

# *Occupation of the Forest by Mahashweta Devi:* A Growing up Narrative with a Difference

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**Abstract:** *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), Mahashweta Devi's Bangla Growing up narrative depicting the growth of Birsha Munda, the legendary revolutionary leader, and the 'Bhagwan' of the Mundas throws light on the then socio-political history and struggle of the Munda tribe against the colonizers, both Indian and the British. This growing up narrative or bildungsroman achieves somewhat epical proportion as we find Birsha, a demi-God in the eyes of his followers fights against all odds and on his success depends the fate and future of an entire race. But Birsha is a historical figure as well and this bildungsroman is a historical novel, thoroughly researched and mostly authentic. This paper attempts to look into the novel, in terms of its features as a bildungsroman.

**Keywords:** Birsha Munda, bildungsroman, Growing up narrative, Mahashweta Devi, Postcolonial, Tribal.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term "Bildungsroman" was introduced to the critical vocabulary by the German philosopher and sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1941). He first used it in an 1870 biography of Friedrich Schleiermacher and then popularized it with the success of his 1906 study *Poetry and Experience*. Dilthey's work were not translated into English until the 1950s, but the term "Bildungsroman" itself started to be used in England as a part of the lexical infusion that arose from Edwardian interest in the writings of German thinkers such as Freud, Weber or Simmel. The Oxford English Dictionary refers to the Encyclopedia Britannica of 1910 with the first English occurrence of the term, which then quickly entered into more common usage as a handy designation for any novel that "has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person."

*Aranyer Adhikar* or *Occupation of the Forest* (1977) by Mahashweta Devi is a Bangla growing-up narrative or bildungsroman which depicts the growth of Birsha Munda, the legendary revolutionary leader, and the 'Bhagwan' of the Mundas. The novel throws light on the then socio-political history and struggle of the Munda tribe against the colonizers, both Indian and the British. To do so, Mahashweta Devi has contradicted the Western tradition of bildungsroman and *Aranyer Adhikar* has become, in Rahul K. Gairola's terminology, an example of "counter-bildungsroman". (5)

## 2. BODY OF ARTICLE

In his article "Deterritorialisations of Desire: 'Transgressive' Sexuality as Filipino Anti-Imperialist Resistance in Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*" Gairola criticises Franco Moretti's book *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in the European Culture* (1987) where Moretti treats the genre of bildungsroman as a typical 'European literary phenomenon that constitutes the symbolic form of modernity' (22). According to Gairola, Moretti considers only Western mainstream canonical bildungsroman texts and ignores the existence of non-Western tradition of growing-up narrative. Gairola terms this genre as counter-bildungsroman. The four key features of counter-bildungsroman, as Gairola points out, are:

1) its characters and plots are mostly non-Western, and often include non-Western words and phrases to displace English language; 2) it is not "classical" or "late" as in Moretti's model, but instead might be considered "contemporary, post(-)colonial"; 3) it disrupts the linearity of traditional Western narratives by using multiple narratives and/or windows of memory; and 4) in appropriating the otherness directed towards post-colonial peoples, it extends such otherness by

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presenting the possibility for non-heteronormative sexualities in queered spaces, or allows narrative agency through sexualities and corresponding spaces that are best described as rhizomatic configurations.

Now if we judge Aranyer Adhikar against these four features, we will find that the novel of Mahashweta Devi conforms to the first three features out of four pointed out by Gairola. Firstly, the protagonists and main characters are mostly non-Western, speaking Mundari, Hindi, Bengali and other Indian languages. However, there are certain characters mostly belonging to the colonial administration and missionaries who are Western and who speak English.

Secondly, contrary to being 'classical' or 'late' following Moretti's model, *Aranyer Adhikar* deals with a post-colonial issue and if not contemporary, the issue concerns a turning point of modern Mundari as well as Indian history. Mahashweta Devi writes in the Introduction (Introduction to a novel, we must note, is not very common) of this novel:

Birsha Munda's name and revolution is memorable and significant in the history of Indian freedom struggle in all possible senses. The particular socio-economic context of the country where and when he was born and organized a revolution was not only against a foreign rule and its exploitative machinery, but also against the contemporary feudal system. Unless we consider this, it would be impossible to evaluate the importance of his revolution. (Translation mine)

Thirdly, and most importantly, contrary to the linearity of the traditional Western narrative, the novel here begins with the death and funeral of Birsha Munda, goes back to the settlement history of the Munda tribe in general and family of Birsha in particular gradually reaching the point of the birth of Birsha. Mahashweta Devi here uses multiple narratives too through the depiction of the activities of the British administrative system, Amulya and Jacob, the missionaries and the dikus. The linearity of the narrative is often disrupted by the memories of Sugana and Karmi Munda, Birsha's parents. Mahashweta Devi explains her departure from the establish norm in the Introduction:

But novel always follow a structural norm. Hence, chronological end of this novel takes place with the death of Birsha. But life, revolution, or whatever that is dynamic, never comes to a halt with the death of any leader. With the passage of time, the baton of revolution gets handed over to the following generations. An uprising gradually turns into a revolution. Therefore even after the end of this novel, I had to add an epilogue.

