

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

IJELLH

Crossref
INDEX COPERNICUS
INTERNATIONAL

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

UGC Approved Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



**Volume 6, Issue 7
July 2018**

www.ijellh.com

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Radical Resistance: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Douloti* and "Draupadi"

Abstract: This article seeks to critically examine Mahasweta Devi's *Douloti* and "Draupadi" to address the way patriarchy intersects with caste, class and state to produce the many-hued violence that targets tribal women and their body, and most importantly, the methods tribal women employ to resist exploitation, overcome marginalization and make their voice heard. During analysis of the selected texts, I shall also have occasions to cite analogy from Devi's other stories from her collections *Breast Stories* (1997), *Five Plays* (1997), *Imaginary Maps* (2001), and *After Kurukshetra* (2005). I shall employ the theories of post colonialism, feminism and subaltern studies to illustrate how the female body is implicated in an emancipatory politics and a narrative of resistance, which *Douloti* and *Draupadi* work out in strikingly different ways.

Key Words: Tribal Studies, Mahasweta Devi, Post-colonial Feminism, Indian Women's Writings

Introduction:

"All art is propaganda, though not all propaganda is art." - Chinua Achebe (qtd. in Irele, 1)

With an intense belief in the remedial power of literature, this essay intends to raise some constructive questions and corrective doubts in the arena of tribal studies. Here, I seek to provide a close reading of Mahasweta Devi's stories *Douloti: the Bountiful* and "Draupadi" to examine how a woman writer writes an allegory of the body to interpret the problems of tribal women and delve into the subtle issues (affecting them) that underlie the postmodern project of development of the so-called welfare state.

The main objective of this article is to critically examine Mahasweta Devi's selected works to address the following questions: How does patriarchy intersect with caste, class and state to produce the many-hued violence that targets tribal women and their body? And more significantly, how do tribal women employ body to resist exploitation, overcome

marginalization and make their voice heard? An analysis of Devi's stories will make us confront with these questions.

Background of the author:

It is worthwhile to mention that Mahasweta Devi's writings are at par with data from any empirical observation as she has been an activist. She was constantly engaged in scripting about the predicament of the tribal in newspapers, journals and magazines and she was actively involved in the formation of a number of organizations that contest for tribal privileges like Palamu District Bonded Labour Liberation Organization, the Lodha Organization in 1978 when Lodha killing took place in Medinipur, Purulia Kheria Sobor Organization, and others. She voiced her intention in an interview to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, her translator, that when she understood that feelings for the tribals and writing about them was not enough, she started living with them and tried to solve their problems from his or her point of view (*Imaginary Maps* v). There is, therefore, a strong overlap of fact and fiction in her literary writings.

1. Allegorizing the Female Body in *Douloti: the Bountiful*:

The thin divide between fact and fiction in Devi's writings validates Spivak's comment, "That history deals with real events and literature with imagined ones may now be seen as difference in degree rather than in kind" (*Breast Stories* 76). The fallacy of complete reliance of history on facts and that of literature on fiction has disintegrated with increasing recognition of role of oral narratives in history and acceptance of literature as a true account of its time which has emerged as an established theory in the gamut of Subaltern Studies.¹

In about the 1980s, the revisionist historiography encouraged by the Subaltern group of scholars paid increasing attention to several neglected aspects of social history, and the new mode of writing "history from below" included smaller histories of the masses from class, Dalit and gender perspectives and it took into account oral narratives, memoirs, fiction as documentation of the time. In the Indian context, too, women have interrogated masculinist hegemony of the nation very effectively in the fields of social sciences, literary theory, and fiction. As far as fiction is concerned, the personal story of the woman protagonists generally serves as the matrix of lived experience in which lie embedded the history of the nation and the events affecting public life. What is effected thereby is an allegorical turn of the personal into public. Women writers often use the narrative of female body as a national allegory to enable their women characters to overcome the state of

subjugation and bondage to patriarchal forms of power that their bodies subject them to. The “Mother India” trope in Indian nationalist rhetoric is called into question and the inherent contradictions become precarious, once a woman writer as powerful as Mahasweta Devi takes up the tropes of woman-as-nation, her corporeality and biology and politicizes them to question the patriarchal power structure and the nation-state.

