction remains unchanged. Her creative writings inhabit the borderland between history and fiction, where 'truth' is constructed from a mixture of fact and make-believe. (122)

Devi's works are blend of fact and fiction, history and myth. *The Queen of Jhansi* has always been a prolific master piece that combines real and imaginary, mythical and historical incidence that constructs from mixture of fact and fiction.

Along with gender, class and nation continue to be significant defining characteristics that

intertwine to create the intricate alternate histories that are revealed in Devi's stories. Ultimately, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan unfolds:

The challenge to and of feminist writing lies in negotiating women's identity defined in these terms ... women are classed, caste and communal subjects ... at the same time, in the interests of a transformative politics, difference must be managed, if not transcended. (123)

Devi's major works such as *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* (2003), *Mother of 1084* (1997), *Rudali* (1997), *Titu Mir* (2004), *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2002), and *Bashai Tudu* (1990) deal with the exploitation of tribal and disadvantaged people. Satpal Singh in "Aesthetics of Protest: A Study of the Works of Mahasweta Devi" asserts:

Before it then only (with 1 tab )- Reading attentively delivers a real . . . helps awaken agency (9)

The history of the 1857 rebellion is occupied by the Rani of Jhansi. As a queen, Lakshmibai is fighting to rid the country of foreign domination while remaining committed to her role in politics. We may discuss some important issues about how gender functions in the narrativization of other histories by looking at Devi's portrayal of her.

Reading attentively delivers a real and perceptive peek into India's

underprivileged communities; her narrative is a veritable kaleidoscope of Indian subaltern existence. They are a reliable measure of how individuals respond to social pressures and the results that follow (12).

Devi's narratives present various spectrums of underprivileged Indians of Bengal and Jhansi particularly. Her narratives are reliable sources of how the subaltern people handle pressure and fight against social and cultural domination.

### **Methodology**

This study uses the theoretical insights of Victor Turner, Michael Garnett, and Antonio Gramsci, to examine the text from the standpoint of agency in relation to body politics in South Asian literature. While analyzing the liminality, bodily transformation, traumatic experience, and suffering of the character—all of which lead to a stage of resistance—contributes to discussions of contemporary tales from a variety of theoretical angles. The external and internal components of self-awakening in Devi's character is similar to those in Garnett's agency (8). Turner's liminality contains a special kind of self-formation that helps awaken agency (9).

By showing how liminal space may be a political place and how a community might best embrace its marginal or liminal groups

such as a female ruler at the time of colonial patriarchal society to extract agency from the dominating, it also sheds light on the relationship between literature and resistance. Due to both internal and environmental factors, the dominant ones in this scenario feel an awakening of agency as they transform. The body's obligation to resist for self-discovery serves as the primary analytical tool in this study. Although it heavily draws on ideas created in body and resistance theory, it does not offer a comprehensive examination of the field. Rather, it emphasizes how classism, imperial dominance, and discrimination based on gender and caste are all factors that contribute to physical change.

This article analyzes transformation of self into new self of characters to resist against the hegemonic power after arousing agency in the vein of the rites of passage through separation, liminality and reintegration in Devi's novels, *The Queen of Jhansi* (1956). In this research article, my focus is how protagonists in these two novels transform into new self when they have agency and solidarity to preserve their dignity and history.

Turner's separation, liminality or transition, and reintegration are the three stages of ritual change that Devi's historical character Lakshmibai goes through throughout the rituals of transformation (89). She introduces a heroine who separates herself from her former social standing during the separation

stage of transformation. The liminality stage is characterized by the complexity and ambiguity of either resisting colonial power authority or being a slave and giving up to colonial power (89). Incorporation signifies the return to a new, comparatively stable, and clearly defined status within the current society.

In order to give her more female characters' agency and voice, Devi dramatizes their subjugation and dehumanization, even if this empowerment is achieved via bodily transformation and occasionally death. What connects these protagonists from different places and contexts is their decision to speak via new agency and confront the self in order to resist suffering and violence. In the face of cultural and gendered violence, the act of self-erasing the feminine body becomes a subversive act of resistance against the oppressive system.

One aspect of the awakening of agency is the distinct self-formation of Turner's liminality. By showing how liminal places as political spaces and how communities might best embrace their marginal or liminal groups to empower the dominating, it also clarifies the relationship between literature and resistance. In this instance, both internal and external factors contribute to the dominant ones' transformation, causing them to awaken to their agency (8).

This study examines Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi* through the lens of caste and gender-based discrimination, imperial dominance, classism, and anti-bourgeois sentiment, which leads to liminality—a bodily transformation ritual used as a political tool to elicit agency from the oppressed in anarchist society.

