



Research Article

Silenced Mothers, Speaking Texts: Reclaiming Tribal Maternal Voices in Contemporary Indian Literature

 Satarupa Ganguly

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Commerce & Management, Jharkhand Rai University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

Corresponding Author: * Satarupa Ganguly 

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21059637>

Abstract

In Indian literary and cultural narratives, motherhood and maternity has often been idealised through the portrayal of moral excellence, virtuousness, sacrifice, and nurture. However, these depictions frequently sideline the experiences of females from indigenous or tribal backgrounds and are majorly derived from dominant social narratives. In spotlight literary discourses, the lived experiences of tribal Adivasi mothers—sculpted by penury, dislocation, ecological fragility, and socio-political marginalisation—remain majorly under-represented, disenfranchised, and marginalised. "Silenced Mothers, Speaking Texts: Reclaiming Tribal Maternal Voices in Contemporary Indian Literature" is the theme of this paper, which tries to explore how literary discourse challenge traditional portrayal of motherhood and all the feminine energies related to life creation in Indian literature and highlight the voices and challenges of tribal mothers.

This paper studies and focuses on how tribal maternity is placed at the intersection of gender, race, culture and class, capitalising feminist theory and subaltern studies, chiefly on the structural frameworks put forward by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

It makes it evident that tribal motherhood and the identity surrounding it, moves way beyond household responsibilities and is intimately related to the preservation of ecological links, cultural memory, and community traditions and customs.

Through the close and intensive readings of literary works like Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* and *Rudali*, and Alice Ekka's descriptions in *Alice Ekka ki Kahaniyaan*, the paper explores how contemporary literature emphasises the routine struggles of tribal women, such as cultural marginalisation, geographical migration, and economic exploitation.

These narratives showcase how motherhood and maternal silence often turns into a prominent and important platform for utterance and defiance. These works not only portray but also challenge winning depictions that often romanticise motherhood and maternity while paralysing its systemic discrimination by portraying the emotional and social realities of tribal mothers. At the end, the paper also reclaims the lost or often suppressed tribal mothers' voices in literary narratives while broadening the preview of Indian feminist and postcolonial studies, letting for a more inclusive concept of motherhood that acknowledges indigenous understanding, adaptability, and the persistence of marginalised maternal identities.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 18-05-2026
- Accepted: 23-06-2026
- Published: 30-06-2026
- IJCRM:5(3); 2026: 1278-1281
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Ganguly S. Silenced mothers, speaking texts: reclaiming tribal maternal voices in contemporary Indian literature. *Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip.* 2026;5(3):1278-1281.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: Tribal Motherhood, Adivasi Women, Contemporary Indian Literature, Maternal Voices, Indigenous Identity, Feminist Theory, Subaltern Studies, Marginalisation, Cultural Memory.

1. INTRODUCTION

Motherhood in Indian and Indian subcontinental cultural, religious, and literary traditions has long been designed as an elevated and almost holy establishment. The figure of a female emerging into a mother is emblematically exalted as the embodiment of sacrifice, moral strength, and unconditional love, in short of agape love. From mythological institutions like Sita, Kunti, Devaki, Parvati and Yashoda to patriotic invocations of Bharat Mata, motherhood is deeply implanted in the philosophical fabric of Indian culture. These depictions, however, are far from being impartial; they are moulded by the presiding caste, class, and hegemonial structures that give shape to maternal habits which are celebrated in name of 'motherhood'.

Within the boundaries of the prevalent hegemonic narration, the encounters and episodes of tribal or Adivasi mothers remain noticeably absent or strikingly silent. Their truths—marked by economic vulnerability, land alienation, ecological precarity, and socio-political exclusion—clash dramatically to the glamorised, idealised and romanticized ideas of motherhood which are prominent in mainstream discourses. The tribal mothers are not solely a caregiver limited to the domestic circle; she is a labourer, a cultural custodian, and often a silent resistor against systemic oppression.

One of the most notable yet under-researched facets of tribal motherhood lie in the territory of oral tradition and collective memory. In contrast to prevalent narrative cultures that benefit written textuality, many Adivasi communities preserve history, identity, and cultural ethics through oral storytelling practices. Within this framework, mothers often function as primary conveyors of knowledge, transferring down not only lullabies and folktales but also ecological wisdom, lineages, and survival strategies.