Devi speaks for the doubly marginalized tribal woman in *Douloti: the Bountiful* (published in *Imaginary Maps [IM]* in English translation by Spivak, 2001). A short account of the story is worth narrating for an understanding of its thematic concerns. Ganori Negesia is one of Munabar Singh’s unfortunate adivasi bond slaves in Palamu. Ganori’s daughter, Douloti is promised marriage by Lord Paramananda in exchange for the cancellation of her father’s three hundred rupees debt to Munabar, the money lender, but she is enslaved as a prostitute and subjected to repeated exploitation of her body. The bitter story terminates with the death of Douloti at 27, riddled with infection and venereal disease. In this pathetic ending, however, the story attains the quality of a national allegory that challenges the myth of national integration of the tribals as the abused adivasi slave, Douloti, dies on the eve of August 15, India’s Independence Day. The tribal woman’s body is found spread all over the map of India that decorates the festival grounds prepared for the ritualistic flag-hoisting ceremony:

Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on August 15th, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan [the village teacher] for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? *Douloti is all over India.* (Emphasis added, *IM* 94)

In this story, as an ironic trope of the motherland, a tribal woman is integrated into modernity in the most appallingly exploitative way and becomes a severe rebuke to the grandiose vision of social justice of post-independence India. Uprooted from the root, enslaved and prostituted in town, evidently, Douloti is not acknowledged as a citizen, or a national subject. Instead, “Douloti’s body becomes a site for the inscription of multiple forms of power, political, economic, ethnic and gendered” (Radha Chakrabarty 81). Ironically, it is only after her death that Douloti begins to *speak* as a “graphic comment on the whole map of

India” and emerges as a site of resistance to exploitation. The concept of Mother India meets its scathing criticism at another place in the story when the washerwoman Rajbi fails to understand the holy man’s pronouncement, “We are all offspring of the same mother” (40). The ignorant woman’s literal interpretation leads to her intervention that the money lender Munabar doesn’t know that and several kamiya (slave) women have children from him who are also bonded labour. She could not comprehend when the holy man explains that he is speaking of Mother India because she doesn’t know India as a country (41).

The allegorizing of female body in the story reminds one of “Stanadayini” (“The Breast-Giver”), another epoch-making story of Mahasweta Devi, in which the female body shows the commoditization of its reproductive capacity and lactating resources within the matrix of exploitative socio-economic relations. When Jashoda’s body is old, unserviceable and devastated by breast cancer, and it is abandoned by those whom it nourished, it raises disturbing ethical questions about human relationship. Spivak paraphrases Devi who calls the story a parable of India after decolonization: “Like the protagonist Jashoda, India is a mother-by-hire. All classes of people, the post-war rich, the ideologues, the indigenous bureaucracy, the diasporics, the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her” (*Breast Stories* 78). Thus, whether used as metaphor or metonymy, female body through its biological victimization generates a discourse that underscores its linkage with land and commodity.

Notably, in Devi’s stories, the death of the female protagonist carries a lot of radical potential if it occurs as an event in an oppressive society and polity. In her collection *Of Women, Outcasts, Peasants, and Rebels* the stories “Giribala” and “Dhowli” draw attention to how capitalist forces have penetrated female reproductive spaces disposing them to sexualized and commodified bodies and how body of a woman surfaces as a space of political resistance. In “Giribala,” after the birth of her fourth child, Giribala asks the doctor at the hospital to sterilize her. In the process, she takes control of her body and affirms her refusal to reproduce as an act of resistance. In “Dhowli,” a young “untouchable Dusad girl” is impregnated by an upper caste Brahman who leaves her to fend for herself (Devi 186). When Dhowli refuses to give up the child conceived of this forced union, her mother coerces her to make sure “she would be infertile after this baby” (Devi 196). When she is compelled to prostitute her body for survival, her destroyer shockingly responds, “why didn’t you kill yourself?” (Devi 204). Towards the end, she is left with no other option, but to become a “public whore” at Ranchi.

