

Museumization of Subaltern History in Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*

Abstract

This research focuses on the area of subaltern study, especially of Munda tribes living in Bihar, Jharkhanda and Uttar Pradesh States of India. It tries to understand why Mahasweta Devi includes many oral narratives of the Munda people and raises their issues. Understanding this is important in order to document the oral history of subaltern people as they are in the verge of extinction because they do not have their own written scripts. For this purpose, this research carries out a review of relevant literatures based on library and internet sources, and the text itself. As a theoretical perspective, this study makes use of different concepts of subaltern studies developed by Dipesh Chakravorti and Ranjit Guha. As a conclusion, this study finds that the subaltern themes extensively permeate the text "Chotti Munda and His Arrow" and it is found that the Indian aboriginal people are subaltern not merely because of their caste, language and location but also due to illiteracy and the lack of written history. Mahasweta Devi's sketch of the subaltern characters, agency of the subaltern voices, her tones and language, her documentation of the oral narratives, her representation of voice of the marginalized people persuades the researcher to conclude that her novel "Chotti Munda and His Arrow" constructs an alternative history which poses itself as an alternative to the Indian colonial history..

Key Words: *Museumization, subaltern studies, alternative history, Indian Mainstream history, oral narratives, colonialism, feudalism*

In a genre of novel, which is supposed to a work of fiction and so presents imaginary events, Mahasweta Devi documents oral narratives of the Munda People in India. She also valorizes their festival 'archery competition' and raises the issue of

bonded labor system. In addition to this, she shows how feudalism and colonialism severely exploited the Indian aboriginal people. Despite being a fictional genre, why she documents oral narratives of the Munda people and how does she historicize the issues of the Indian subaltern people? Such questions pulled me into the area of this research.

This research focuses on the area of subaltern studies, based on the transliterated text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* in English by the Indian subaltern theorist Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak but it was originally written in Bengali language by the Indian prolific writer Mahasweta Devi. It explores the significant events that took place in India, especially with the subaltern people called Munda tribes since 1915 to late twentieth century. Indian historians Dipesh Chakravorty and Ranjit Guha, in their volumes on the Indian subaltern history, argue that the *adivasis* or aboriginal ethnic people are excluded from mainstream history. They further reiterate that their roles in nation formation and in independence of India remain significantly unacknowledged because the elite class regards them as belonging to lowest strata of the society. And, the elite class pays no heed to the rights of the aboriginal people because they lack education and do not possess their own scripts to compose their history. In this regard, the researcher, through extensive research, aims to bestow voice to voiceless people.

The researcher argues the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* as an alternative history parallel to the mainstream Indian history because Mahasweta Devi charts the unsung stories of tribes, their experiences, and rituals in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* as an alternative history. Moreover, she constructs her text from the perspective of subaltern studies historians' 'history from below' approach. She foregrounds seemingly tribal issues of the ethnic. Through her portrayal of subaltern character,

Chotti Munda (the protagonist), she unfolds the layers of stories of Munda life. The protagonist has layers of stories in his life from his childhood to adulthood which remain absent in the mainstream history. With her portrayal of subaltern characters, she provides an overdue voice to the subaltern preoccupations. In this way, she justifies their collective militant resistance. Thus, she calls the mainstream society to rethink the adverse attitude towards the subaltern, or be ready to face the revolt of tribal people. In this regard, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in the preface of this text, states that “one of the most striking characteristics of the novel is the sustained aura of subaltern speech, without the loss of dignity of the speakers” (VII). She strategically employs her subaltern characters which perfectly exhibit the tone, language and original dialogues of ethnic people. This gives justice to subaltern people.

Mahasweta Devi primarily manifests her concern with the marginalized Munda tribe as well as the Gonds, the Bhils, the Santals, the Oraons, the Minas, and so on. The Munda tribes are the aboriginal people who now reside in the areas of Jharkhand and in adjacent parts of Assam, Odisha, Bihar, West Bengal, Chattisgarh and portions of Bangladesh. People know them as ‘primitive,’ ‘tribal,’ ‘indigenous,’ ‘aboriginal,’ ‘native. Although they are scattered across several parts of India, the author depicts the *Chotti* village as a microcosm of the Indian tribal regions. This group is a major segment of India’s total population.

According to 1991 census, ethnic tribes constitute about 8.08% out of the total population. They would be about 6.78 crores out of total population of 83.86 crores. In spite of being in large numbers and being one of the significant tribes of India, the saddening fact that the Munda tribe has no presence in official Indian history, motivates the researcher to investigate this issue. The primary text for this research

recounts Munda tribe's significant events from the perspective of subaltern studies; however, most of the critics have overlooked this dimension of the text.

Hence, this research attempts to make a succinct comparison between the subaltern history and the Indian mainstream history. By interpreting this text as an alternative history, the researcher seeks to depict it as a storehouse of Indian subaltern details comparable to the museum which stores traditional cultural artifacts.

Mahasweta Devi originally wrote *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* in Bengali language in the 1980s, the year of the emergence of subaltern studies in the Indian Historiography. Later, Indian literary theorist and feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak transliterated it in English language in 2002. The coincidence of its publication and the emergence of subaltern studies in India furnish us with some clues of the themes and trends of subaltern studies.

