

# *Indigenous Feminisms and Mongrel Theoretical Discourses: Re-reading MahaSweta Devi through Eastern and Western Paradigms*

Shweta Jha

Research Scholar

Email -[jhashweta509@gmail.com](mailto:jhashweta509@gmail.com)

B.N.M.U. Madhepura

## ABSTRACT

This article offers an extended, theoretically layered re-reading of MahaSweta Devi's oeuvre through the intersecting lenses of Indigenous feminisms and what is here conceptualized as *mongrel theoretical discourse*. It argues that Devi's literary and activist practice unsettles the epistemic divide between Eastern and Western paradigms by producing a hybrid feminist imaginary grounded in Adivasi lifeworlds, anti-colonial struggle, and gendered subaltern agency. Drawing on close readings of *Draupadi*, *Stanadayini (Breast-Giver)*, *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, and *Aranyer Adhikar*, the essay demonstrates that Devi's representations of Indigenous and marginalized women cannot be adequately interpreted within either Western liberal/postcolonial feminism or essentialized cultural nationalism. Instead, her texts demand mongrel hermeneutics attentive to relational ontology, land-based identity, oral memory, and embodied resistance. By bringing Eastern philosophical traditions (Shakta imaginaries, dharmic ethics, animist cosmology) into dialogic tension with Western theoretical frameworks (subaltern studies, intersectionality, Marxist feminism, decolonial theory), the study situates MahaSweta Devi as a foundational figure in global Indigenous feminist thought whose work theorizes plural feminist modernities beyond East/West binaries.

**Keywords:** Indigenous feminism, mongrel theory, subalternity, Adivasi women, decolonial feminism, Eastern epistemology, postcolonial studies.

## INTRODUCTION: TOWARD A MONGREL FEMINIST READING

MahaSweta Devi (1926–2016) stands at a critical intersection of literature, activism, and feminist thought in South Asia. Writing primarily in Bengali yet deeply embedded in Adivasi struggles across eastern and central India, Devi forged a literary practice inseparable from political engagement. Her corpus chronicles dispossession, bonded labor, ecological devastation, and militarized violence while foregrounding subaltern women as agents of history rather than passive victims. Yet the theoretical reception of her work has frequently oscillated between two reductive poles: assimilation into Western feminist/postcolonial discourse or containment within an essentialized Indigenous authenticity beyond theory. This binary reproduces the colonial epistemic divide that positioned “East” and “West” as mutually exclusive intellectual worlds. Devi's texts, however, are profoundly hybrid. They merge oral narrative with documentary realism, mythic time with

political reportage, tribal cosmology with Marxist critique, and gendered embodiment with anti-imperial resistance. Such textual heterogeneity resists singular theoretical appropriation. To read Devi adequately, theory itself must become hybrid. This article proposes the framework of **mongrel theoretical discourse** to capture this hybridity. Reclaiming “mongrel” from its colonial-racial derogation, the term here signifies mixture, survival, and adaptive vitality. Mongrel theory rejects epistemic purity and recognizes that postcolonial knowledge traditions are historically entangled through translation, conflict, and exchange. Applied to MahaSweta Devi, it enables a feminist reading that moves across Eastern and Western paradigms without subordinating one to the other. The central thesis advanced here is that MahaSweta Devi’s representations of subaltern and Indigenous women articulate a form of **Indigenous feminism** grounded in relational ontology, land memory, and collective resistance. This feminism exceeds liberal rights discourse while simultaneously critiquing patriarchal structures within both colonial modernity and indigenous cultures. Devi’s literary practice thus anticipates contemporary decolonial feminist theory, offering a plural epistemology that destabilizes binaries of East/West, tradition/modernity, and oral /written.

