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Exploring the Identity Crisis in Mahasweta Devi's Novel *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*

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Postcolonialism, in the early 21st century, have brought to the fore pertinent issues of identity crisis, ethnicity, gender, and culture. The predominant theme of Mahasweta Devi's fiction is to highlight the issue of identity crisis. This paper examines the novel, The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh using the tools of qualitative textual and content analysis. The paper aims to study the complex elements of the identity crisis that the novel's female characters experience. In light of the sociocultural context of India, Devi explores the mental conflicts that her characters go through in various situations. This research outlines the many aspects of women in which women's bodies become the object of sexual exploitation while maintaining the social stigma of caste. She reflects on a broader perspective of the women's experience of extreme suffering and identity problems.

Keywords: exploitation, gender consciousness, identity crisis, postcolonial studies, sociocultural context

Postcolonial literature plays a vital role in addressing compelling issues such as identity crisis. Postcolonial studies focus on

the effects of colonialism on communities and cultures after the independence of colonial countries from a European power. Postcolonialism is “a branch of contemporary theory that investigates and develops propositions about the cultural and political impact of European conquest upon colonized societies and the nature of those societies responses” (Ashcroft, 2012). The progression of postcolonial studies has invoked curiosity about the concept of female identity (Butler, 1988) and its allied term, subjectivity, central to modern literary criticism (Showalter, 1986) and psychoanalytic discourse (Gilbert & Gubar, 1984). Identity is a “paradoxical term” that has “contradictions” despite being constantly linked to “sameness and distinctiveness” (Gardner, 2004, pp. 385–387).

The phrase “identity crisis” was first used by renowned psychologist Erik Erikson in the 1950s. The idea that identity is a process between an individual’s identity and the identity of a cultural context was put forth by Erik Erikson, a follower of Freud’s school of thought. Erikson defines identity thus:

A subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unselfconscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him, we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given—that is, body type and temperament, giftedness, and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals—with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters. (Kothari, 2020, pp. 22-23)

Thus, the causes of the identity crisis have been the subject of intense debate within postcolonial literature. A societal problem has been identified as a women’s identity crisis. However, the creative works of several women writers like Arundhati Roy, Ann Tyler, Toni Morrison, Sylvia Plath, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Anita Brookner have studied the female identity crisis. Mahasweta Devi examines the stages of a woman’s identity construction and identity crisis.

Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali writer and social activist, observed the political transition that led to India's crucial existence from British colonialism to postcolonial India. Devi has been a relentless activist for the socio-economic protection, stability, and political well-being of Adivasis, also known as Scheduled Tribes, inspiring both young and old with her enduring influence in defending India's indigenous population. Devi portrays ethnographic realism and social consciousness, which have affected all phases of her writing career. Mahasweta Devi's ability to integrate anthropological findings with sociopolitical action earned her the title of "political anthropologist". Her work exemplified a thorough awareness of the social, cultural, and political components of the communities, and she utilized her position to fight for their rights and dignity. Mahasweta Devi represents the oppression and suffering of the indigenous tribes. This paper assesses gender roles as significant to women's inner experiences, psychological conflict, identity exploration, and existential ideological issues.

The present study employs a qualitative methodology that critically evaluates the issue of an identity crisis. Qualitative methods can be more useful in identifying and characterizing social phenomena in postcolonial literature and comprehending the significance of their existence. It can be argued that Mahasweta Devi uses fiction to reveal the psychological state of her fictional characters. The research aims to analyze the identity crisis of women as it is raised in postcolonial perspectives exhibited by the novel's characters in the Indian settings. Furthermore, it concentrates on a particular sociological perspective that was formerly a problem for women in postcolonial India. The primary objective of this study is society and social behavior. Mahasweta Devi makes an excellent effort to represent her female characters while dealing with the issue of an identity crisis. Devi has represented several important female characters, including Gulal, Rukmani, Lachhima, Haroa, and Pallavi.