Lakshmibai starts fighting the British right away. She makes an effort to justify her allegation. In 1804, East Indian Company and Shivrao signed and two "kharitas" address to the English and even included supporting documentation to prove right to the throne (13). She gives instances of adopted children being recognized by the English as legitimate heirs to the throne. But all of her arguments are mercilessly and without much thought dismissed by the English. These correspondences demonstrate her caution and position her as a capable administrator who is enough knowledgeable about her position and the law to oversee her subjects.

As locus of resistance, the body and corporeality have been studied by many thinkers. In the explanation of liminality as a link between the old and new selves, Victor Turner refers to this "self" as an ideological component that is essential to identity and dignity. To explain the body's rituals of transformation, Turner uses three words from anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep's "Rites de Passage": separation, liminality, and re-integration. In reference to Van Gennep's

description of rites de passage as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age," Turner explains the "liminal phase" (89). According to Turner, liminality has a unique self-formation that is anthropologically oriented and constitutes the awakening of agency through physical transition as a political ritual.

Through physical transformation and the development of resistance, the body expresses its individuality and self-worth. When people are liberated from both internal and external influences, they experience an awakening of agency. Some individuals are blinded by prejudice and superstitions, some have phobias, some have highly illogical compulsions and drives, and some have ideological features that deprive them of their freedom. Being independent or autonomous demands inner freedom, which is not an easy feat. Garnett asserts "The idea that interior states can impair freedom in basically the same way as outward obstacles might, namely by prohibiting the agent from doing what one would otherwise be able to accomplish,"(4). There is no agency since there is no inner freedom, independence, or self-governance. Agency cannot exist when an individual lacks autonomy.

### **Lakshmibai as Embodiment of Agency**

This section of the research I examine how the indigenous people of Jhansi and West Bengal suffer due to imperial hegemony,



elitist subjugation, gender and caste based discrimination and state atrocities in contemporary Indian societies during British colonial period of 1850s. This inflicted pain and trauma among the people. To deal with such dominance, they demonstrate a subversive act of resistance in the interim by exposing their sensitive bodies as a location of resistance. Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi* foregrounds the bodies of Lakshmibai as the spaces of resistance.

By challenging the prevailing societal discourses, the ritualized shift of the body results in a new empowered self that exhibits enlightenment and a type of resistance. Turner opines, there are liminal entities that exist in between the positions that are established and structured by law, tradition, ceremony, and convention. Neither here nor there are they. Because of this, the many civilizations that ritualize social and cultural changes use a wide range of symbols to depict their ambiguous and indeterminate qualities (90). Liminality undergoes a transformation and experiences the division of the original self, rejecting social creation in pursuit of a new sense of agency and enlightenment. Turner refers to incorporation as the subjects' return to their new, comparatively stable, and well defined place in the community, or *communitas*. The experience and order of this excursion are quite enigmatic or metaphorical.

Lakshmibai, the historical persona of

Mahaswata Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi* passes through three stages of ritual change throughout the rituals of bodily transformation: separation, liminality or transition, and integration. In the stage of liminality, she exhibits the complexity and ambiguity of either resisting colonial power authority or being a slave and submitting to colonial power. In the separation stage of transformation, she presents the protagonist character Rani, who separates herself from her previous social status. Incorporation signifies the return to a new, relatively stable, and clearly defined status in the present society.

Devi illustrates how a changed self with awakened agency serve as a center of resistance in Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi*. Devi rewrites the history of exploitation and agitation attempts to use agency to fight bodily. It closely examines the painful experiences of the characters' bodies and minds in connection to society. The people of subaltern suffer on a social, political, and economic level. It forces individuals to participate in a cultural ritual of bodily alteration. They refuse to concede. Instead, they dare to rebuild themselves as self-aware, enlightened beings. They attempt to overthrow the hierarchy based on societal norms that force them to endure painful events throughout the transitional period, a ritual of political self-transformation into agency to fight against social injustice, despite their suffering. In the end, they are successful in

doing so. Through acts of transformation and redefining their lives in a new community, the oppressed characters turn their bodies into places of resistance. Long-term conflict with Hugh Ross gradually made Jhansi weaker. The palace was eventually burned down. Every Jhansi person battled for their territory. Blood made the "ground slick" (208). To demonstrate their imperial strength, the English troops committed horrible crimes that were documented. For two years, human killing persisted and violence turned into a show. They enjoyed and documented their act of barbarism out of racial hate. Along with her young son, *The Queen of Jhansi* fled the court to join the uprising. She died as a result of the wounds she sustained during the protracted conflict with the English. She has attained immortality as her name and notoriety endure in folktales, songs, and stories that are sung during rituals or at work:

That Queen, so very great was she,  
Said she would never let go of Jhansi.  
She fought for the sake of her soldiers,  
And took bullets herself.  
As long as water in India flows  
The Queen of Jhansi will live (69).