## INDIGENOUS FEMINISMS: GLOBAL AND SOUTH ASIAN CONTEXTS

Indigenous feminism has emerged globally as a critique of both colonial patriarchy and mainstream feminism’s universalizing assumptions. Across the Americas, Australia, Africa, and Asia, Indigenous women have emphasized that gender oppression cannot be separated from land dispossession, cultural erasure, and settler violence. Their struggles are simultaneously feminist, ecological, and anti-colonial. Unlike liberal feminism’s focus on individual autonomy, Indigenous feminisms foreground community survival, kinship networks, and relational ethics grounded in territory and ancestry. In South Asia, Adivasi women’s activism against mining, displacement, deforestation, and militarization has articulated analogous concerns. Yet academic feminist discourse in India has historically centered caste, class, and religion while marginalizing tribal perspectives. MahaSweta Devi’s writings from the 1960s onward constitute one of the earliest sustained literary engagements with Adivasi women’s resistance. Her reportage, fiction, and advocacy foreground land alienation, bonded labor, and state violence while depicting women as custodians of memory and insurgency. Crucially, Devi avoids romanticizing tribal societies. She exposes internal hierarchies, gender violence, and poverty, refusing nationalist primitivism that idealizes Adivasis as timeless ecological subjects. Her Indigenous feminism is therefore materialist and historical rather than essentialist. Tribal communities appear as politically entangled with colonial and postcolonial state structures, capitalist exploitation, and nationalist development projects. Women’s agency emerges within these contradictions, not outside them.

## CONCEPTUALIZING MONGREL THEORY

The notion of mongrel theory builds on postcolonial and decolonial critiques of epistemic purity. Colonial discourse constructed East and West as civilizational opposites—spiritual versus rational, traditional versus modern—while colonial modernity itself produced hybrid intellectual formations. South Asian thought since the nineteenth century has evolved through translation, reinterpretation, and contestation across cultures: reform movements blending Enlightenment rationalism with Vedantic ethics, Marxism intersecting with anti-colonial nationalism, feminist activism engaging indigenous cosmologies. Mongrel theory acknowledges this historical intermixture and treats hybridity not as dilution but as generative epistemic condition. It involves four interrelated principles:

1. **Epistemic pluralism:** Knowledge arises from multiple traditions interacting rather than from singular origins.
2. **Dialogic critique:** Theoretical frameworks transform through cross-cultural encounter rather than unilateral application.
3. **Relational accountability:** Interpretation remains ethically grounded in communities represented.
4. **Contradictory simultaneity:** Postcolonial texts may sustain conflicting ontologies without resolution.

MahaSweta Devi's writing exemplifies these principles. Her narrative strategies juxtapose ethnographic detail with mythic symbolism, oral testimony with archival documentation, and feminist embodiment with class struggle. Such heterogeneity invites a mongrel reading attentive to both Indigenous epistemologies and global critical theory.

## EASTERN EPISTEMIC PARADIGMS IN MAHASWETA DEVI

### Shakta Imaginaries and Feminine Power

Shakta traditions in South Asia conceptualize feminine divinity (shakti) as creative and destructive force permeating the cosmos. Devi's female protagonists frequently resonate with this imagery, yet she secularizes and politicizes it. In *Draupadi*, Dopdi Mejhen's final act of naked defiance recalls the epic Draupadi's disrobing, but without divine intervention. The tribal insurgent becomes her own locus of power. Mythic memory persists as insurgent archetype rather than transcendental salvation. Similarly, figures in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* embody latent feminine potency tied to land and ancestry. Women preserve ritual knowledge, songs, and genealogies sustaining community identity across generations. Shakti here emerges not as goddess worship but as collective resilience embedded in ecological belonging. Devi transforms religious symbolism into political anthropology.

### Dharmic Ethics and Relational Justice

Classical Indian ethical thought often emphasizes relational duty (dharma) rather than individual rights. Devi's narratives depict justice as communal responsibility rooted in kinship and territory. Characters act from obligations to ancestors, clan, and land rather than liberal selfhood. For example, in *Aranyer Adhikar*, tribal resistance against colonial forest laws arises from cosmological duty to protect ancestral forests. Women participate as ritual custodians and logistical organizers, enacting gendered dimensions of dharmic responsibility. Such ethics challenge Western feminist emphasis on autonomy and choice. Survival in Devi's worlds is collective; the self cannot be detached from community ecology. Yet Devi also exposes how dharmic rhetoric may justify patriarchal sacrifice, particularly in *Stanadayini*. Thus, Eastern paradigms appear neither romanticized nor rejected but critically reinterpreted.