Mahasweta Devi's works reflect not only the gender dimensions in the society but also addresses the class issues within gender. The criticism of class was first introduced in *Critique of Political Economy* (1867). *The Origin of the Family, Private*

Property, and State by Engel, published in 1889, traces the connection between gender and class oppression, a consequence of cultural interactions that imagined innate inferiority on women's side. This suggests that males exploit women and their bodies in business processes to continue to pursue their authority over property and wealth. Moreover, despite having highly influential positions inside and outside their homes, women often remain as "providers of sexual services" (Lerner, 1986, p. 214). They are always considered weak and inferior compared to males. A woman's identity crisis has been the subject of several psychological, psychoanalytical, feminist, and postcolonial discourses. The notion of female performativity proposed by Foucault poses questions about gender and identity (Butler, 1988).

Psychoanalysis comes to aid for the better understanding of the concept of identity disorder. According to Janet (1889), dissociative identity disorder can be considered a distinct mental disorder, and dissociation can be viewed as a defensive mechanism in response to severe childhood trauma. This approach is considered to be the initial etymological perspective on the disorder. Dissociative identity disorder is a psychoanalytic term for the "disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states, which may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession" (Brand et al., 2014). A separate identity is a pattern of thinking and acting differently regarding one's social and personal identities, which results in identity dissociation and self-fragmentation. Finding oneself between two conflicting entities might be challenging. Dissociative identity disorder is characterized by a "disruption of identity", which manifests as discontinuities in the sense of self and behaviour (Tyrer, 2019).

Freud's classification of dissociative disorders as "hysteria" was characterized as higher and common incidence among women than men. According to Freud's earlier works, traumatic hysteria arises from a repressed previous experience of sexual assault. Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) posit that the original event was not intrinsically traumatic but acquired its traumatic nature only through subsequent recollection. Throughout the 20th century, Freud's theory of repression dominated the field; according to this view, it is

internally formed concepts that are blocked from memory rather than external trauma.

The dissociation-induced temporal gap and the trauma's inherent latency led to an uncertain interpretation and significance of the encounter. Caruth explains that trauma is "a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is, in fact, a break in the mind's experience of time" (Caruth, 1996). The conventional Freudian trauma model postulates that traumatic events are inherently dissociative and splinter people's psyches via ideas like latency, pathology, dissociation, and infection. Dissociative identity disorder distorts a human's awareness, sense of self, and interactions with the environment. The conventional definition is that two or more personality states coexisting within an identical person is a common symptom of the problem. However, identity crisis and a characteristic that rules our modern society are linked to self-fragmentation. Thus, it has been connected to conflicts in the contemporary world. It is described as a "decentred self" (Brown, 1989). The subject experiences dissociation and self-fragmentation between the social and the intimate selves. "...the felt lack of inner identity leads to desperate fears of abandonment and even suicide attempts in order to prevent it..." (Fuchs, 2007, p. 383). The protagonists in Devi's work exhibit signs of neurobiological fragmentation resulting from sexual assault, and they appear to be affected by social constraints surrounding the discussion of their experiences of violation. The women protagonist presents a model that challenges and is responsible for their torture and violations.

The subaltern becomes not only a factual topic of discussion but also a literary one, objectifying the forces of the classical world at work in shaping human fate. Subalternity creates a historical genealogy of opposition that is seen as legitimate and elevates the role of ongoing dissent (Masselos, p. 210). The attitude of the subaltern is one of resistance and taking action against power. Hence, "we are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practise in historiography... for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny" (Guha, 1984, p.vii).