By emphasizing people's perceptions of history, Devi re-interprets and re-constructs the historical queen of Jhansi in the biography named *The Queen of Jhansi*. The way that people view their beloved monarch is also

included in her narrative. "Rani margay nahouni, abhi to Jindahou" is one of their songs and their faith that embodies her. (15).

Lakshmibai realizes a need of Indian home rule liberating the nation from the grasp of British Raj. She unusually grows a resisting agency within the self and imparts this among her people. She becomes successful to arouse agency among her downtrodden people due to which they stand in the warfronts against the British. Regarding this Devi asserts, "The whole regiment stood still as painted figure. Thus, it began 1857 struggle for independence which shook the foundation of the British Empire for two whole years" (105). The people of Jhansi fight against British Empire for their own identity and cultural independence.

Lakshmibai worries about the securities of the nation as the Kingdom of Jhansi lacks troops, artilleries and courage in the beginning. But she succeeds in filling her people with valor, and enthusiasm in the face of adversity. Devi contends:

Jhansi was utterly unprotected. The English 65 in number counting the women and children, and were unarmed, too. The sepoys were 600 in number and armed. Everywhere anti-English feeling were rife . . . The queen herself had no soldiers apart from the 40 private palace guards. She sends 40 guards to the fort to



keep watch over the English. She had no military power, yet under such condition she did not lapse from what she deemed to be her duty, despite knowing that she could be in peril from the sepoys if they caught her helping the English. (109)

Despite of having very weak number of security, Lakshmibai has awakened power to have agency on her to fight against military mighty British Empire. Lakshmibai is a leader of freedom fighter, although she is Indian widow historical character in colonial period of Uttar Pradesh. She has not more number of soldiers and does not have very diplomatic relationship with neighboring but her agency helps to develop new self on her to challenge against British Raj.

The body itself serves as a medium and an objective that undergoes active experiences in order to create a new body and preserve equilibrium between the old and new selves. Since the body is a fluid entity, it goes through a political transformation ritual that is anthropologically oriented toward *communitas* and liminality. Victor Turner goes on to explain the "liminal phase" in relation to Van Gennep's description of rites de passage, which he defines as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (89). The unique self-formation that is a component of the awakening of agency through physical transition is a feature of Turner's liminality.

Devi's protagonist Lakshmibai has encouraged her helping hands with her own pain and difficulties. She has the patriotic feeling towards her own land and reminds the duty of guard to the nation in front of rivals. She further says:

She assembled her chiefs and sepoys. Her eyes were red and tearful as she addressed them, saying, 'peshwa's soldiers . . .' she cleared her voice and said loudly, 'My brave sepoys, chiefs and friends – we did not start this struggle in the hope from the Peshwa's soldiers. So far we have guarded Jhansi with our own might. Today we must fight the enemy in the same spirit. (202)

Lakshmibai with her red and tearful eyes wish the soldiers to go ahead in the war to fight against enemies. She herself had the pain and trouble and goes ahead with such painful situation. She further appreciates sepoys with mighty spirit to guard Jhansi at that movement. She has new self after having liminality stage and that supports for agency on her and others.

Devi's characters use their bodies to stand up to societal injustice and fight for their identities. Resistance is a subversive act against all forms of exploitation, discrimination, prejudice, and subjection. It's a process that involves both rejection from below and dominance from above. Without

agency, resistance is impossible. Michael Garnett links enlightenment, which occurs when limitations are overcome, to agency and inner freedom. The ability to act in a certain setting where tension arises while generating it is known as agency. Furthermore, agency is not an individual endeavor but rather a result of historical and communal processes. "Losses of inner freedom are not explicable in terms of failures of deep agency, that is, in terms of motivation by alien desires," explains Garnett (3). Agency is intertwined with inner freedom. To seek inner freedom is to seek true or profound agency. Overcoming fear and both internal and external limitations is necessary to develop agency and become an independent person. Enlightenment is the result of inner freedom, yet people are not free because of external and internal forces.

An act of subversion against all forms of exploitation, discrimination, prejudice, and oppression is called resistance. This method combines rejection from below with dominance from above. In the absence of agency, resistance is impossible. According to Michael Garnett, enlightenment, which occurs when limitations are overcome, is associated with agency and inner freedom. Agency is the ability of a doer or agent to act in a certain situation where tension arises while generating it. Furthermore, rather than being the result of individual effort, agency is a historical and communal phenomenon. As explained by Garnett, "Losses of inner

freedom are not explicable in terms of failures of deep agency, that is, in terms of motivation by alien desires" (3).... Agency and inner freedom go hand in hand. The pursuit of inner freedom is a quest for true or profound agency. In order to develop agency, one must overcome fear and both internal and external limitations in order to become an independent self. Internal freedom results in enlightenment, yet external influences also contribute to people's lack of freedom.