This paper contends that the exclusion of Adivasi maternal tones and nurturing voices is not unintended but a framework embedded within the limits of literary and cultural fabrication. The prevalent narratives on mothers works the same as what Adrienne Rich coins an "institution," one that sets bars, regulates, controls and disciplines women, female bodies, and identities (Rich 13). Tribal mothers, placed outside the conventional structures of Hindu patriarchy, are transformed as invisible within this customary discourse.

Deriving from feminist theory, subaltern studies, and postcolonial critique, this write-up aims to retrieve these absent voices through literary breakdown. It employs with the writings of Mahasweta Devi, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, and Alice Ekka to explore the functioning of the contemporary Indian literature which questions the dominant portrayal and emphasises the lived realities and the subjective experiences of tribal mothers.

Furthermore, this paper also integrates the conceptual understanding of Judith Butler and Chandra Talpade Mohanty to intensify the study. Butler's perception of gender expression and performance complexifies and further entangles the idea of motherhood as an organic or authentic identity, while Mohanty critiques the uniformization of "Third World women" within the boundaries of Western feminist discourse. Together, these viewpoints enable a more intricate understanding of tribal

motherhood as a locale of overlapping and multidimensional struggle, resistance, and pushback.

Ultimately, this paper argues that literature functions as an essential space for the expression of disenfranchised voices. By retrieving tribal maternal narratives, it opens up its boundaries to the scope of Indian feminist discourse and challenges the

The analysis of tribal motherhood demands a complex theoretical framework that moves beyond the boundaries of mainstream feminist narration. While initial feminist theory accentuated the universality of women's experiences, later scholars have highlighted the importance of intersecting identities in understanding the intricacies of gender.

Adrienne Rich of *Woman Born* gives a fundamental contrast between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution. She writes, "Motherhood as an institution has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems" (Rich 14). This insight is exceptionally relevant in the Indian context, where motherhood is ideologically activated to strengthen patriarchal norms.

Judith Butler further disrupts the notion of fixed identities through her concept of gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues, "Gender is not something one is, it is something one does" (Butler 25). Applying this to motherhood, we can understand maternal identity not as an innate biological circumstance but as a socially produced role that is performed within specific cultural norm. Indigenous or tribal motherhood, therefore, cannot be minimized to a singular experience but must be understood in relation to socio-economic and cultural conditions.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's assessment of Western feminism is equally substantial. In her essay "Under Western Eyes," she questions or puts forward that the genre of "Third World Women" is often fabricated as a homogeneous and identical group defined by a sense of victimhood. She claims, "The assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests... implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally" (Mohanty 337). This critique is extremely important and relevant in avoiding minimizing representations of tribal women as passive victims and voiceless subjects who are defenceless and easy to suppress.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's understanding of the 'subaltern' further complicates as well as intensifies the discussion. Her assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 104) highlights the foundational barriers that avert marginalized voices from being heard. However, literature can operate as a negotiating sphere where these inactive or suppressed voices are partially traced as well as recovered, even if not fully represented.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality also deploys a vital role in this study. Tribal mothers experience overlapping and complex forms of oppression based on gender, class, ethnicity, and geography. In other words, it is multi-layered. Their marginalization cannot be comprehended through a single core of identity.

Ecofeminist outlooks include another facet by stressing the connection between women and nature. Scholars such as Vandana Shiva argue that indigenous or native women are

intensely connected to ecological structures, and their marginalization is associated to environmental and ecological manipulation. Tribal motherhood, therefore, is not merely a social role but also an ecological one. This overlaying intersectional structure allows for a more comprehensive understanding and cognition of tribal motherhood as a complex, flexible and dynamic phenomenon.

The disenfranchisement of tribal maternal voices in conventional or orthodox discourse is both ingrained and ideological. Dominant narratives of motherhood are fashioned by upper-caste, urban, and middle-class interpretations that exclude and reject these indigenous experiences.

Tribal communities have historically been subjected to processes of uprooting, displacement and dispossession. Development initiatives such as mining, deforestation, and industrialization have disturbed the traditional ways of life of these tribals. For Adivasi mothers, these changes have profound, meaningful and unfathomable implications, as their identities and roles are tightly tied to land and community.