Devi's fiction, *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*, illustrates how identity crisis is a major contributor to men's dominance over women. They suffer an identity crisis, and males experience conflict, frustration, hopelessness, and anxiety. The majority of nations are patriarchal, where women are solely expected to be good mothers, perfect wives, and homemakers, among other responsibilities in the community. They are willing to sacrifice for their family and be tolerant and obedient as wives and mothers. Women's lives in male-chauvinistic communities are limited to housekeeping responsibilities, including taking care of the home, raising children, etc. "The constraints that surround her and the whole tradition that weighs her down prevent her from feeling responsible for the universe" (Beauvoir, 1953). It is crucial to comprehend how "women" in a cultural context have an additional, clear impact on her actual existence as a woman. Understanding the concurrent occurrence of diverse political situations requires a change toward a materialistic understanding of gender. The study's objective is to analyze and assess the phenomena of identity crisis addressed in the context. The subject of this study is society and social behavior.

The fiction *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* developed a framework for women's struggle in India against regional and local inequality. Yet in both feminism and postcolonialism, the prevalent perspective is one of "challenging types of oppression" (McLeod, 2015, p. 174). According to Devi, the fight against gender inequality paves the way for the fight against the prevailing systems of class and caste, and anti-colonial ideologies. Devi's fictional description of the Indian setting displays a variety of forms of stereotyping brought about by patriarchy, caste, colonialism, and religion. *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* by Mahasweta Devi is examined in this study for its caste-based pursuit, in addition to subaltern historians and critics of caste-based oppression and the Dalits fighting and subverting the current predominance of caste hierarchy have studied. The so-called lower caste characters, such as Lachhima, Rukmani, Mohor Karan, Haroa, Bigulal, and others, are dominated by so-called upper caste characters, such as Medini Singh, Ganesh Singh, Nathu Singh, and others. The fiction eloquently depicts how old landlords used to oppress women and lower castes.

In the narrative, Mahasweta Devi reveals upheavals of the social, economic, and political contexts where Ganesh and Medini Narayan Singh coexist. According to Gupta, the narrative uncovers the negative aspects of the contemporary discrimination culture, in which women are the victims. Although wives of landlords undergo emotional and bodily torment if they can't "give birth to a male heir" (Gupta, 2013). At the beginning of the novel, the villagers named the newborn as Ganesh. Medini Narayan asks Gulal, "I'll give you three bighas of land. And ten rupees a month. When you leave, you'll get a cow" (Devi, p. 3). The tempting proposal was to take away his granddaughter, Lachhima to support Ganesh. Lachhima becomes a courtesan to Medini, and Ganesh's caregiver. Sexual exploitation escalates into subjugation to sexual interest. Medini begins to have sex with Lachhima to maintain his masculinity in his sixties. Medini and Ganesh seem to be from non-Dalit communities, and Gulal and Lachhima are members of the Dalit group. Medini considers Lachhima as his suzerainty. Gulal, on the other hand, is overcome with remorse and humiliation. Ganesh instructs Medini to immediately give her what she wants as she prepares to part Lachhima. She responds with a shrill retort:

I don't have any desire at this time. I was made to labor at Malik's home by my grandfather. We are people of low caste—Malik has seen me sacrifice my youth for you. Never gave me a gorgeous sari, cash, a gold or silver object, or anything else. None at all. Hey, Malik! I at least volunteered to mention you! (Devi, p. 87)

Gungi, a woman from Medini's caste, prepares and serves the food. Furthermore, Lachhima and Gulal are kept for oil massages for Sarju and Sita, sweeps the yard, cleans the shed, does laundry, and does other household chores. Women face distress in societies where men dominate because they are constantly reminded of their caste gender. Women's bonded slavery satisfies the intense sexual desires of the male Rajputs of Barha. Mori, a Dalit lady, is another hidden courtesan of Barkandaj. Ganga is also Nathu's subjugated woman; this is typical among the Rajputs. Maliks rape Dalit women before they leave, considering them as having inherent dignity. Slaveowners rape low-class women until they reach adolescence like