### Animist Ontology and Ecological Relationality

Indigenous cosmologies in Devi's texts often assume animist ontology in which humans, animals, spirits, and landscape share agency. *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha* exemplifies this worldview: the prehistoric creature haunting a tribal region embodies ancestral trauma and ecological grief. Western rationalism reads it

as allegory; Indigenous ontology recognizes it as living presence. Women characters mediate between realms through ritual and storytelling, sustaining ecological consciousness absent in modern development discourse. This relational ontology aligns with ecofeminist insights yet exceeds Western environmentalism by grounding ecology in spiritual ancestry rather than resource ethics. Devi's narratives suggest that colonial modernity's environmental crisis is also epistemic—the suppression of relational cosmology. Indigenous women's knowledge emerges as alternative ecological rationality.

## WESTERN THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN DIALOGUE

### Subaltern Studies and the Question of Voice

Subaltern studies scholarship has significantly shaped readings of MahaSweta Devi, particularly through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of *Draupadi*. The question "Can the subaltern speak?" finds complex response in Devi's representation of Dopdi. Her defiance operates through bodily refusal rather than discursive articulation, challenging assumptions about speech and agency. Western theory interprets this as subaltern voice emerging from structural silence. Yet Devi situates such agency within collective tribal resistance traditions rather than isolated subjectivity. Speech is communal memory, not individual assertion. Mongrel reading therefore recognizes both dimensions: subaltern agency legible through postcolonial theory yet grounded in Indigenous communal ontology.

### Intersectionality and Material Structures of Oppression

Intersectional feminism provides analytical tools for understanding how gender oppression intersects with class, caste, ethnicity, and state violence. Devi's characters inhabit precisely such intersections: tribal women subjected to militarization, bonded labor, sexual exploitation, and displacement. Intersectional reading illuminates structural domination by colonial capitalism and patriarchal state apparatuses. However, Devi also demonstrates that these structures are mediated through local cosmologies, kinship systems, and ritual economies. Oppression cannot be mapped solely through Western sociological categories. Mongrel feminism thus integrates intersectional analysis with Indigenous epistemology, producing multi-layered understanding of power.

### Marxist Feminism and Reproductive Economies

Marxist feminist theory concerning reproductive labor and bodily commodification resonates strongly with Devi's *Stanadayini*. Jashoda's body becomes means of production sustaining upper-caste households. Her lactation is economically appropriated under ideological cover of sacred motherhood. Western theory elucidates this exploitation as patriarchal capitalism. Yet Devi simultaneously exposes indigenous religious symbolism legitimizing such exploitation. The lactating mother echoes goddess iconography; dharmic sacrifice sanctifies bodily suffering. Mongrel reading therefore critiques both capitalist and cultural patriarchy, revealing their complicity.

### Case Study I: *Draupadi* — Nakedness, Myth, and Insurgency

*Draupadi* narrates the capture and gang rape of Dopdi Mejhena, a tribal guerrilla resisting state repression. The climactic scene in which she refuses clothing before the officer Senanayak has generated extensive feminist

debate. Western readings emphasize reclamation of bodily autonomy and disruption of patriarchal gaze. Dopdi transforms violated body into weapon, exposing militarized sexual violence against Indigenous women. Eastern-Indigenous contexts add crucial nuance. Nudity in many tribal cultures does not bear the same moral stigma imposed by colonial and Brahmanical norms. Dopdi's refusal therefore rejects colonial shame rather than transgressing indigenous modesty. Furthermore, the epic resonance of Draupadi invokes collective humiliation historically avenged through war. Dopdi becomes embodiment of communal vengeance rather than isolated victim. Her statement "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of" destabilizes patriarchal authority while affirming tribal selfhood beyond colonial morality. The body becomes archive of resistance memory. Mongrel theory synthesizes these layers: feminist embodiment, mythic archetype, and Indigenous cultural semantics coexist without reduction. Dopdi's nakedness thus constitutes decolonial feminist praxis grounded in both Eastern cosmology and Western critical insight.