In Mahasweta Devi's fabricated universe, this friction between spoken and written comprehension becomes interestingly visible. Her works often drag upon oral histories of tribal defiance, yet the maternal voice within these narratives is often negotiated through suffering, disintegration, or absence. This deficiency is not purely portrayive but systemic, demonstrating what Spivak recognizes as the 'epistemic violence of colonial and postcolonial knowledge systems. The tribal mother, in this regard, transforms into a carrier of knowledge that is on no occasion fully validated within dominant literary discourse.

Mahasweta Devi's writings provide a powerful critique of these mechanisms. She spoke about an entirely different yet inescapable source of marginalisation. This was not direct traditional patriarchy, but was a foreign superior root. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, the struggle for land is key to the narrative. The novel accentuates how colonial and postcolonial frameworks of governance have marginalized tribal communities. Women, in particular, bear and sustain the burden of this marginalization, as they are responsible for preserving families in the face of economic hardship.

The obscurity of tribal mothers is also evident in policy structures, where their voices are rarely considered. Development and urbanization at the cost of the tribal land is often carried out without consultation, leading to further marginalization of these silent voices.

Chandra Mohanty's critique is primarily relevant here, as it exposes how global narrations often erase or sideline local nuances. Tribal mothers are not only victims of patriarchy but proactive agents sailing through complex and sometimes undecipherable socio-political realities.

Literature, however, presents a resistant or counter narrative. By representing the real lived experiences of tribal mothers, literary creators challenge the dominant ideologies and create space for alternative voices.

Representation of Tribal Motherhood in Selected Texts:

An alternative essential component of tribal motherhood is its interconnectedness with economic insecurity and labour exploitation. As opposed to the idealized, domesticized and

habituated mother in upper-caste Hindu discourse, tribal mothers are often implanted in multiple forms of wage and survival labour. Their maternal identity is inextricable from their role as agricultural workers, forest gatherers, construction labourers, and informal workers in urban spaces.

This coming together of maternal experience and labour disturbs the bourgeois feminist separation between public and private spheres. As Silvia Federici contends, reproductive labour is essential to capitalist accumulation, yet it remains systematically devalued. In tribal contexts, this decline in value is escalated by the confiscation of land and forest rights, which forces women into increasingly precarious forms of survival work.

Mahasweta Devi's "Stanadayini" presents a unadorned and sharp portrayal of the commercialization of the maternal body. Jashoda's portrayal as a wet nurse transforms her biological competence into economic labor. Her body becomes a stock to be exploited within a capitalist system.

As Devi writes, "Jashoda was a professional mother" (Devi 47). This phrase captures the reduction of motherhood to a transactional relationship. The story exposes the inconsistencies and contradictions ingrained in the glorification of motherhood, revealing how it is concurrently admired or revered and exploited.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity is interestingly useful here. Jashoda performs the role of the nurturing mother, but this performance becomes execution as it is shaped by economic necessity rather than personal choice. Her identity and role is constructed through repeated acts of nurturing that are socially and economically standardized and regulated.

In Devi's another poignant work, *Rudali*, the character of Sanichari symbolizes the transformation of grief into defiance. Her initial difficulty and later inability to cry reflects the emotional numbness produced by institutional oppression. Yet, her role as a professional mourner allows her to repossess agency.

Devi writes, "In her whole life, Sanichari had never been able to weep properly" (Devi 82). This assertive statement underscores the suppression and restraint of emotional expression among marginalized women. However, it is extremely interesting to understand that by performing grief for others, Sanichari subverts social expectations and asserts her agency. Or through the tears she shed for others, she finally wept for her condition and personal pain.

This corresponds with Butler's notion that destabilization or disruption can occur through the repetition of social norms. By exaggerating the act of mourning, Sanichari exposes its performative nature, which has nothing to do with natural emotions.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* delivers a sophisticated yet subtle portrayal of tribal life. The narrations highlight the impact of displacement and modernization on indigenous communities.

In one of the stories, the loss of land disturbs ancestral structures and cultural patterns. Mothers play a crucial role in sustaining and preserving traditions and maintaining a sense of identity. Shekhar pens, "Our land is our mother, and we belong

to her” (Shekhar 118). This statement indicates the intense connection between motherhood and ecology.

Ecofeminist theory helps elucidate and establish this relationship. Tribal mothers are not only nurtures but also stewards of ecological awareness. Their identities in sustaining and preserving communities is intertwined from their connection to the land.

Alice Ekka’s contributions are noteworthy in providing initial representations of tribal women’s experiences. Her stories apprehend the everyday realities of poverty, gender roles, and community life.