The stories of the protagonist's life showed up in the wake of colonization and neo-colonization in India. In this fashion, she broadly delineates the harsh exploitation and suffering of the *adivasis* by the Indian dominant classes that continued even after the independence of India in 1947.

Mahasweta Devi sheds light on most of the incidents from the perspective of the subaltern recognizing the roles of every tribe in nation formation as a form of rebellion. On the basis of this reason, the researcher claims this text as a form of subaltern history. The author highlights Munda tribe's demonstration of solidarity against oppressor as a prominent feature. In a unique fashion, she clears her message that the more we attempt to suppress and keep someone under our feet, the more they become aggressive and violent.

In this text too, the same thing applies. Officers of British colonization, the Indian landowners, money-lenders and politicians mistreated the Munda tribe as well

as other suppressed people as their voter banks and laborers. They unpleasantly bounded them up with the reprehensible system of the bonded labor. Consequently, the Munda tribe undermined their chain of law and coped with it with the demonstration of solidarity. The Indian mainstream historian excluded such histories of subaltern people. This shows that the novel *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* detours from the Indian mainstream history.

The comprehensive study of Munda tribe's songs, experiences and oral narratives makes this research significant. In the process of archiving subaltern history, Mahasweta Devi unveils the down-trodden facts of the subaltern people. Similar to this view, the Indian historian, Gyan Prakash points out that

[...] these scholars have sought to uncover the subaltern's myths, cults, ideologies, and revolts that colonial and nationalist elites sought to appropriate and that conventional historiography has laid waste by the deadly weapon of cause and effect. (1479)

Therefore, this research purports to uncover unspecified facts of oral narratives and myths of marginalized people in the mainstream history so as to handover them from one generation to another in written form. As stated earlier, Munda and other ethnic people do not have their own scripts. Thus, the author, through extensive research, chronicles undefined oral narratives of Munda tribe as a form of history. This is what the process of museumization does.

In the museum, the valuable and rare artifacts are preserved. This makes the museum a storehouse of knowledge for many generations. In the same way, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* functions as the museum for the Indian *adivasi* people, whereby they could know their past history. Furthermore, with the help of their own

chronicled history, tribal people could learn from their history and make their better future in upcoming days.

Unlike the manipulated and biased Indian mainstream history, Munda tribe relocates their factual oral narratives into songs, and passes it from one person to another in order to preserve it. Admittedly in this text, the author reports those songs of oral narratives. Just as the Indian mainstream history stands as a source of knowledge for the Indian elite people, so does this original text for the Indian *adivasi*.

Unlike the mainstream history, she critiques the Indian Independence, thereby implying that Indian Independence from British colonization has not brought any remarkable betterment among the tribal people. The situation of ethnic people remains unchanged. The author interprets the life of aboriginal people as horrendous and traumatic. The above mentioned evidences persuade the researcher to characterize this text as an alternative history parallel to the mainstream history.

The researcher claims that Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* constructs an alternative history of the oppressed India Munda tribe through its portrayal of various subaltern characters; for example: Chotti Munda, Dhani Munda, Purti Munda and so on.

Moreover, this thesis identifies the fact that education plays vital role for chronicling the historical facts. If *adivasis* were literate, they would not need help of others for writing their history; instead they would be able to transliterate their oral narratives into scripts. And, such scripts would be their own history which this research terms as alternative history.

All in all, this research puts the following overall aims: to clarify how subaltern studies approaches the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* as an alternative history parallel to mainstream history; to identify how Indian *adivasis* are subaltern;

to assess how subaltern themes dominate this text; and finally to recommend that identity, history and education have triangular relationship in the sense that identity cannot be formed without our history and to make identity immortal and existential education is a must. In order to achieve above objectives, the researcher carries out his efforts through literature review and library visit.

Referring to Mahasweta Devi's project of subaltern studies, the Indian research scholar, M. S. Vinutha opines that "the documentation of exploitation of the suppressed class is one of the ways to rebel against the exploitations of the society" (375). The author's efforts of chronicling the *adivasis*' oral narratives into written form have been a part of solidarity and resistance to rebel against the exploitation of the landowners and the government officers. In the words of Munda tribe, she has been second archery to defeat elitists' suppression upon them. She has been both sympathy and empathy upon them.

Regarding the inevitable features of subaltern studies in the text, the Indian critic and professor, R. Pavithra, notes on her writing that "a very important aspect of Mahasweta's text is spontaneity and capturing the sudden surge of thoughts which runs in the mind of characters" (297). As noted in the quoted lines, the translator of this text, Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak projects most of the Bangali words into roman form, for example; 'Haramgod', 'arrer,' and so on. Likewise, the translator presents the sentences pattern in the form of dialogues as if they are originally produced, capturing their intonation, rhyming pattern and spontaneity. These evidences persuade the researcher to claim that she gives voice to the voiceless and space for dislocated *adivasis*.