### **Case Study II: *Stanadayini (Breast-Giver)* — Sacred Motherhood and Commodity Flesh**

Jashoda, the protagonist of *Stanadayini*, serves as wet nurse to numerous upper-caste children whose mothers refuse breastfeeding. Her body becomes perpetual lactation machine sustaining feudal households. When breast cancer renders her useless, she is abandoned. Devi's narrative interrogates how sacred maternal ideology masks economic exploitation. From Marxist feminist perspective, Jashoda's reproductive labor is appropriated without compensation. Her breasts function as means of production; maternal devotion conceals commodification. Intersectional analysis reveals caste hierarchy enabling this exploitation: a Brahmin woman serving elite families while remaining economically dependent. Eastern symbolism intensifies critique. Jashoda's name evokes Yashoda, foster mother of Krishna; her milk echoes goddess Annapurna nourishing the world. Religious iconography sanctifies sacrifice, rendering exploitation culturally invisible. Devi demonstrates how indigenous patriarchal symbolism collaborates with material oppression. Mongrel reading therefore exposes multilayered violence: capitalist, caste-based, and symbolic. Jashoda's tragedy arises from intersection of sacred motherhood and economic necessity. Feminist critique must address both structures simultaneously. Devi's narrative anticipates contemporary debates on care economies and bodily labor across cultures.

### **Case Study III: *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha* — Trauma, Time, and Ecological Feminism**

This novella blends political reportage with mythic apparition. A journalist encounters tribal communities haunted by a prehistoric pterodactyl. The creature signifies collective trauma from displacement, famine, and ecological devastation. Western postmodern readings emphasize allegory and narrative fragmentation.

Yet Indigenous ontology interprets the pterodactyl as ancestral presence inhabiting cyclical time. Past and present coexist; extinct beings remain spiritually active. Women characters perform rituals acknowledging ecological grief and historical memory. Their practices sustain communal healing absent in state development narratives. Mongrel theory permits simultaneous allegorical and ontological readings. The pterodactyl is both symbol of subaltern suffering and living ancestor within tribal cosmology. Devi destabilizes modern binaries of myth and reality, proposing Indigenous ecological consciousness as feminist epistemology. Women's ritual mediation foregrounds ecofeminism rooted in land memory rather than abstract environmentalism.

## Case Study IV: *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* — History, Gender, and Tribal Modernity

*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* traces generations of a tribal community confronting colonial and postcolonial transformations. While centered on male hero Chotti, the novel's women sustain cultural continuity through songs, rituals, and subsistence labor. They preserve oral histories linking land, ancestry, and resistance. Female characters negotiate shifting gender relations as market economy penetrates tribal society. Western historical and Marxist frameworks interpret the novel as critique of colonial capitalism and developmental modernity. Yet Indigenous paradigms highlight cyclical temporality and sacred geography structuring tribal consciousness. Women's narratives encode ecological ethics absent in state discourse. Mongrel reading reveals gendered dimensions of tribal modernity: women as mediators between tradition and change, memory and survival.

## Case Study V: *Aranyer Adhikar* — Forest Rights and Feminist Resistance

*Aranyer Adhikar* reconstructs the nineteenth-century Birsa Munda rebellion against colonial forest laws. Although Birsa dominates historical narrative, Devi foregrounds women's participation in insurgency through provisioning, ritual leadership, and communication networks. Forest emerges as maternal space sustaining community life. Colonial enclosure constitutes both ecological and gendered violence. Western environmental history interprets the rebellion as anti-colonial resource conflict. Indigenous feminist reading emphasizes relational ontology linking women's bodies and forest fertility. Mongrel analysis integrates both: colonial capitalism destroys ecological and social reproduction simultaneously. Devi thus anticipates contemporary Indigenous land rights feminism connecting sovereignty, ecology, and gender justice.

## Language, Orality, and Epistemic Translation

MahaSweta Devi's Bengali prose incorporates tribal vocabularies, untranslated terms, and oral storytelling rhythms. This linguistic heterogeneity reflects epistemic hybridity. Oral narrative structures emphasize collective memory and performative knowledge rather than individualized narration. Western literary theory describes such multiplicity as heteroglossia or linguistic resistance. However, Indigenous epistemology treats orality not as stylistic device but as primary mode of knowledge transmission. Devi's narrative voice often mimics communal storytelling, embedding reader within shared memory. Translation into English risks erasing these nuances, domesticating texts into Western literary expectations. Mongrel hermeneutics must remain attentive to linguistic loss and cultural specificity, recognizing theory itself as translated terrain.