Ekka’s description of motherhood is anchored in realism, accentuating resilience and adaptability. Unlike mainstream discourses, her work does not romanticize motherhood but presents it as a complex and often challenging experience. Chandra Mohanty’s critique of homogenization is extensively relevant here. Ekka’s stories challenge the tendency to universalize tribal women’s experiences, highlighting their diversity and specificity.

Tribal motherhood appears as a site of resistance that challenges and confronts dominant narratives. Mothers play a crucial role in preserving cultural traditions, oral histories, and community values.

This role is fundamentally political, as it resists the elimination of indigenous or tribal identities. By transmitting knowledge and traditions, tribal mothers ensure the continuity of their culture, traditions, norms and moreover, their communities. The collective and shared nature of tribal societies further contrasts their understanding of motherhood. Child-bearing and child-rearing is often a collective responsibility, demonstrating a more inclusive and interrelated social structure.

Ecofeminism provides a beneficial framework for comprehending structure this dynamic. The correlation between women and nature is not essentialist but rooted in material realities. Tribal mothers’ relationship with their land reinforces their role as protectors of ecological systems also.

Judith Butler’s concept of performativity can again be adopted here. By reconceptualizing motherhood in terms of community and defiance, tribal women overthrow dominant norms and create alternative forms of identity.

The incorporation of tribal maternal voices has considerable significance for feminist and postcolonial studies. It challenges the globality of dominant frameworks and highlights the importance of intersectionality.

Chandra Mohanty’s call for a more subtle yet complex understanding of women’s experiences is specifically relevant. By emphasizing the voices of tribal mothers, this study facilitates to a more inclusive feminist discourse.

Similarly, Spivak’s understanding of the subaltern highlights the importance of representation. While the subaltern may not fully “speak” or remain silent altogether, literature provides a space for incomplete yet unbiased articulation and resistance.

To conclude, it is essential to state that the exploration and analysis of tribal motherhood reveal the limitations of dominant narratives that often romanticize motherhood while ignoring its complexities. Tribal mothers, positioned at the junction of multiple structures of marginalization, offer a powerful challenge to these narratives.

Through the works of Mahasweta Devi, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, and Alice Ekka, literature becomes a zone for reclaiming voices that are either silenced or kept unheard. These texts highlight the resilience, agency, and cultural significance of tribal mothers. By merging intersectional and postcolonial perspectives, this study broadens the scope of feminist discourse and highlights the need for more inclusive representations.

Consequently, reclaiming tribal maternal voices also demands a rethinking of what reckons as literature and whose knowledge is accepted as authoritative. It requires an epistemological switch from textual prominence to oral diversity, where storytelling itself emerges as an act of resistance, challenge and defiance against cultural elimination. Reclaiming tribal maternal voices is not merely an academic exercise but a moral, ethical and political act that challenges structures of power and confirms the importance of marginalized perspectives.

REFERENCE

1. Butler J. Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity. London: Routledge; 1990.
2. Crenshaw K. Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Rev.* 1991;43(6):1241–99.
3. Devi M. Breast stories. Translated by Spivak GC. Kolkata: Seagull Books; 2010.
4. Devi M. Rudali. Kolkata: Seagull Books; 1997.
5. Ekka A. Alice Ekka ki Kahaniyan. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan; 2015.
6. Mohanty CT. Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2.* 1984;12(3):333–58.
7. Rich A. Of woman born: motherhood as experience and institution. New York: W.W. Norton & Company; 1976.
8. Shekhar HS. The Adivasi will not dance. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger; 2015.
9. Shiva V. Staying alive: women, ecology and development. London: Zed Books; 1988.
10. Spivak GC. Can the subaltern speak? In: Nelson C, Grossberg L, editors. *Marxism and the interpretation of culture.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press; 1988. p. 271–313.
11. Federici S. Caliban and the witch: women, the body and primitive accumulation. New York: Autonomedia; 2004.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution–Non-Commercial–No Derivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license. This license permits sharing and redistribution of the article in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, provided that appropriate credit is given to the original author(s) and source. No modifications, adaptations, or derivative works are permitted under this license.

About the Author



Satarupa Ganguly is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Commerce and Management at Jharkhand Rai University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India. She specialises in academic teaching and research, with interests in literature, gender studies, and interdisciplinary approaches to social and cultural issues, contributing to scholarly development in her field.