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Recovering Silenced Histories: Women as Custodians of Memory in Indian Women's Fiction

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Abstract

Memory involves not just personal memories of the past but also acts as a cultural process by which communities retain their experiences, identities, traditions, sorrows, and histories. In many societies women have held an important but generally unrecognised role in this process since domestic areas, family stories, oral traditions, rituals, food customs, language, and the passing on of stories from one generation to another have usually been linked with women's lives. Contemporary Indian women writers have turned this seemingly private area into a major literary venue for the recovery of history and culture. The present paper makes a comparative study of the way in which women are portrayed as guardians of memory in the selected works of Mahasweta Devi, Krishna Sobti, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The study concentrates especially on Mahasweta Devi's

The works referred to are "Draupadi," "Breast-Giver," and "Rudali"; Krishna Sobti's *Mitro Marjani* and *Ai Ladki*; and Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. The article states that even though these authors come from different linguistic, regional, historical, and diasporic backgrounds, they have in common a major literary approach consisting of recovering histories which are usually pushed to the background by bringing women's voices, bodies, memories, and ordinary experiences to the heart of their narratives. In Devi, memory functions as a record of the suffering of the oppressed and of political violence; in Sobti, it takes the form of an intergenerational dialogue by means of which women's experiences and cultural worlds are passed on; and in Divakaruni, memory acts as a bridge across the diaspora that links women to their families, to their homeland, and to the cultural identity they have inherited. The comparison shows that women's act of remembering is not merely passive nostalgia or simple preservation. It can challenge patriarchal authority, reveal social injustice, pass on cultural knowledge, and help to reconstruct identities. The writers thus change women from being objects of history into becoming the guardians and interpreters of those histories which would otherwise go unheeded.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Women's Writing, Mahasweta Devi, Krishna Sobti, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Oral History, Feminism, Subalternity, Diaspora, Indian Literature, Gender, Collective Memory

Introduction

History is often linked to public events, political institutions, wars, movements, leaders, and documented records. However, much of human experience does not make it into these official archives. The daily lives of women, domestic workers, marginalized groups, mothers, daughters, migrants, widows, and economically disadvantaged communities often survive through oral stories, family memories, rituals, objects, personal experiences, and tales passed down through generations. These experiences might not show up in standard historical records, but their absence does not lessen their historical importance. In fact, the lack of these voices prompts questions about who has traditionally held the power to record history and whose experiences have been deemed worthy of preservation.

Literature becomes crucial when these experiences are not adequately represented in traditional historical narratives. Fiction can capture knowledge that formal archives might overlook. It can document not just what happened but also how events were felt, remembered, misunderstood, silenced, or shared. Literary texts can serve as alternative sites of memory, allowing experiences that are often excluded from mainstream historical accounts to gain visibility. This role is especially important in Indian women's writing, where authors challenge the idea that women's lives exist solely in the private realm with little connection to broader issues of history, politics, culture, and collective identity. Women have historically faced complex challenges within Indian society. Patriarchal structures have often limited their public roles, yet women have been essential in preserving family traditions, oral histories, customs, rituals, food practices, language, and intergenerational knowledge. The domestic sphere cannot be seen only as a confining space. It can also be a site for preserving culture. Stories shared between mothers and daughters, memories of ancestors, household rituals, traditional speech, recipes, clothing, songs, and recollections of places all help preserve aspects of cultural history that might otherwise vanish.

Mahasweta Devi, Krishna Sobti, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explore women's experiences from significantly different social and literary perspectives. Mahasweta Devi's fiction focuses on tribal communities, class exploitation, gender-based violence, political oppression, and the relationship between marginalized groups and power structures. Krishna Sobti's Hindi fiction delves into women's sexuality, family dynamics, memory, aging, language, regional culture, and shifting social values. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who primarily writes in English and from a diasporic viewpoint, often addresses themes of immigration, family, gender, cultural dislocation, and the connection between India and America. Their literary backgrounds differ, and it would be simplistic to treat their portrayals of women as identical. Still, their works share a common goal: recovering women's experiences from silence.

This paper looks at these writers through the lens of the woman as custodian of memory. The term "custodian" is important because it implies more than just passive preservation. A custodian protects, maintains, interprets, and passes on what has been entrusted to her. The women in Devi, Sobti, and Divakaruni's works often take on similar roles. They hold memories of families, communities, violence, migration, sexuality, cultural practices, and historical change. At the same time, these authors complicate the idea of women as merely passive bearers of tradition. Their female

characters frequently challenge inherited values, reinterpret the past, reject oppressive traditions, and use memory to create alternative identities. Memory thus becomes a dynamic process rather than a fixed inheritance.

Maurice Halbwachs' theoretical framework on memory provides a strong basis for this interpretation. Halbwachs suggests that memory is influenced by the social groups individuals belong to. People do not remember in isolation; family, community, language, religion, culture, and social ties shape what is remembered and how it is understood. Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory builds on this idea by separating memories passed through everyday communication from those kept alive through symbolic forms, rituals, texts, traditions, and cultural institutions. This distinction is especially relevant for examining women's writing, as women often pass on cultural knowledge through informal and domestic exchanges. A grandmother's tale, a mother's memory, a family ritual, a traditional recipe, or a story about a forgotten woman can all serve as cultural transmission.

Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, offers another useful framework. Memory is not confined to individual minds; it can attach itself to places, objects, rituals, texts, and symbolic practices. A house, a piece of clothing, a letter, a family photo, a kitchen, a village, or even the human body can all hold memory. In the works of Devi, Sobti, and Divakaruni, these sites are often linked to women's lives. The female body, domestic spaces, conversations between mothers and daughters, food, clothing, oral storytelling, and family ties can all act as vessels through which the past stays alive. Oral history is also key to this comparative study. Oral histories keep alive experiences that might be left out of official records. They are personal, fragmented, and often full of emotion, but these qualities do not lessen their cultural value. In fact, their subjectivity can reveal how people truly experienced historical and social changes. The women in these authors' works often preserve memories through speech, storytelling, conversation, silence, and physical experiences. Literature turns these informal memories into written narratives, thereby granting cultural visibility to experiences that might otherwise remain hidden within private memory.

Mahasweta Devi's fiction is a compelling example of literature serving as an alternative archive. Her writing consistently puts marginalized communities at the forefront and challenges dominant narratives of Indian society. Her stories about tribal communities, impoverished women, workers, and socially excluded groups show that history cannot be understood solely through the experiences of those in power. In "Draupadi," "Breast-Giver," and "Rudali," women bear witness to the violence and inequality that mainstream historical accounts often neglect. "Draupadi" is particularly notable because the main character, Dopdi Mejhen, is a tribal woman caught in a violent political situation. Her experience illustrates how gender, class, tribal identity, and political power intersect. Dopdi's body becomes the battleground for political authority's attempts to exert control. The violence inflicted upon her is not just a personal trauma; it reflects a broader history of oppression faced by marginalized communities. Her body becomes a record of political violence.

Yet, Devi does not allow Dopdi's tale to end in victimhood. Dopdi's final confrontation with authority reinterprets her violated body. The body that endured violence becomes a source of resistance. In this way, Dopdi's body carries historical evidence

that cannot be easily erased. The official narrative may try to define the event under its own terms, but Dopdi's physical presence refuses to fade into an abstract political story. Her body speaks where official history remains silent. The importance of "Draupadi" for this discussion lies in its challenge to the conventional view of historical testimony. Dopdi does not record her history through written words or formal documents. Her experience is lived. The scars, humiliation, silence, and resistance of her body serve as forms of testimony. Thus, the story illustrates that marginalized women can be archives of histories that dominant institutions would rather suppress.

A similar dynamic appears in "Breast-Giver," where Devi examines the connection between women's bodies, motherhood, and work. Jashoda's maternal body becomes a source of economic value as she is hired to nurse other people's children. Motherhood, often linked to love, sacrifice, and cultural esteem, is revealed as a form of labor that can be exploited. Jashoda's body feeds wealthy families while her own life slowly fades into the background. The story poses a crucial question about memory and social value: whose labor is remembered and whose is ignored? Jashoda's experience symbolizes countless women whose reproductive and domestic work supports households without receiving proper acknowledgment. Her body records labor that society both needs and undervalues. The physical decline of her body shows the effects of a social system that regards women's reproductive abilities as a resource.

In this light, Devi turns the maternal body into a historical archive. Jashoda's suffering is not simply a personal loss; it signifies a larger social system where class, gender, poverty, and motherhood intersect. The story preserves the history of women whose work is essential to society but whose individual identities often go unrecognized. "Rudali" further explores this theme of marginalized women and forgotten histories. Sanichari's life is defined by poverty, caste discrimination, gender bias, and social exclusion. As a rudali, or professional mourner, she embodies a complex relationship between grief and labor. Women who have personally faced hardship are hired to publicly express sorrow for wealthy families. Those whose own suffering is seldom acknowledged become representatives of others' grief. The contradiction shows an unequal social structure where not all deaths receive the same cultural recognition. The death of a wealthy person becomes a public event filled with elaborate mourning, while the suffering of poor women stays invisible. Sanichari's profession highlights the unequal distribution of grief and social recognition.

Through Sanichari, Devi turns the marginalized woman into a witness of society. Her life holds memories of poverty, loss, caste discrimination, motherhood, and survival. These memories are absent from official national history, but they represent an important history of Indian society from below. The literary text thus becomes a space where women who are socially excluded can preserve their experiences. While Devi's women often bear histories of political and material oppression, Krishna Sobti's women preserve a different type of cultural history. They capture the intimate history of family, language, sexuality, aging, motherhood, and everyday life. Sobti's fiction pays close attention to the details of lived experience. Her use of casual and regionally specific language is crucial because language can preserve cultural memory. When a form of language disappears, an entire way of experiencing the world can be hard to reclaim. Mitro Marjani serves as an important example of this process. Mitro's refusal to stay

silent about female sexuality challenges the traditional portrayal of Indian women as modest, obedient, self-sacrificing, and mainly defined by their relationships with men. Her directness makes her an unconventional female character, but her importance goes beyond individual rebellion. Her words preserve a type of female experience often suppressed by patriarchal culture.