Ganesh grabbed Rukmani's hand; "Na... na.." she screamed in fear. Ganesh slaps her and injures her, like the way their lower-caste enslaved women are kept in their houses. Women from low castes eventually transform into living corpses. Ganesh rapes Rukmani in the narrative, and she becomes pregnant. Rukmani starts crying and then groans as she says, "Get out" (Devi, p. 108); Ganesh laughs and tortures Rukmani; she attempts to save herself but fails. Raping lower-caste women was not a big deal for upper-caste males like Ganesh. She rejects it and resolves to make a difficult decision in life. She thinks she cannot visit Kamu while carrying a child in her womb, as she wants Kamu to be her husband. She does not feel honored to see Kamu exhibiting her decency while carrying Ganesh's child. Finally, she takes an unexpected action: "... Rukmani had hung herself on a burnt-out Amra tree in the deserted bhangitoli" (Devi, p. 116). She could not endure the humiliation brought on by the upper-caste Ganesh. She puts her honor above anything else. Instead of embracing the chance to develop a poor reputation, she chooses to sacrifice her life. Her selfless act of sacrifice for her privilege is not in vain. All her family members discuss Ganesh's deed in front of the villagers. They become more conscious of the wrongdoings of their slaveholders. Thus, Rukmani "not in life but in death, Rukmani proved her strength. The Rajput Malikis were stunned by this unexpected turn of events..." (Devi, p. 119). This unexpected turn of events astounds Rajput Malik. Her sacrifice for the glory of herself and her people is not in vain. An interviewee alluded to this notion:

I: As Ganesh is always considered as a symbol of 'goodness' but in 'Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh...?

M.D: Ganesh is Ganesh. Sri Sri Ganesh Mahima. You understand the word 'Mahima', 'Glory'?

I: But 'Mahima' is a word which always looks in positive sense, but here 'Mahima' means some bad character?

M.D: 'Uski mahima yahi hai, Isme wo ek aurut ki life haram kar deta hai na'? It was only this evilness. It's positive, very positive.

I: 'Evilness', was positive?

M.D: Yes, why not! Is it, Ganesh continuing this story.....
 Written by caste prejudice how that upper caste owning much
 land, having property class....?? (Agarwal, 2010)

Devi focused on the identity conflict because she believed only protest could influence revolution. Although the hovering figure of Lord Ganesh is mentioned in the title, it is Lachhima, the family's bonded laborer, who frees Ganesh and provokes the oppressed to protest. However, it is up to the historical past to determine if this transformation will continue. Lachhima and Rukmani survive as representations of suffering and strength of lower-class people in the narrative. Lachhima was compelled to abide by Medini Narayan's sexual violence as she agreed to serve as the caregiver for Medini's son. It demonstrates that a woman under the traditional landlord structure is miserable. Other female characters, such as Rukmani and Pallavi Shah, also experience the same kind of bodily exploitation. Lachhima musters fortitude and requests her release while being confident that the landlord will never consent: "If you're getting rid of me anyway, let me go now, Malik. Let me have someone to lean on. Or elsewhere will I go? When I am forty? I've served you all these years; shall I serve Chhota Malik for eight more years? You could keep a maid, no?" (Devi, p. 24) He kicks her and yells at her, "Take the lower castes to bed, and they forget their place. Who are you talking about?" (Devi, p. 25) out of rage rather than compassion. When Lachhima is given money as she prepares to leave, she responds angrily and addresses the Medini. She responds in a harsh voice, "How much money, how much gold, will it take? I have no desires. My grandmother put me to work in Malik's house. We are low-caste folk!" (Devi, pp. 68-69). Understanding gender resistance necessitates accessing fundamental political and social thought.