This radical context not only calls into question the existence and security of the female subaltern, but also problematizes the concept of the welfare state in general and its claim of provision of equal rights for its subjects.² What is worse is the adivasis' acceptance of their precarious condition as something preordained. Mahasweta Devi's stories on bonded slavery reveal what Frederick Jameson calls the "omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social" (*The Political Unconscious* 4) where the socio-economic relationship and cultural relationship merge. As Samik Bandyopadhyay writes:

Exploitation in India operates beyond the law and with the tacit acquiescence of an exploited class held in thrall by a load of conventional role-obligation. Legal reforms or legal defences for the exploited have rarely affected the exploitative mechanism sustained by the illiteracy/ignorance of the exploited. (Introduction, *Five Plays* 1999, xiii)

Ganori in *Douloti*, too, thinks bond slavery is written in one's fate: "On the high caste boy's forehead he [God] writes property, land, cattle, trade. Education, job, contract. On the outcaste's forehead he writes bond slavery" (*IM* 22). Such fate of the low castes and untouchable tribals, he believes, is divinely sanctioned rule supported by Lord Rama's killing of Shambuk, a Sudra (39). The tribals' passive acceptance of bond slavery as an ancient law perpetuates tribal exploitation. Also, ignorance of laws and lack of voice in public matters prevent any resolution to their problem. They are skeptical of deliverance from exploitation by the government because the government officers are the perpetrators and they, too, retain kamiyas and visit whorehouses (84). Mahasweta Devi in her conversation with Gayatri Spivak condemns the ill execution of the Government policy:

The present Government of India had to introduce, in 1976, the Bonded Labour System Abolition Act. In 1970, the Government of India had supposedly liberated a handful of bonded labourers in Seora village on top of a hill. And, on paper, had given them land. What land? Land on top of the hills, no water level, where nothing could grow. And the people who kept them as bonded slaves were low echelon government officials themselves. It was through their hands that the Government gave money to rehabilitate these people. Naturally nothing reached the tribals. They were in desperation. They said: we will now go back to bond age again. (*IM* iv-v)

Douloti gives voice to the author's concern for the collective predicament of the tribals, "Sir! What will come of the gormen abolishing bonded labour? Without land, without food, hunger will drive the people of this society to become Kamiyas again" (*IM* 73).

In the midst of utter hopelessness and desperation, a significant thing worth discerning is that the text accords the bonded slave women a collective voice in the songs that are interspersed throughout the text. On winter nights, the old kamiya women sing,

By the strength of loans, by the strength of loans.
 Two rupees ten rupees hundred rupees
 Ten seers of wheat, five of rice
 Munabar lends us.
 We don't know what to do
 We gape like fools
 His pet wolves catch our hands
 Smear ink on our left thumbs
 Take our mark on white paper
 Put the paper in the safe
 He has thousands of sheets of paper like this
 He is king by the strength of loans

 He has become the government by lending money
 And we have become kamiyas
 We will never be free. (21)

When Douloti is brought to the town, she falls victim to bond slavery of another kind:

These are all Paramananda's kamiyas.
 Douloti and Reoti and Somni
 Field work, digging soil, cutting wells is work
 This one doesn't do it, that one doesn't do it, the other one doesn't do it –
 The boss has turned them into land
 The boss ploughs and ploughs their land and raises the crop
 They are all Paramananda's kamiyas.