In the same light, the Indian research scholar Mukhtar Ashmad Dar critically examines that

The novel presents the story and plight of Munda tribals and lower caste Hindus and celebrates their sustained and unrelenting resistance against unscrupulous, dodgy intruders and ruling oppressors through the freedom struggle of India to the post-Emergency period. (1)

Moreover, in order to justify the reason of her subaltern project, Mahasweta Devi writes herself on *Dust on the Road*:

Mainstream society is carrying on a continuous, shrewd and systematic assault on his social system, his culture, his very tribal identity and existence [. . .] My contention is that history should be rewritten, acknowledging the debt of mainstream India to the struggles of the tribals in the British and even pre-British days. The history of their struggles is not to be found only in written scripts but in their songs, dances, folktales, passed from one generation to another. (150)

Besides documenting their cultural artifacts, Mahasweta Devi points out various problems and predicaments, thereby she wants to encourage marginalized people to speak against their suppression, exploitation and inhuman practices upon them.

Drawing on those closer claims regarding Mahasweta Devi's text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, what I can deduce is that the author is giving voice to the Indian aboriginal people by an alternative history of them. Still, there remains a need to recognize how her writing an alternative history is authenticable and what makes the Indian *adivasis* subaltern.

This research, thus, explores how the text stands as an alternative history and what forces the Indian aboriginal people to be subaltern. With the help of concepts taken from subaltern studies, it critically examines the text as well as its contexts to comprehend more about the Indian subordinated people before and after the

colonialism. By analyzing the issues of the text, I believe readers will be better able to understand not only Mahasweta Devi and her writing pattern but also be able to know why subaltern history should be written.

In this context the researcher has some questions. We generally assume that someone may be subaltern people because of their caste, language and location. But, does it so in the case of the Munda people? How are the Indian *adivasis* subaltern people? Does this text represent the subaltern history authentically? What are the dominant themes of subaltern studies that are represented in the text *Chotti Munda ans His Arrow*? Were subaltern issues unaddressed in the colonial Indian history? Is she innovating or discovering a history of the Indian tribal people? Are there significant events that are raised in the text detour from the Indian colonial history?

Regarding the above questions, it is hypothesized that subaltern issues are unrepresented and unspecified than misrepresented in the Indian mainstream colonial history, thinking that their issues are worthless and their resistance and revolt are no longer closer to national movements. Furthermore, the Indian aboriginal people are the subaltern people not merely by their caste, language and location but most importantly by their illiteracy. Based on narration and dialogues of Mahasweta Devi's with Munda tribal people, we may further hypothesize that she is in the project of discovering subaltern issues as if they were lost in mainstream Indian history in opposition to innovating totally new issues of the Munda people.

In the process of examining those questions, I have consulted the several volumes on subaltern studies by the Indian subaltern theorists Dipesh Chakravorty, Ranjit Guha and Gyan Prakash. Similarly, I have brought some ideas from a dialogue between Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak and the author herself mentioned on the preface of the text. In order to make my argument more convincing to my readers, I have

taken her direct sayings mentioned on other series of her writing like *Dust on the Road and Bitter Soil*. Thus, this research is primarily carried out on the basis of the textual analysis of the primary text in the light of the critical insights of obtained of the secondary materials.

In order to justify the possible question of why her works ought to be read from the perspective of subaltern, we can draw close affinity with the notions of subaltern studies as proposed by Dipesh Chakravorty and Ranjit Guha and Gyan Prakash and criticism made upon *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* by different critics.

With the arrival of a discipline of subaltern studies in postcolonial historiography, it began to question national history. From the mid twentieth century, there began a tussle between nationalism and colonialism. The dominant classes overshadowed the national issues in the exaggeration and over significance of colonial insights. Consequently, the identity of *adivasis* remained in flux. Then, in order to compensate the irreparable loss created by the tussle between thesis (nationalism) and antithesis (colonialism), there emerged synthesis (subaltern studies).

To be concerned with the mission of subaltern studies, the Indian subaltern historian, Ranjit Guha elaborates in his third volume that:

The declared aim of subaltern studies was to produce historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subjects of history. We are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography [. . .] for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project. (3)

Subaltern studies crucially raise the issues of destiny and identity of the aboriginal people. In the same light, the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* also talks about how

Munda people form their own identity. Their identity has been inextricably connected with the archery competition. This game has been a part of their life.

To quench the thrust of a question ‘Why does the text stand as an alternative history?’ we can answer: tribal history lacks continuation in the Indian historiography. But the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* bridges the gap between the Indian colonial history and the subaltern history. It is because the text archives the oral narratives of the Munda people which are unaddressed in the Indian mainstream history.

Subaltern history seems ruptured and manipulated. The Indian dominant classes feel easier to manipulate subordinated history because the illiterate *adivasis* could not form their own written documents. In the same vein, the Indian subaltern historian, Gyan Prakash makes forthright claim in his remarkable writing ‘Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism’ that “the reliance on subaltern studies and the emphasis on textual readings arose from the absence of workers' diaries and other such sources available to British historians. Indian peasants had left no sources, no documents from which their own "voice" could be retrieved (1480).”As mentioned in quoted lines, the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* mirrors the problem in archiving unwritten documents and cultural artifacts of ethnic people.