To achieve her objectives, Mahashweta Devi has also blurred the boundaries of genres. *Aranyer Adhikar* shares a certain trait of an epic as Birsha, like the heroes of epics is a demi-God in the eyes of his followers and he himself declares himself as 'Dharti-Apa' and 'Bhagwan of the Mundas'. Like an epical hero he fights against all odds and on his success depend the fate and future of the entire Munda tribe. But Birsha is a historical figure as well who existed even less than hundred years ago. Hence, this 'coming-of-age' narrative is no less a historical novel, thoroughly researched and mostly authentic. Mahashweta Devi makes it accurate document of harsh realities that prevailed during the time of the Munda uprising. Interestingly, Birsha Munda's biography by Mahashweta Devi, though written for young students, does share the same information database and documentary proofs which she uses to write this 'fictional' work. She writes in the Introduction: "I am particularly indebted to Mr Suresh Singh for his book well-written informative book *Dust Storm and Hanging Mist*, without which this novel would not have been possible." [Translation mine]

Mikhail Bakhtin in his "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism" argues that the *Bildungsroman* presents to the reader "the image of man in the process of becoming" (19) and situates its protagonist on the threshold between different historical eras:

[The hero] emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him . . . It is as though the very *foundations* of the world are changing, and man must change along with them. (23-4)

In *Aranyer Adhikar* too, Birsha Munda emerges along with the Mundari world and he does reflect the historical emergence of that world. He is on the transition point between two epochs. But where *Aranyer Adhikar* is different is that Birsha is not only changing along with the changed world, but it is he who makes this change happen. He called the Mundas for 'ulgulan' i.e. revolt and promised them 'Swadhin Mundariraj-e swadhin hoya banchar sukh' i.e. 'happiness of freedom in free Mundariraj'. His ulgulan was not successful nor could he keep his promise. But the Mundari world changed in the psyche of the Munda people: a pride for being a Munda as their lyric says, "I am born as a Munda./ I didn't

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know I would have so much pride in my blood to be a Munda./ This is what you have taught us Birsha Bhagwan./ This is like the moon for me./ I won't complain even if I won't get anything else.' If not political and economic freedom, Birsha was also successful to free the Mundas from age old pagan religious beliefs, superstitions, unscientific ways of life. Hence, beyond what Bakhtin sees as criterion for the hero of a new age bildungsroman, Birsha Munda in *Aranyer Adhikar* is instrumental to bring the changes in the Mundari world.

Birsha Munda, who was educated in Missionary school and who knew basic English, projected himself as the Bhagwan of the Mundari world who will save the Mundas from all the troubles. He used the Mundari myth that one day 'Bhagwan' will be born in an ordinary Munda family and He would fight against all odds and remove all the troubles on his way to establish a Mundari raj when, like the ancient times, Mundas will have all the rights over the forests and lands. Birsha, in order to unite all the Mundas under one umbrella, to inspire them with fiery revolutionary spirit and to rescue the tribe from pagan superstitions used that myth to declare himself as 'Dharti Apa' or 'Bhagwan'. To continue the spirit even after his death he gave birth to a new myth: 'Birshar maran nai. Ulgulaner ses nai' i.e. 'Birsha never dies, Revolution never ends'.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In *Aranyer Adhikar*, Mahasweta Devi condemns the inhuman, barbaric, anti-democratic value-system of the establishment of colonized India of treating hundreds and thousands of subaltern people as criminals. Her moral singularity with the tribal people helps her in effectively achieving the difficult task of subaltern representation. The present paper has tried to show how instead of making her bildungsroman academically pleasant and aesthetically enjoyable art objects following the tradition of Western bildungsroman, she makes it accurate document of harsh realities that prevailed during the time of the Munda uprising. While doing so she goes deep into the Mundari mythology and the issue of construction of nations in the colonized backdrop.

Mahashweta Devi in her coming-of-age narrative uses these tribal myths and deviates from the usual Western norm of bildungsroman which generally ends with the protagonist's attaining maturity. Here the narrative continues up to Birsha's death and subsequent funeral in the Ranchi jail and even beyond as she adds an 'uposanhar' i.e. epilogue to describe the aftermath of Birsha's death and the direction of the revolutionary activities.

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