 The boss has made them land
 He ploughs and ploughs their bodies' land and raises a crop

They are all some people's *maat*. (60)

Here also all later loans are added to the principal, and the interest is compounded to ensure that the kamiya prostitute is never free. There is no respite even when the body becomes unserviceable and the kamiya prostitute is evicted from the whorehouse as she has to repay by begging or selling dried cowdung for fuel. Radha Chakravarty comments, "Shot with bitter irony, the songs of the prostitutes tell the story of their exploitation in an idiom completely different from that of political rhetoric, stressing the remoteness of their confinement from the arena of mainstream activity" (82). I would assert that such narration of collective predicament hints at the possibility of their inclusion in national politics as attempted by people like Bono Nagesia, the person who escaped from bond slavery, Father Boomfuller, the white missionary hopeful of legislative reforms, Mohan Srivastav, the school master sympathetic towards the cause of the tribals, or Prasad Mahato of the Palamu Bhumidas Freedom Party. Though their effort does not culminate in a positive outcome, it along with the powerful conclusion of the story invites its readers to shed their inattention to the cause of tribal women as, I believe like Spivak, "A literary text exists between the writer and the reader. This makes literature peculiarly susceptible to didactic use" (*Breast Stories* 83). On her writings about tribal issues, Mahasweta Devi expresses her intention thus:

A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take stand in defense of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him . . . I desire a transformation of the present social system . . . I find myself still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate, directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints, is the only source of inspiration for all my writings. (Introduction, *Five Plays* viii-ix)

2. Rewriting Myth in "Draupadi":

While Devi deals with the issue of bonded slavery in *Douloti*, her much-acclaimed short story "Draupadi" treats the cause and effect of Naxalite Movement in Bengal which started as a rural revolt of landless workers and tribal people against landlords and money lenders in the village of Naxalbari in North Bengal in the late 1960s. The story was published in her work *Agnigarbha* in 1978 and was introduced to the English reading world through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation of her collection of short stories titled *Breast Stories* ([BS] 2010). In "Draupadi," Dopdi is a tribal guerilla fighting for the rights of the Santali people in the forest area of Jharkhani in Southern Bengal. Her husband Dulna Majhi is slain in police encounter and Dopdi is captured by the police. After her interrogation, as

darkness advances, Senanayak (the police officer) orders his men to “make her up” and “do the needful” to fulfill his dark desires. Dopdi is subjected to repeated violation of her body and abandoned. In retaliation, she refuses to clothe herself again and confronts Senanayak in that state:

You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? . . . There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, *kounter* me-come on, *kounter* me? . . . and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid. (Devi *BS* 36-37)

In this moment of protest against oppression and injustice, Dopdi, emerges from her individual status to become a representative image of possibility of social transformation among the tribals. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan's comment in this context is worth quoting, “It is simultaneously a deliberate refusal of a shared sign system (the meanings assigned to nakedness, and rape: shame, fear, loss) and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create disconcerting counter effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy” (352). The power and authority of the postcolonial state, personified in the figure of Senanayak, is challenged by Dopdi. Through a compelling interplay of politics and history, Devi lays bare the conspiracy of the hegemonic patriarchal system that puts a great value on shielding a woman's honour, but given a chance encroaches upon it without having any qualm.

The protest and resistance of Draupadi to injustice and humiliation connects Dopdi to Draupadi, the royal heroine of the grand *Mahabharat*. Draupadi in the *Mahabharat* is a black woman and she must have been a tribal, says Mahasweta Devi (*IM* i). In the state of Himachal Pradesh, the sort of fraternal polyandry that Draupadi is supposed to have practiced is still being practiced by women of a particular tribal community who are said to belong to the Draupadi clan. As a tribal, though Dopdi is not romanticized by Mahasweta Devi, her resemblance to the mythical is exhibited in her heroism. Draupadi in the *Mahabharat* prays to the Supreme Lord Krishna and is infinitely clothed by Him and saved. Unlike her mythical namesake, Dopdi does not seek any benign intermediation to save her honour. Instead she wages war upon her tormentors by refusing to cover her nude body. In “Translator's foreword” to the story, Spivak observes,

Mahasweta's story rewrites this episode. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi—in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the

representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine (in this case it would have been godlike) comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops. (BS 11)