The stories of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* revolve around continuity, especially continuing struggle of Munda tribe through the representation of heroic figure, Chotti Munda, who stands as a symbol of tribal aspirations. The stories happened in the life of Chotti Munda from his childhood to adulthood makes him the protagonist of this novel.

At the outset of this novel, Mahasweta Devi recounts the story of Chotti’s forefather, Perti Munda. By his story, Devi clearly unfolds the fact about how elite class people displaced Munda tribe from their own residence. The ancestral figure of

Munda tribe, Purti Munda migrated from Chaisabasha to Palamau near by the Chotti River. While showing infringement of non-tribal into the tribal homeland, the author narrates: “suddenly one day many kinds of people—White-Bengali-Bihari—appeared and evicted him from his home” (1). In addition to this, for univocal demonstration of intrusion of non-tribal into Chotti land, Chotti Munda articulates: “how White men and Biharis jumped at the sight of coal and mica, how instantly they disfigured *adivasis* areas with slums of tile-roofed dwellings” (2). To solve their economic crisis, non-tribal displaced *adivasis* one place after another, clearing the forest or by means of coercion. Although it seems an unavoidable fact in tribal history, such inhuman efforts remain absent in the mainstream documentation.

Mahasweta Devi progressively unfolds the life story of Dhani Munda and his spellbound ‘arror’ that became the major concern among high authorities and Munda tribal. Unfolding the stories of parental figure of Munda tribe, Dhani Munda, she aims to depict how forefathers become dominant and responsible for protecting their cultures despite their some obstacles. In fact, Dhani Munda is Chotti’s sister Purmi’s grandfather-in-law. And, he is known as ‘Haramgod’ of archery and the veteran rebel, who actively took part in Ulgulan with his associate, Birsa. The story of Dhani Munda begins after Chotti’s encounter with him. At that time, he was close to ninety and Chotti was only fifteen. After Chotti’s encounter with him, Dhani Said, “I have a spellbound arrer. If ten birds fly in t' sky, an' ye tell t' arrer get me t' third one, it'll do it” (4). When Dhani announced this statement, Chotti was lured by him and persuaded Dhani to teach him.

In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Dhani is an embodiment of revolutionary spirit. He used to use his spellbound ‘arrer’ in any short of revolution, such as Birsa’s revolt, Mukkoi revolt etc, and defeated them badly. When police officers knew about

his tactics, they kept him under their control and threatened for not using bow and ‘arrow’, thinking he has been the major cause of riots and troubles in Chotti village. In the process of describing police officers’ suspicion upon him, Dhani says, “They think if I lift an arrow I’ll call t’ great revolt-Ulgulan-again” (8). Despite the inspection and supervision over Dhani, he bequeathed his arrow to Chotti saying, “Most feist y arrow! This is an arrow to keep close Chotti, don't shoot unless there's great need. No one can ever beat ya if ye keep this by” (16). This statement symbolically stands for developing and transforming their tradition from one generation to other. And this symbolic act is transferred into songs and sung among tribals.

Unlike mainstream history in which major incidents are documented and passed generation to generation, subaltern people documents major incidents into their songs. Such songs are stored in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. In this light, the author apparently points out: “Munda Language has no script. So they turn significant events into story, and hold them as saying, as song. That’s their history as well” (18). As their tradition is transforming the significant events into songs, Dhani Munda’s death and his significant contributions are invaluabley formed into songs in the following ways:

Dhani, ye came out of t’ je-hellhouse.

Big polis boss said with red eyes

Ranchi and Chaisbasha are forbidden for ye

[...]

Ah! On Sailrakab stone now flowers bloom

Ye are those flowers. (19-20)

When significant events appear in Munda community, they transfer into songs as mentioned above and communicate among the tribal people.

The ethnic people think song as a source of their revival. As events are documented in history, they become long lasting, so does Munda's songs. When they remember and sing those recorded songs, then, memories are revived. All in all, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is a collection of songs. Such collection of songs can be compared with the process of archiving the artifacts in museum. The logic of archiving songs persuades the researcher to claim this primary text as a form of museum, which can be termed as an alternative history.

Mahasweta Devi emphasizes upon resistance until the goals are achieved. In order to make the resistance effective even after his death, Dhani Munda teaches the skills and techniques of bow and 'arrer' to his descendants. In this situation, the author clears the purpose of their resistance against the perpetrators in the following lines:

Let' teach Chotti. Chotti, let me thread ye to the tales and sayings of
Munda life by trachin' ye to pierce the straw man. But what does
Chotti say?

Why must one kill people from time to time?

We Killed

Why?

We won' eat mealie, won' obey t' terrorizin' moneylender, Diku,
Polis, will occupy arable and settled rural land, will take back to t'
forest. (15)

These lines are meaningful in the sense that they offer the reasons for how Munda cates are subaltern people and why it is necessary to teach Chotti a piercing of bow and 'arrer', although this act is strictly forbidden by the local police officers. Bequeathing the bow and 'arrer' is his final step in order to revive the spirit of

revolution. In the lines quoted above, the researcher implies that the more we oppress others, the more they become aggressive and violent.