The spokesperson for the subaltern, Spivak claims, serves as both their master and their lifeblood. "The little peasants' proprietors cannot represent themselves, they must be represented," she says (71). In her struggle to give the working class a voice, Spivak opposes intellectual elites who merely offer their elitist interpretation of the subaltern voice. In a discourse, subalterns are positioned as passive subjects rather than active participants. According to Spivak, academicians should look at how their intellectual dispositions impact their capacity to fairly portray the disadvantaged. She makes the subaltern's inability to speak out quite clear. The underclass is always impacted by the bias of the thinkers at the top.

In Devi's tale, the ravished Lakshmibai is transformed into a terrifying embodiment of female retaliation. Furthermore, the people in Mahasweta's other past, who said that "The Queen hasn't died! Baisaheba jarur

jinda houni'" (15), continue to imagine the vanquished queen. According to Mahasweta Devi, this is the real meaning of the Rani of Jhansi's life—an iconic figure who embodied the spirit of the people during a pivotal period in the history of the country,

Rani Lakshmibai was an expression of what India felt in those times. One truth rises above the countless mistakes, flaws, weaknesses and defeats of those days, and that is of the first conscious rebellion taking place against the stranglehold of foreign rule... As long as people insist, 'Rani margay na houni'—"The Queen did not die"—the Queen will be alive. (16)

The rebellious spirit of the people denies the fall of the Queen even after a long span of time. She is alive in the heart and memories of her folks. The truth that the Queen fights against British Raj and their stranglehold of the foreign rule despite timely failures do not remain so long. A praiseworthy action to defend the nation and sovereignty gets worshipped forever. Lakshmibai remains as a political icon for the Indians forever.

Regarding body, its autonomy and role to challenge and resist the orthodox social norm, values and institution Maurice Merleau-Ponty admits:

At the outset I wish to clarify that the truth claims of the subaltern body, or its corporeality, can be best accounted for

phenomenologically, since phenomenologists believe that truth is grounded in bodily perception and it can be re-lived through memory. Maurice Merleau-Ponty rightly says that "The identity of the thing through perceptual experience is only another aspect of the identity of one's own body... It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive things" (182).

The role of the body is twofold: it embodies the consciousness of past circumstances and endeavors to reopen time based on present implications. As our constant means of 'taking up attitudes' and creating pseudo-presents, the body serves as our medium of communication with both time and space.

Rani preaches to her soldiers and people with an indomitable spirit to resist the British hegemony. She fills her people with courage and valor. Devi asserts:

During last period of battle the Queen had lost numerous soldiers and had suffered very heavy damaged. But until now her enthusiasm and will to fight had indomitable. Today she was haunted by an unknown apprehension. She rode that night to each of the bases and towers of the city to inspect everything personally and to cheer up her soldiers. She rewarded them with money and jewellery and inspired them anew with her words of hope and assurance. (196)

Despite the heavy damage that Jhansi suffered, Lakshmibai keeps on fighting against the British along with her tiny military. She travels each and every bases, towers and forts to inspect personally, and to cheer up soldiers rewarding them with wealth. This act of the Queen gave assurance and courage to her soldiers.

### Conclusion

To sum up, Devi provides the marginalized people a sense of identity and reclaims the past of the oppressed through *The Mother of 1084* and *The Queen of Jhansi*. In order to disrupt the situation of national forgetfulness, she gives her characters voices and shares their unexamined tale. Through her tale, the author exposes the cruelty and crimes of the ruling class, elite culture, state, gender issues, and their effects on the minds of the oppressed. In order to rebuild a new identity distinct from the previous one, they transform their traumatic experiences, grief, and terror into power. People who are marginalized use their consciousness as a site of resistance

against hegemonic forces throughout their lives. These subaltern figures go through a political rite of transition with an emergence of subaltern consciousness creating an agency to resist. After getting enlightened, the subaltern agency re-incorporates into a new social space where it defines its own identity and dissolves into a society of equilibrium.

Devi depicts Lakshmibai shows as a boldly and generously pursuing their entire agency while opposing the ill- social practice of imperialism, caste, and class-based discrimination. As Devi is a member of a marginalized community, she depicts the awakening of the impoverished groups and, as a result, their inner selves in the novels described above. The story of the protagonist speaks the triumph of marginalized and subaltern society. Finally, they see that they can awaken everyone with self-asserting agency and the ability to oppose the evils that divide society against the backdrop of universal humanity.

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