Shobha Ghosh pertinently remarks that Mahasweta “wrenches the character out of myth and inserts her into history,” thereby rewriting both the myth as well the “official” history of the Naxal movement vis-à-vis tribal women. (“Refiguring Myth” 97). In fact, Mahasweta Devi engages with myth in many of her stories to interrogate the nexus of power between feudal social system, capitalist economy, middle class and politics in India both prior to and after its independence. In *After Kurukshetra* (2005), she views the Great War of *The Mahabharat* as a cold-blooded power game that sacrificed countless human lives and looks at events through the eyes of women—marginalized, dispossessed, and Dalit. The five women in the story of the same name who are widowed by the War critique it as a war of greed (3). History as a chronicle of the kings and highborn is criticized in “Kunti and the Nishadin.” After the Great War, Kunti, during the forest retreat tending Dhritarastra and Gandhari, confesses her sin of not acknowledging Karna as her son in the presence of a Nishadin, a tribal woman, unaware that she understood her. The Nishadin reminds her of a greater and unpardonable sin of leaving the drunken Nishadin and her five sons in the house of lac, Jatugriha, when it burnt. The Nishadin, the eldest daughter-in-law of the dead Nishadin, avenged the deaths of the innocents by setting the forest on fire. “Souvali” is another story of resistance of the relegated. In this story, Souvali is a *dasi* (maid servant) who bears a son to Dhritarastra. On his death, her son Souvalya does the *tarpan* (the death rites), but unlike other *dasis* who bore royal children, Souvali declines wearing white cloth and fasting. Instead, she feasts on delicacies to her heart’s content. Here, it is relevant to mention Spivak, who, in the Translator’s preface to *Imaginary Maps*, writes, “When the subaltern speaks in order to be heard and gets into the structure of the responsible (responding and being responded to) resistance, he or she is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual” (xxi). The above mentioned stories, thus, celebrate the organic intellectuals.

Spivak draws attention to the celebration of the organic intellectual in “The Hunt” in the figure of Mary Oraon in contrast to *Douloti* in which the conclusion forecloses the possibility of emergence of the same. In “The Hunt,” the main character Mary Oraon, a tribal woman, invites the wrath of Tehsildar Singh, the contractor because his eyes fall on her, but she refuses his amorous advances. An enraged Mary invites him on the day of Janiparab,

catches him and strikes him down with the axe.³ It is significant that this act of justice takes place on the day of the Festival of Justice of the tribals when they bring offenders to justice. What is interesting is, as Spivak points out, "...unlike the ethnographic account of tribal identity in rituals, Mahasweta shows an individual activating ritual into contemporary resistance" (*IM* 206). Mahasweta Devi's stories establish that when a tribal woman resists exploitation, it is more radical than all the feminist talk of the third world intellectuals. After the hunt, Mary feels, "Today all the mundane blood conditioned fears of the wild quadruped are gone because she has killed the biggest beast," hinting that the creatures women fear most are not wild animals, but wild men (17).

Conclusion:

Demographically accounting for around 8.6% of the total population of India (2011 Census), the tribals have been mercilessly marginalized by the mainstream discourse of development. Devi's works, in turn, produce a kind of deconstructive, counter-historical and counter-hegemonic discourse which aims to center the subaltern.⁴ By bringing to the forefront the plight of tribals who have been rendered invisible in the nationalist narratives, as well as the gendered subaltern who is marginalized in "mainstream" discourse, Mahasweta Devi's *Douloti* and "Draupadi" vehemently assert, "Yes, Subaltern Can Speak."

Notes:

1. In India, the story of revisionist historiography is intertwined with the story of the Subaltern Studies volumes (its initial volume published by Oxford University Press in New Delhi in 1982, edited by Ranajit Guha) and the intellectual movement it represents. Subaltern Studies scholars include Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Arvind N. Das, Veena Das, Gyanendra Pandey, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sumit Sarkar (Sarkar dissented the group later). They remembered Indian resistance struggles from the perspective of subaltern groups who were oppressed and silenced by the hegemonic structures of the British Raj and its Indian elite classes.