Mahasweta Devi documents how the tribal people used to count their ages although they were uneducated. In this context, the author interestingly writes that “Dhani counted his age by the measure of the two maturing and ageing cycles of the Sal and Teak trees in the forest- from his childhood to this day” (4). This process of counting their ages offers unique tastes to its readers. It is also one of the techniques for counting any numerical fact. However, the literacy rate of Munda tribe and the untouchables of twenty-first century have gradually been increasing. Documenting such episode of Munda’s life becomes interesting history for upcoming generations.

By unfolding Dhani’s story and his association with Chotti, Mahasweta Devi depicts how the untouchables and the tribal people are living under the pathetic condition of poverty, displacement and alienation. Archiving such inhuman conditions of the Munda people characterizes the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* as an alternative history. For example: Chotti’s dislocation from his house to his sister’s in law’s house metaphorically stands for the pathetic condition caused by the drought.

In addition to this, the above illustration proves how they are united in times of difficulty. Co-operation and helpfulness is in their blood. In cooperative and neighborly tone, Chotti’s sister, Parmi’s father -in-law states that “There aint no grass in yer fields, sand runs around on the riverbed, pushed by t’ sunburnt wind. Send yer eldest son. He’ll tend cattle. There’s no drought that side” (5). In comparison to Chotti’s house, his sister in-law’s house is economically better. When Dhani Munda proposes to take Chotti Munda to his house, Chotti’s brother, Koel’s says, “I too’ll go” (5), which signifies how they are longing for their better life. I think Chotti’s displacement brings substantial transition in his life. If he was not taken by Dhani

Munda, he would not learn how to shoot spellbound 'arrer'. His close affection especially with Dhani encouraged Chotti for resisting their oppression and domination with the proper use of bow and 'arrer'. Although Dhani was kept under tight supervision of Police officer, threatening not to raise any bow and arrer, he used to raise and teach others how to raise bow and 'arrer' by deceiving police officers' eyes.

The history of 'spellbound arrer and bow' becomes a unique story in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. The references and connection of this tradition come throughout the novel. This valorization of Munda people's festival by Mahasweta Devi impresses the researcher to allege the text as an alternative history of the Indian *adivasis*. They have been practicing the 'spellbound bow and arrer' since the Munda tribal's existence in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. In this festival, the competitors were supposed to hit the bull's eye that is tied up with rings on bamboo poles. After the festival is over, the winners would buy rice, pork, liquor and would sit together for sharing their profound joys and excitement. These activities reflect the fact that it has brought harmonious relationship among the tribal people.

The next fact surprisingly related to the festival of archery competition is Chotti Munda and his descendants would win the game every year, defeating the elite contestants. Such victorious history of the Munda people is absent in the Indian mainstream history. Accordingly, the festival becomes a source income. The winners would get five rupees prize from each head of judge committee, totaling around 20-25 rupees. They would spend the remaining money after celebrating victory for maintaining daily expenditures throughout the year. Hence, the researcher claims that the author has progressively museumized this festival by illustrating their victorious history and reflecting how the festival became their source of income.

Introducing the ‘spellbound arrer’, Mahasweta Devi manifests how this tradition functions as a binding thread among the *adivasis*. It has a long interesting history of how this festival has bonded one generation to next. As described before, Dhani taught his skill to Chotti Munda in order to revive his revolutionary spirit against the relic of feudalism and colonialism. Then, in the interest and request of Mundas from Kurmi village- Dukhai, Bikhana and Sukha- Chotti Munda taught them skills of using bow and ‘arrer’. In much the same way of Dhani’s thoughts, Chotti mindfully considered that it would be important to make their culture getting victory and being alive in each fair. As a result, Chotti Munda bequeathed his ‘spellbound arrer’ to his son, Harmu when Chotti Munda was on the death bed. The characterization of this festival as a binding thread highlights its importance. But the reflection of the importance of Munda festival remains missing in the Indian mainstream history. Unlike it, such a description of bequeathing the ‘spellbound arrer’ identifies the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* as an alternative history.

Mahasweta Devi raises the issue of bonded labor, thereby she portrays how the elite classes exploited and chained the *adivasis* under their feet. The reference to this system seems to lack in the Indian colonial history. But, with the discussion of the bonded labor practice in *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*, the author offers a powerful critique of the system of bonded labor and reflects how this practice has caused the Indian *adivasis* to be subaltern people. Similar to the slavery system in Nepal, the bonded labor predominantly exists in those areas, where inequality, poverty, illiteracy and racial discrimination extremely overwhelm. This system can be depicted as a relic of feudal system. It is defined as a system, by which a person receives loans from his creditor and remains a laborer until the loan and interest is repaid. Accordingly, by the

system of bonded labor, the landowners alienated the Munda people and the untouchables from their own land during the colonial time.