The social conventions belong to and are framed by men: but women are the ones who suffer. Lachhima is the first female character in the narrative who is self-aware. Although she is not well educated, she can comprehend the nation's situation. And towards the conclusion, when Medini Singh's son Ganesh reaches Lachhima, who formerly served as his caregiver, she says, "Only I could have saved you then. Today, I shall save you again" (Devi, p. 164). She yells out to the

crowd, “Wherever you are, come quick! Ganesh Singh has come to set fire to the forest, and he’s hiding in my hut. Wherever you are, hurry! Ganesh Singh is hiding here. Come quick!” (Devi, p. 163) The confinement of Lachhima is over, and the entire community comes together. The villagers come together to punish their aggressor; “Voices rose, and a sea of armed individuals rushed all around the home. Lachhima stepped aside to make room for the entrance and merged with the group” (Devi, p. 165). Horoa, Rukmani, and Lachhima, identified as exploited women characters, are incredibly eloquent in their community. Therefore, it can be asserted that the underclass’s voice can be heard. Towards the narrative’s conclusion, Lachhima protects Ganesh on her terms rather than Medini’s, letting go of a lifetime’s worth of hate and anger against them. The lower castes are inspired by Lachhima’s openness which influenced them to rise in opposition to the wealthy landowners. The narrative establishes women’s subordinate position, portraying them as objects of reproduction on delivering a male infant. Devi makes humorous remarks, “Another daughter, and I turn you out. Terrified. No place to go if turned out. . . Two co-wives, Badke and Majhli, sat like vultures just outside the door. They were also mothers of daughters, and if the youngest wife birthed a son, it would be hard for them” (Devi, p. 1). The satirical attitude is also noticeable when Devi claims that Ganesh is an affectionate character since he did not abandon any “mothers of daughters” (Devi, p. 12). Rajput women accepted the culture of retaining low-class women. Landlord’s wives took low-class women as an integral part of their lives, implying the most substantial opposition to domestic labor and bonded servitude. Throughout the narrative, the enslaver’s wife undergoes physical and psychological abuse, especially when they cannot give birth to a male child. “[It] deals with the theme of child’s marriage as seen in the early marriage of Ganesh’s daughters” (Devi, pp. 25–26). Devi portrays critical themes in her writings, including the preference for sons, early marriages, and especially “female subjugation” (George, 2008).

Mahashweta Devi describes how Gajomoti kidnapped a girl from the village of Barha to work on drought relief projects before releasing her without registering her complaint. Gajomoti and his

buddies treated women as commodities. Devi, though, continues to believe in the strength of women. Devi is an intellectual writer and author from a developing nation who is well aware of the message she has given. The only person who can put strength into action is a woman since only a woman can “endure” her feminine consciousness into constructive strength. The narrative asks bold questions like, “If one gives birth to a daughter, is it the mother’s fault?” (Devi, p. 101). Pallavi, a societal opponent from the city who enters the bhangi toli is dismissed as a caricature of humanity when she claims to have made a sacrifice by doing something that upper castes have never done before, barring religious rebels.

Devi, a courteous observer, reveals the societal layers, highlighting the need for reform. Bondslave women’s progress towards independence is represented by leaving the whorehouse. In her concluding part, Lachhima speaks out against the evils of bonded servitude on behalf of thousands of other slave women and herself. Rukmani’s symbolic death demonstrates that it is not a singular incident but that similar incidents occur all over India. The disgusting smear of blood she throws up post-independence symbolizes humiliation. Lachhima had lost all expectation that she would get married to Mohar and had turned into Medini’s motionless captive. Lachhima believed maybe Medini might end up winning over and gratifying her household and survival needs after eight years of waiting. Women are aware of their inferior physical power to men. However, by altering their mindset, women may overcome their helplessness. The novel exemplifies their determination to end injustice through their deeds and ideas. Lachhima displays her strength through her personality to take charge of her life rather than feeling weak, giving into tyranny, and feeling helpless.