## Representation, Positionality, and the Writer-Activist

As an upper-caste Bengali intellectual representing tribal communities, Devi confronted ethical dilemmas central to Indigenous feminism: who can speak for whom? Her response lay in sustained activism—legal advocacy for bonded laborers, documentation of police atrocities, collaboration with tribal organizations. Literature emerged from political engagement rather than detached observation. Western postcolonial theory addresses such dilemmas through concepts like strategic essentialism and testimonial narrative. Eastern ethics emphasize relational responsibility and service (*seva*). Devi's practice intersects both traditions. She positions herself as witness and ally rather than spokesperson, foregrounding community voices through songs, testimonies, and oral histories embedded in narrative. Mongrel theory reframes representation as relational accountability rather than epistemic authority. Devi's texts enact collaborative storytelling in which authorial

voice coexists with subaltern expression. Such approach anticipates participatory research methodologies later articulated in Indigenous scholarship.

## Rethinking Feminist Universality and Pluriversality

MahaSweta Devi's corpus challenges universalist feminism premised on shared womanhood. Tribal women in her texts confront hunger, displacement, militarization, and ecological destruction—conditions inseparable from colonial and capitalist histories. Gender oppression appears entangled with land loss and cultural erasure. Feminist theory must therefore expand beyond patriarchy alone. Yet Devi also reveals trans-cultural patterns: sexual violence as domination, reproductive labor exploitation, symbolic idealization of motherhood. Mongrel feminism recognizes both difference and connection. It resists homogenization while enabling solidarity across contexts. Such perspective aligns with decolonial feminist concept of pluriversality—the coexistence of multiple feminist epistemologies grounded in distinct worlds. Devi's literature anticipates this framework by decades. Her narratives demonstrate that feminist theory can emerge from subaltern lifeworld's rather than being imposed upon them. Indigenous women's experiences generate epistemic insight reshaping global feminism

## Mongrel Feminism as Decolonial Praxis

Synthesizing Eastern and Western paradigms, mongrel feminism emerges as decolonial praxis characterized by:

- **Hybrid epistemology:** Integration of Indigenous cosmology with critical theory.
- **Relational ontology:** Selfhood constituted through land, ancestry, and community.
- **Embodied resistance:** Body as site of political and symbolic struggle.
- **Ecological consciousness:** Feminism inseparable from environmental justice.
- **Narrative activism:** Storytelling as tool of social transformation.

MahaSweta Devi's texts enact this praxis. Her female protagonists confront patriarchy, colonial capitalism, state violence, and ecological devastation simultaneously. Feminism becomes inseparable from anti-imperial struggle and land rights activism. Such perspective expands feminist discourse beyond Eurocentric modernity toward plural feminist futures.

## Conclusion

Re-reading MahaSweta Devi through mongrel theoretical discourse reveals her as foundational thinker of Indigenous feminism whose work dissolves East/West binaries. Her narratives weave myth and realism, oral memory and political critique, gendered embodiment and ecological consciousness. Western feminist and postcolonial theories illuminate aspects of her texts yet require transformation through Indigenous epistemologies. Conversely, Eastern paradigms gain political articulation through dialogue with critical theory. Mongrel theory becomes generative encounter rather than compromise. Devi's subaltern women Dopdi, Jashoda, Pirtha, and countless unnamed figures speak across epistemic worlds, demanding theories capable of hearing them. Their stories foreground land dispossession, bodily violence, and cultural survival while articulating resistance grounded in relational ontology. In an era of global Indigenous resurgence and decolonial feminist movements, MahaSweta Devi's work remains urgently relevant. It demonstrates that feminism must

be plural, land-based, and accountable to marginalized communities. Only through mongrel theoretical discourse—open to hybridity, contradiction, and relational knowledge can such feminist futures be imagined.

## Works Cited (MLA 9th ed.)

- Chakravorty Spivak, Gayatri. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 1987.
- Devi, MahaSweta. *Agnigarbha*. Seagull Books, 1978.
- Breast Stories*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Seagull Books, 1997.
- Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Seagull Books, 2002.
- Aranyer Adhikar (The Right to the Forest)*. Seagull Books, 1977.
- Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Seagull Books, 1995.
- Guha, Ranajit, editor. *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan, 2006.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed., Zed Books, 2012.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.
- Xaxa, Virginius. *State, Society, and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India*. Pearson, 2008.

### Copyright & License:



© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.