Beside alienation, the elite classes suffocated and made the Munda people's life miserable laboring them in the field works without paying the wages. Then, in order to suppress the voice of aggression, landowners provided the fallow land in lease to the head of the untouchables. Tirathnath, the landowner, had given a portion of land that was uncultivable and barren to Chotti for farming. But he had put the condition that he should be given half percent of harvested crops. When Chotti and his family members ploughed the land, the fertilizers and finally made the land fertile in one year, then it was taken back by him. These evidences illustrate the fact how the *adivasis* are inescapably tied up under the feet of the landowners and the moneylenders. To be directed with the Indian Mainstream history, such facts are overlooked. Unlike in the Indian mainstream history, presenting the above issues of exploitation, suffocation, marginalization of the *adivasis* in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* has encouraged the researcher to interpret this text as a history of subaltern people.

With references to the system of bonded labor, Mahasweta Devi critiques the colonial attitude unlike in the Indian colonial history. The Land lords and the moneylenders are the representatives of colonial rule even after the Indian Independence. They think that to bind the indigenous people in bonded system is their natural duty. It refers their colonized attitude. Without hesitation, Lala Baijanath, the moneylender, in colonizing tone apparently says: "It is very easy to bind the *adivasis* in debt. If they once put their thumbprint on paper, they give bonded labor for generations. On course this is just as applicable to untouchables"(25). These quoted lines convey the belief of the elite classes that the *adivasis* and the untouchables can

easily be manipulated. It explores the fact that the landowners and the landlords are superior and civilized, and others are inferior and uncivilized.

As a researcher, I find it important to illustrate *adivasis*' attempt to give up bonded labor despite of their difficulties. Unlike the mainstream history, the illustrations of their courageous acts to give up bonded labor make the subaltern history vibrant and liable. Even before the attainment of Independence, the *adivasis* did not keep the stone unturned to fight against inhuman practices in society. Since the story began from unfolding the life story of Dhani Munda, he was fighting to eliminate the bonded labor. When Parmi's father-in law was planning to go to the moneylender for giving the bonded labor, Dhani Munda prevented him saying "[T] a gie bond labour? Doncha know? That bond labour is one among all t' ills he fought against?" (10) With this he was indicating to the 'Birsa Movement' and his rebellion in which they fought to give up the bonded labor. In addition to this, When the feudal lords showed disinterest in providing daily wages per head, the tribal people set their cottages on fire. Similarly, When Lala Baijanath was reluctant to provide foods and water at the time of drought and famine, the tribal people looted the granaries of Lala Baijanath.

These evidences delineate that subaltern can speak without the help of external force. As a translator of the text, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak finds herself contradiction on her own stance "Subaltern cannot speak" (104). In opposition to the idea of Spivak, subaltern can speak but their words and action do not get materialized in the absence of written documents. That is the problem what the Munda people are facing. This constitutes the reliable history of the Indian *adivasis* which is remarkably mentioned in the primary text. Such facts gave a vivid picture of an alternative history.

Despite their several efforts, the Munda people were unsuccessful to end reprehensible bonded labor completely. However, it caused the subaltern people to realize their weaknesses of being illiterate. They could not raise the issues of their legal rights and register the petition to police officers about their suppression. Such self-realization can be seen in the following words of Chotti Munda while debating with Tirathnath:

Many things are done wit' worda mouth. Ye say I've borrad so much, worda mouth. Ye say I've harvested so much, worda mouth. Make me understand', Munda doesn' read, so how does he know worda mouth won' stand true? (122-123)

These lines shed light on the gap between words and action. The illiteracy caused their failure in most of the movements. These lines help the researcher to come to the conclusion that the illiteracy caused them to be subaltern people beside other several factors like caste, language and location. The *adivasis* use only words for procuring the goods and for their social and economic transactions. To make agreements only by words is not enough. It has the possibility of changing according to the needs of the creditor. The same thing happens in the text also. Thus, the education is obligatory to everyone for making written documents.

In opposition to the Indian mainstream history, Mahasweta Devi critiques the independence by mirroring the pathetic condition of the Munda people. On the contrary to the Indian mainstream history, critiquing the independence prompts the researcher to allege the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* as an alternative history. In this process, Mahasweta Devi digs out the vestiges of bonded labor system that went unabated even after the attainment of Independence. Despite the enactment of Bonded Labor Abolition Act in 1976, this evil practice continued in India. In this regard, B.T.

Ranadive argues that “[I]n consonance with its outlook of compromise with feudal land relations the bourgeoisie leadership adopted a policy which, though differing in words from the earlier policy, in content remained the same (143)”. It proves the fact that the relic of feudalism was even allowed to be practiced in the postcolonial India.

Similarly, in the process of showing pathetic condition, the author narrates that “[T]he August movement did not even touch the life of Chotti’s community. It was as if that was the Diku’s struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle (121)”. It denotes the fact that the Zamindars and the moneylenders practiced the absolute power in post-colonial India. Although the Indian constitution prescribed several measures for the upliftment of the Indian *advasis*, it did not bring any remarkable changes. These references coax the researcher to say Mahasweta Devi makes the harsh comments upon Independence. Accordingly, these harsh comments offer the possible explanation for separating this text from the Indian mainstream history.

