

Research Article**Subjugation in the Selected Plays of Mahasweta Devi and Manjula Padmanabhan****V. Beulah Rani¹, Prof. G. Chenna Reddy²**¹Associate Professor of English, Hindu College, Guntur² Professor of English, Acharya Nagarjuna Univeristy**Corresponding Author: V. Beulah Rani****Abstract**

Subjugation refers to the systematic domination and control of individuals or groups by those in power, resulting in the denial of freedom, dignity, voice, and equality through social, political, economic, gender, and cultural forces. In drama, Subjugation serves as a powerful thematic device through which playwrights expose injustice and unequal power relations, often depicting the suffering of marginalized groups such as women, lower castes, the poor and political dissidents. In this context, this paper attempts to examine the theme of Subjugation in the plays Bayan, Water and Mother of 1084 by Mahasweta Devi and Lights Out and Harvest by Manjula Padmanabhan. Mahasweta Devi presents oppression as a deeply rooted structural reality rooted in caste, gender, class and political power. In Bayan, Chandidasi is condemned by superstition and caste prejudice, labeled a witch and pushed out of society. The Mother of 1084 portrays political repression, as Sujata's private mourning for her son is muted by state authority and the apathy of the middle class. In Water, Maghai's role as a water astrologer reveals economic and caste exploitation, where control over water symbolizes power over survival itself. Similarly, Manjula Padmanabhan's plays foreground modern forms of oppression. In Lights Out, violence against women is sustained by social silence and male apathy, revealing the deep psychological grip of patriarchy. Harvest shows how extreme poverty turns human bodies into commodities under global capitalism, with women suffering compounded oppression from both class exploitation and patriarchal dominance. Together, these works reveal how entrenched power structures in society perpetuate silence, normalize injustice, and perpetuate oppression.

Keywords: Subjugation, Patriarchy, Superstitions, Social apathy, Social ostracism, Economic growth.

Introduction

In Indian English writing, especially in texts that question social injustice, political violence, patriarchy and economic exploitation, the theme of oppression is a key concern. Literature and drama, by foregrounding oppressed voices and lived experiences, become powerful tools for questioning dominant ideologies and exposing hidden structures of power. Among the most important writers in this tradition are Mahasweta Devi and Manjula Padmanabhan, whose writings consistently challenge systems that oppress individuals and societies. Mahasweta Devi's writings emerged from her continuous contact with tribal communities, lower caste groups and political dissidents. Her narratives document how oppression is embedded in caste hierarchies, superstitions, development policies and state repression. On the other hand, Manjula Padmanabhan focuses on urban, middle-class and futuristic contexts, exposing patriarchy, social apathy and oppression through global capitalism. Despite differences in form and setting, both authors reveal how power operates on bodies, emotions and identities, especially on women's bodies.

This article examines oppression in the plays *Bayan*, *Water* and *Mother of 1084* by Mahasweta Devi and *Lights Out* and *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan. Through detailed textual analysis, these works explore how they portray various forms of social, political, economic and psychological dominance and how they question resistance, complicity and moral responsibility. Together, these texts provide a comprehensive critique of oppression in local and global contexts.

Mahasweta Devi: Continuing to challenge oppression from the margins

Mahasweta Devi's literary project is inseparable from her activist commitment to the oppressed. Her writing serves as a counter-history that documents experiences that have been removed from mainstream narratives. In her works, oppression is not accidental or personal; it is systemic, historical, and deeply rooted. Devi exposes how oppression is normalized through social customs, state institutions and economic policies.

Bayan: Superstition, Patriarchy and Social Exclusion

Bayan is a powerful exploration of how superstition and patriarchy combine to subjugate women from oppressed communities. The protagonist Chandi belongs to a lower caste group and works as a caretaker of crematoriums. Her socially required labour constantly brings her close to death, which society associates with impurity and fear. As a result, she is branded as a bayen (witch) and faces severe social ostracism. Chandi's oppression works through symbolic violence rather than physical force. She is denied companionship, motherhood, and social acceptance. Although society depends on her labour, it also removes her from moral and emotional life. This contradiction reveals how power operates by exploiting individuals and denying them dignity. Since patriarchal norms associate women's bodies with pollution and danger, Chandi is particularly vulnerable as a woman.

Mahasweta Devi highlights the psychological consequences of such constant ostracism. Chandi internalizes her imposed identity, gradually losing her sense of self. Her eventual breakdown reflects the devastating impact of social ostracism and silence. Through *Bayan*, Devi demonstrates that subjugation does not have to be overtly violent to be destructive; social ostracism and symbolic degradation can be equally devastating.

Water: Development, Displacement and Structural Oppression

In *Water*, Mahasweta Devi turns her attention to the rhetoric of development and its consequences for tribal communities. The story criticizes large-scale irrigation and dam projects that promise national progress while displacing indigenous populations. Here oppression is enforced through official policies, legal frameworks and administrative indifference. For tribal societies, land and water are not just economic resources, but central to cultural identity and survival. Development projects disrupt this relationship, leaving communities homeless and deprived of livelihoods. Devi exposes how the language of progress masks structural violence and legitimizes removal in the name of national interest. Affected communities are excluded from decision-making processes, reducing them to passive recipients of state power.