See, Ranajit Guha, editor, *Subaltern Studies*, vols. I-V, Oxford UP, 1982 - 85; Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, editors, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Foreword by Edward W. Said, Oxford UP, 1988; Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan, editors, *Community, Gender and Violence, Subaltern Studies*, vol. XI, Columbia UP, 2000.

Some standard essays on feminist subaltern studies in particular include Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Sub-altern Speak?" (pp. 66-111); Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (pp. 196-220); Sara Suleri's "Woman Skin Deep" (pp. 244- 256). See, *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Editors. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia UP, 1994.

2. Besides *Douloti*, Mahasweta Devi wrote other stories like "Palamu" and "Gohumni" on bonded slavery. Devi tells that in "Palamu" the formation of organized bonded labour is seen through the experiences of a woman and in "Gohumni," literally meaning female cobra, the woman retaliates and punishes the money lender who comes to take her away (*IM* xiii). Devi's *Aajir* also unveils the barbaric system of bonded labour and reveals the manipulative nature of the advantaged caste Hindus (*Five Plays*).

Mahasweta Devi gives a journalistic account of bond slavery prevalent in different regions of India under various names in *Douloti*. "In Andhra the people of Matangi, Jaggali, Malajangam, Mahar, and other castes become Gothi. In Bihar Chamar, nagesia, Parhaiya, Dusad become Kamiya or Seokiya. In Gujarat the Chalwaris, Naliyas, Thoris and others become Halpati. In Karnataka the low of birth become Jeetho, in Madhya Pradesh Haroyaha. In Orissa Gothi and in Rajasthan Sagri. The Chetty rayats of Tamil Nadu keep Bhumidases. In Uttar Pradesh the Bhumidas is called Maat or Khandit-Mundit or Sanjayat. The Bhumidases of the Laccadive Islands are Nadapu" (*IM* 61)

3. Devi elaborates about the Janiparab in conversation with Spivak, "the tribals have this animal hunting festival in Bihar. It used to be the Festival of Justice. After the hunt, the elders would bring the offenders to justice. They would not go to the police. In Santali language it was the Law-bir. Law is the Law, and *bir* is forest. And every twelfth year it is Janiparab, the women's hunting festival in Bihar. Every event narrated within that story is true. What Mary did that day has been done in that area again and again. Among the tribals, insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime" (*IM* xi).
4. Mahasweta Devi has been instrumental in helping the indigenous people in reviving their past and to give them a pride of place. Her narratives highlight resistance movements and sacrifice of the tribals against the colonial masters which have not received adequate attention and are largely ignored by the mainstream historians and

writers. The Revolt of the Paharia Sardars of 1764, the Tamar Revolts of 1789, the Munda Revolts of 1820, the Koi Insurrection of 1831-33, the Santal Insurrection of 1855, the Birsa Munda Movement of 1874-1901, or Tana Bhagat's Movement of 1914 and 1920 remain unacknowledged in history and tribal leaders such as Dulchand Tudu, Jayaram Murmu, Raghu Murmu, Ganpat Mahoto, Birsa Munda, Lakshman Naik are unsung heroes. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahasweta Devi explains why she thought of writing about tribal history: "Once a tribal girl asked me 'When we go to school, we read about Mahatma Gandhi. Did we have no heroes? Did we always suffer like this?' That is why I started writing about the tribal movements and the tribal heroes" (*IM* iii). Mahasweta Devi's efforts have been to bring forth the oral history of the tribals to the attention of mainstream society. Her novels *Sal Girar Dakex (In the Name of Birthday)*, *Aranyer Adhikar (Rights over the Forests)*, and *Chotti Munda ebang Tar Tir (Chotti Munda and His Arrow)* deal with tribal history. It is worth exploring how the writer juxtaposes oral tales, legends and myths with the documented facts for reconstructing the past.

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