Mahasweta Devi’s active involvement in releasing the bonded laborers and ameliorating their deadly condition is incredibly praiseworthy. In conversation with Enakshi Chatterjee, mentioned in the book *Wordsmiths*, Mahasweta Devi points out that:

I treat Palamau as a mirror for India. I have lived among the tribals, loved them, and worked with them. I have been saying to the Government, to the people all over India that you must give the tribals' the respect they deserve. Just allotting some funds is not enough - the money does not reach them. (173)

These lines motivate the researcher to claim that her efforts made while writing this text are genuine and every event mentioned in the text is based on her extended

research. The above lines further reiterate the fact that although economic pressure forced the subaltern people to the stranglehold of bonded labor not only by their vulnerable economic condition but social, political and religious factors were also equally responsible. Dominant classes think that if a deadly practice of bonded labor is ended, they won't get the laborers in low wages that will finally degrade their economic condition. The above line 'just allotting some funds is not enough- the money does not reach them' conveys the significant message that imparting education to them is the most. And, the *adivasis* should be offered job opportunities rather than supporting funds to bring them out from the category of subaltern.

The unique characteristic of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is the valorization of the consistent demonstration of the victims against the inhuman practices. Mahasweta Devi depicts the Munda people's demonstration as a form of solidarity. Such depiction motivates the researcher to analyze the text from the perspective of subaltern studies. For example, all the tribal people who come under the rubric called subaltern- the mundas, Oraons, Kurmis, Ganjus and Washer-caste-joined together for fighting with their enemies. To get rid of the intolerable pain of drought, the Mundas collectively dug ponds and pit instead of procuring the water of Zamindars. In this view, the author opines that: "The hole digging is like a joint festival for the Mundas and for Chhagan's crowd. The men dug up the sand and put in planks with no gap in-between on the walls of the pit. The woman threw the sand at a distance, on the bank. Gradually they dug ten pits. The water came up. They got the water right there" (101). These lines lay out the fact that solidarity is a form of empowerment for liberating subaltern people from the chain of feudalism and colonialism. Although it was the time of dividing different groups attuned to the political interests, they came with their united single voice to resist against the oppression.

To support the idea of demonstration and solidarity of the Munda people, Karlene Faith opines that “Whenever power is infused across the range of disciplinary sites, there it simultaneously intersects with the force of resistance, even at the most microscopic, cellular and capillary levels of existence” (38). As quoted by Karlene, the dalits and the untouchables joined their hands together to eke their living in the hostile milieu. By illustrating such facts in the text, the researcher claims that Mahasweta Devi is giving justice to the demonstration of the subaltern people. Giving justice to their acts and speaking in favor of them persuades the researcher to claim this text as an alternative history.

Along with their strong unification, they are equally conscious about the conspiracy of the landlords and the moneylenders for parting their bonding. The moneylender of Chotti village, Tirathnath tries his best to separate Chhagan’s group and Chotti’s group, thinking that their partnership will definitely create problems in his ways of oppression. Tirathnath points out that “It is certainly a problem if Chotti’s group and Chhagan’s people work together” and he suggests that “it is necessary to keep them apart” (102). In retaliation, with straight head in bold and resistant voice, Chotti remarks Tirathnath that “I knew all along that ye’d separate us from Chhagan and his people. Now I see that ye separate Munda from Munda” (104). Such conversation between Tirathnath and Chotti provides us with the fact that Chotti’s and Chhagan’s groups are minutely aware about the tactic of divide and rule of Tirathnath for destabilizing the farsighted mindsets of the subaltern leaders. By showing the consciousness of Munda people, the author is sketching the positive character and dominant attitude of the subaltern people.

Mahasweta Devi minutely depicts how the Britishers intervene and insult to the subordinated people of Chotti village. By doing so, the author reflects the colonial

attitude of the Britishers unlike in the Indian colonial history. Masquerading the true nature of domination and suppression, the Britishers, not surprisingly, enter the village showing their love and respect to the Munda tribal. They keep close association with the Munda people for knowing their cultures and lifestyles, and later they interfere by demoralizing and intervening upon them. For example, in the text, a whitey man named Ronaldson fancies Chotti by speaking in Mundari language. Praise his skills of using bow and arrow, he makes several queries for knowing their lifestyles. Then, he entered Chotii village and enjoyed with them by eating what they ate, sitting where they sat. Amusing the villagers, he won the heart of the Munda people. But, for proving himself a civilized man, the Britisher does not drink liquor at victory party of Neundra Fair. Then, the Neundra Pahan ironically says, “If ye’re a good Gormen why do we suffer so?” (36). This statement clearly shows the contradiction between German’s behaviors and policies.

To show the hegemony of German people, the author, addressing Chotti, narrates that “He had heard from Dhani that god Birsa had been cremated on the banks of this river. Not by the Mundas. By Gormen. Gormen lit the god’s corpse with lumps of dry cowdung, to insult god’s body” (37). These lines apparently show how the Britisher demoralizes to the subaltern people. Such facts presumably lack in the Indian mainstream history. Conversely, interpreting the hegemony of German people upon the *adivasis* in the primary text motivates the researcher to detour the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* from the Indian colonial history.