In Devi’s narrative, Lachhima and Rukmani oppose their class identity. Their struggle for identity is incomparable, as in Devi’s depiction of oppressed perceptions as a physical frame and an embodiment of the self-predominate. Lachhima grows stronger as she endures pain, ages, loses her youth, and has her aspirations while maintaining her existence. She succeeds in escaping to confines of her enforced isolation and prepares for liberation. Affluent people like Ganesh, harsh and illiterate, has a feudal mindset which happens to

be a barrier to the country's progression. Lachhima breaks the chain of bonded labor and accepts the responsibility for Ganesh's downfall in the village. While Ganesh continues to taunt Lachhima about his aspirations for a decent life and the needs of life that they lack, he does it with no remorse. He says, "Why should you stay here? Come with me, stay as you used to. A good house. A good food. I'll throw out my wife; marry again" (Devi, p. 164). Lachhima is different and would stop at nothing to obtain her freedom: "Today I shall save you again. But not, Ganesh Singh, in the way you want me to. Today I shall do it my way" (Devi, p. 164). This subordinate woman does succeed in reclaiming her own identity in the end.

The body occupies the center when physical survival is impossible due to malnutrition, deprivation, sickness, physical pain, torture, trauma, rape, or murder. The body is referred to as an elemental priority in human rights discourse. Pramod Nayar makes the following argument: "Possessing a body" is the most fundamental tenet of human life, and the "language of the body highlights any violation of fundamental rights" (Nayar, 2010). Devi thinks body language is the most crucial communication tool for the gendered subaltern. She portrays the female body as a place of conflict and power (Bhattacharya, 1996) and as a "metaphoric text of subaltern plot and betrayal" (Purakayastha, 2021). Devi focused on women as an essential dialectical link, including a speaker, reader, oppressor, unprivileged, enslaver, and enslaved person. Devi emphasizes the body by focusing on the physical suffering and torment experienced by women in the high or low caste. But once more, it is this body she puts into words in the most profound and underlying ways (Spivak, 2014). Devi's fiction thus proves the point.

The bhangis are shown writing songs in *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*; they had a right to write songs about local caste. They offer a strong will despite their lack of resources and plight. "The bhangis' Holi celebrations ended with them killing one or two pigs and spending the whole night in an uproar of liquor and pigmeat. The dusads were rootless now. Uprooted from their ancient values and traditions" (Devi, p. 57). The place of Barha had a history of exploitation by governed Malik. There is no written record of the impoverished being exploited

by the Malik-controlled Barha community; only the songs sung by the lower caste had such information.

Nonetheless, the malik attempts to suppress this obvious authoritative voice of the custom: “I’ll teach the bhangis a lesson. They can make up their songs, paint their faces, and clown around, but they shouldn’t bring the maliks into it” (Devi, p. 76). Similarly, Ganesh remarks, “as long as I’m here, no violation of customary rules will be permitted, Chachaji” (Devi, p. 71). Ganesh upholds Dalit community’s traditional customs, working menial works, delivering their women to Maliks, and more. Ganesh practices to favor Malik’s community while demeaning another. Ganesh claims to be a Malik because of the defense of his caste. In this instance, he attempts to maintain Singh, a higher caste. The primitive analysis of the narrative is engaged with the theoretical concept and how it is used in an identity crisis. The event of retaliation from the downtrodden would be a new system that succeeds in overthrowing the old. In the village of Barha, the fall of Ganesh signals this transformation, and it is the irony reflected in the title.

Although Lachhima, Rukmini, and Pallavi, the fictional characters, strengthen the resistance to an identity crisis, their struggle might represent the opposition and lack a convincing voice compared to other segments of Indian society. These female characters question the identity of class, gender, and caste in contexts, thoroughly and unconsciously—through their emotional connection threads. The study of the sociocultural context of India has presented difficulties that have sparked a larger conversation about oppression, eviction, imprisonment, and disaffection when considering such indisputable occurrences. Devi’s portrayal of women in the narrative deserves careful analysis to understand the female characters completely. The character’s inner sentiments constitute a significant theme in Mahasweta Devi’s writings. Her fictional characters, Lachhima, Rukmini, and Pallavi, have intense psychological emotions that lead them to say or do something surprising and even unanticipated. This framework serves as a backdrop for the comprehensive analysis of texts that consider the Indian context to provide new, more equal perspectives.

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