In *Water*, oppression is impersonal and systemic. The oppression is spread through policies and paperwork. Devi emphasizes that such forms of dominance are particularly dangerous because they appear rational and benevolent. This text challenges readers to question development models that prioritize economic growth over human dignity.

Mother of 1084: Political Violence and Middle Class Complexity.

Mother of 1084 examines oppression through political oppression and social conformity. The drama revolves around Sujata, whose son Brati was killed by the state for participating in the revolutionary movement. The title reduces Brati to a number, suggesting how the state suppresses dissent as it erases individuality. Sujata's oppression operates on multiple levels. In her bourgeois family, she is emotionally humiliated and silenced by her husband and relatives, who prioritize social respectability over moral truth. As a citizen, she is denied justice and information about her son's death. Devi exposes how the middle class perpetuates state oppression through silence, fear and indifference.

Through Sujata's gradual awakening, the drama critiques not only overt state violence but also passive complicity. It has been shown that oppression continues just as consistently through

passivity as it does through direct oppression. The resistance in this text is internal and moral, emphasizing memory, questioning and a refusal to forget.

Manjula Padmanabhan: Urban, Gender, and Global Oppression

Manjula Padmanabhan's plays examine oppression in contemporary urban and global contexts. Her play focuses on patriarchy, social indifference and neoliberal capitalism, revealing how oppression persists in modern, progressive societies. Padmanabhan uses realism, irony and dystopia to unsettle the audience and provoke critical reflection.

Lights Out: Gender Violence and Collective Indifference

Lights Out is based on a true incident in which residents of an apartment complex witness the gang rape of a woman but choose not to intervene. The play exposes oppression through gender violence and social indifference. The woman's suffering becomes background noise, while the onlookers rationalize their inaction through fear, convenience and concern for fame. Padmanabhan criticizes not only the perpetrators but also the spectators who enable violence through silence. Patriarchal attitudes normalize the objectification of women's bodies, while urban isolation discourages collective responsibility. Here, oppression is perpetuated through social structures that prioritize convenience over justice.

The play directly confronts the audience, forcing them to confront their own capacity for indifference. By dramatizing inaction, Lights Out reveals how oppression thrives not only through violent acts, but also through everyday choices that look the other way.

Harvest: Neoliberal Capitalism and Bio political Control

In Harvest, Padmanabhan presents a dystopian vision of global inequality, where poor people sell their organs to wealthy foreigners. Oppression is carried out through economic coercion, technological surveillance, and corporate contracts. Poverty coerces consent, revealing the illusion of choice in capitalism. The human body has been reduced to a commodity, monitored and controlled to ensure productivity. This represents bio political control, where power acts directly on life itself. Individuals lose autonomy over their bodies, identities, and futures. Women, confined to domestic spaces and subjected to surveillance, are deeply oppressed.

Harvest criticizes a global system that values profit over humanity. Resistance in the play is fragmented and uncertain, reflecting the overwhelming nature of multinational power. Padmanabhan raises urgent ethical questions about dignity, exploitation, and the cost of survival in a world of objectification.

Comparative Perspectives on Oppression

A comparative analysis by Mahasweta Devi and Manjula Padmanabhan reveals common concerns and different approaches. Devi's works are rooted in the historical and social realities of the marginalized, focusing on caste, tribal identity and state oppression. Her portrayal of oppression emphasizes realism, documentation and moral imperative. In contrast; Padmanabhan's plays explore oppression in urban and globalized conditions. Power operates through social norms, market forces, and technology rather than overt violence. While Devi often gestures towards collective resistance, Padmanabhan presents a dark vision in which resistance is uncertain and fragmented. Both writers foreground women's experiences to reveal how gender exacerbates oppression. Women's bodies are becoming sites of condemnation by multiple systems of power, whether through superstition, political violence or commodification. In particular, both authors implicate society as a whole, emphasizing that oppression continues through participation, silence and indifference.

Resistance, Agency, and Moral Responsibility

While oppression is widespread, neither Mahasweta Devi nor Manjula Padmanabhan portray oppression as entirely complete. Devi emphasizes moments of awareness, defiance, and solidarity, suggesting that resistance begins with recognition and memory. Although Padmanabhan is more pessimistic, she still exposes the cracks in oppressive systems by forcing the audience to confront moral dilemmas. Both authors challenge readers and audiences to examine their own complexity. Whether through middle-class silence in Mother of 1084 or urban apathy in Lights Out,

oppression is shown to be based on collective choices. Literature and drama become sites for moral engagement and ethical questioning.

Conclusion

In the works of Mahasweta Devi and Manjula Padmanabhan, oppression emerges as a complex and systemic condition shaped by caste, gender, class, state power, and global capitalism. Through *Bayan*, *Water and Mother of 1084*, Mahasweta Devi exposes the living realities of marginalization, revealing how superstition, development and political repression silence vulnerable groups. In *Lights Out* and *Harvest*, Manjula Padmanabhan critiques patriarchy, social apathy, and neoliberal exploitation, demonstrating how oppression persists in modern urban and global contexts. Together, these texts affirm the power of literature and drama to challenge injustice and provoke moral reflection. By giving voice to the repressed and revealing mechanisms of domination, Devi and Padmanabhan force readers and audience to recognize that oppression is not natural or inevitable, it is produced, maintained, and therefore open to challenge.

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