Along with Britishers’ interference upon the culture of the Munda people; Mahasweta Devi shows how the government’s representatives like police officers, Daroga and Mahavir Sahay, are reluctant to help the aboriginal people at the time of drought and famine. In the mid 20th century, the Chotti village was severely paralyzed

by the natural calamities. In the hope of getting help, the aboriginal people went to the police officers with petition. Unfortunately, instead of getting hope, the *adivasis* were bitterly responded answering:

Yes, there's a drought. But where's the famine?

In a famine people will die, they'll run from the village, that's what a famine is! Is the government's money that cheap?

No one but Tirathnath has rice or wheat

He wants to give. (39)

Above lines depict the contradictory attitude of both the administration and the police officers. These lines make the government polices naked. Such illustration about anti-government remain absent in the mainstream history. Unlike it, the presence of above facts symbolizes the text as a history of the Indian subaltern people.

Among other things, the text raises an issue of drought and famine in Chotti village and its haphazard consequences among its inhabitants. The Deputy Director of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Samra J.S. downplayed the report that "From 1871 to 2002, India has witnessed 22 major droughts each in 1873, 1877, 1899, 1901, 1904, 1905, 1911, 1918, 1920, 1941, 1951, 1965, 1966, 1968, 1972, 1974, 1979, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1987, and 2002 and five of them were severe" (1).

Moreover, Samra J.S. reiterates that "The drought in 2002, one of the severest in the 130-year history of India affected 56% of the geographical area and livelihoods of 300 million people in 18 states" (v).

Above mentioned data make us crystal clear about how the tribal people were affected by the drought. In such moment, the local government was supposed to announce the program of declaration and monitoring in affected areas. Although government lunched the program of relief funds and missionary programs, the

indigenous people were knowingly back warded from such helping hands. To illustrate the fact, the author, addressing to Chotti, narrates: “He lets the wish of the government be known unofficially, henceforth the news of famine will be accepted only if it comes through proper channels” (46). The authentic medium to inform government secretary about natural disaster is the police officer, but the problem is they do not register the petition filed by the Munda people and their leaders. They intentionally compel the aboriginal people to take help from the local landlords and the moneylenders instead of from the government.

Unlike the above illustrations of feudal lords and moneylenders presented by the Mahasweta Devi, the colonial history presents them as being advantageous to the Indian aboriginal people. In the same light, Dipesh Chakravorty stresses the fact that:

Official documents of the British government of India—and traditions of imperial history writing—always portrayed colonial rule as being beneficial to India and her people. They applauded the British for bringing to the subcontinent political unity, modern educational institutions, modern industries, modern nationalism, a rule of law, and so forth. (11)

The above discussion and theoretical insight allow us to claim that the depiction of relics of feudal lords and moneylenders is not as much similar presented by the Indian colonial history. The different characterization of feudal lords and moneylenders as exploiter and blood sucker of adivasis by Mahasweta Devi persuades the researcher to claim the text as an alternative history.

From aforementioned facts and illustrations it is found that the Munda people and other ethnic minorities are not always subaltern because of their caste, gender, class and culture; but their illiteracy caused them to be the subaltern people. However,

we cannot deny the facts of discriminations, suppression and hegemony upon them. But, lack of education is the most foundational factor for making them subaltern. We can assume that if they were educated, they could write their own written history instead of transforming their significant events into oral narratives. In fact, there would be no need of second person like Mahasweta Devi for collecting their event and piling them into a form of novel.

To conclude, this thesis solely focused on subaltern voices and themes in order to interpret the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* as an alternative history. The most intriguing aspects that this thesis raised are the oral narratives of the Munda people, their victorious history in archery competition, their exploitation, suppression and alienation in the society. And then, in order to critique the Indian mainstream history, the researcher picked up the issue of the bonded labor system and showed how the Indian *adivasis* were chained to the feet of the elite classes. In addition to this, this thesis mentioned an event of Whitey man, Rolandson, who entered the Munda villages and manipulated them as his intention. These facts are absent in the Indian mainstream history which make criticism upon capitalism, neo-colonialism, feudalism and independence in terms of their treatment upon marginalized people as stated by Ranajit Guha. According to him:

Subaltern historiography necessarily entailed (a) a relative separation of the history of power from any universalist histories of capital, (b) a critique of the nation-form, and (c) an interrogation of the relationship between power and knowledge (hence of the archive itself and of history as a form of knowledge). (8)

As mentioned above by Guha, the facts and illustrations mentioned on “Chotti Munda and His Arrow” by Mahasweta Devi show the separation from the absolute power of

Indian elite people and critique their hegemony. The moments and events which go against the concise of ruling class people are unspecified by the Indian colonial history. However, in order to bestow the voice to the Indian aboriginal people Mahasweta Devi chronicled the subaltern narratives and myths in the text. So, the researcher borrowed the term “musuemization” from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as mentioned by the Indian research scholar Mukhtar Ashmad Dar in his writing(5) to indicate that the author stored subaltern artifacts in the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, and accordingly depicted the text as an alternative history.

In fact, the Munda tribes were not just a case in point; but original ethnic classes from every corner of the world were presumably taken as subaltern not because of their caste but because of their lack of education. Thus, every conscious citizen of the world should significantly focus on uplifting the subaltern people making them educated; not only digging out their history so that they could write their own history.

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