The ability to speak about female desire stands as a form of cultural memory. Experiences that cannot be articulated are tough to pass down. By giving Mitro a unique and outspoken voice, Sobti creates a literary space for women's sexuality to be recognized as a legitimate topic of cultural representation. Mitro's language counters the notion that respectable women should remain silent about their bodies and desires. Sobti's language use is closely tied to her feminist beliefs. Language influences not only how people communicate but also which experiences can enter cultural memory. Mitro's speech disrupts a system where men's discussions dominate and women's desires remain unvoiced. Her voice thus becomes an alternative archive of female experience. The question of intergenerational memory becomes clearer in *Ai Ladki*. The work focuses on an elderly mother and her daughter, whose conversations gradually uncover memories of family, childhood, marriage, womanhood, and the passage of time. The mother serves as a living storehouse of experiences from an earlier generation, while the daughter becomes the listener and eventual interpreter of those memories. This relationship matters because cultural memory often passes from one generation to the next through intimate dialogue. The older generation holds memories that the younger generation has not directly experienced. Yet this transmission doesn't guarantee complete acceptance. The daughter listens to her mother's stories but interprets them through her own perspective.

Sobti thus portrays memory as both inheritance and negotiation. The mother does not merely pass on an unchanged cultural tradition to her daughter. Instead, the two women engage in a process where the meaning of the past is reassessed. Their conversation features affection, disagreement, irritation, vulnerability, and silence. These complexities make the memory more genuine because cultural inheritance is seldom a simple or harmonious process. The mother's aging body adds another layer to this relationship. As she nears death, the urgency to preserve her memories grows. Her physical absence threatens the loss of a specific cultural world. The daughter's act of listening becomes a form of preservation. She does not just listen to her mother as an individual; she accepts a history that might otherwise fade away.

This mother-daughter relationship links significantly to Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of marginalized women and Divakaruni's depiction of immigrant women. In all three writers, women often carry experiences that are at risk of disappearing. The difference lies in the historical context of those experiences. Devi emphasizes political and social oppression, Sobti focuses on intergenerational and intimate cultural memory, while Divakaruni explores the issue within a diasporic context. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction particularly examines how migration changes cultural memory. Her characters commonly move between India and America, creating a psychological link between their homeland and current residence. Memory becomes a bridge between cultures. The migrant carries not just personal memories but also food, language, clothing, family traditions, religious practices, and stories tied to their homeland.

In "Clothes," for instance, clothing serves as an important marker of cultural identity. A garment is never just a physical object; it can

hold memories of family, marriage, homeland, gender expectations, and personal transformation. For a migrant woman, clothing can become a portable piece of cultural memory. The physical move from India to America may separate her from familiar places, but items associated with her past allow fragments of those spaces to remain present. Divakaruni's emphasis on clothing reveals that memory is not limited to words. People remember through objects as well as stories. A sari, photograph, piece of jewelry, recipe, letter, or household item can preserve emotional and cultural histories. Material culture is especially significant for migrants because objects can travel even when people cannot remain in one place. "The Maid Servant's Story" further illustrates Divakaruni's focus on recovering marginalized female voices. A domestic servant lives in the household but lacks the same social authority as the family that employs her. She sees and remembers the domestic world from a viewpoint different from that of the employer. Her memories thus create an alternative history of the household. This is an important point of comparison with Mahasweta Devi. Although the social contexts are different, both writers question whose voice is considered authoritative. The servant in Divakaruni's story, like the marginalized women in Devi's work, occupies a position where her experience could easily disappear from widespread narratives. By including such experiences in their texts, the writers challenge the hierarchy that decides which lives matter in history.

"Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" offers one of Divakaruni's clearest looks at cultural memory. Mrs. Dutta, an elderly Indian widow living with her son's family in California, carries a set of cultural habits and expectations from another social environment. Her cooking, interactions with family, understanding of domestic relationships, and daily life increasingly clash with the expectations of the younger generation.

This conflict shows that cultural memory often lies within everyday practices. Mrs. Dutta may not consciously see her actions as expressions of "culture." They are simply how she lives her life. Migration makes these habits noticeable because they enter a new cultural environment where they may be viewed differently. Mrs. Dutta thus becomes the keeper of a cultural world that the younger generation finds harder to grasp. Her memories connect her to India, but the story does not imply that every tradition should remain unchanged. Instead, it presents cultural memory as something that must be worked out between generations. This complexity sets cultural memory apart from nostalgia. Nostalgia often creates an idealized view of the past, while Divakaruni's fiction shows both the comfort and limits of inherited traditions. The past can offer a sense of belonging, but it can also include gender restrictions, family pressures, and outdated assumptions. Remembering requires interpretation.

This process of reinterpretation is central to the idea of women as keepers of memory. A keeper does not simply protect an object without examining it. The keeper decides how to preserve it and how to make it meaningful today. Similarly, the women in these writers' works do not just inherit the past; they reshape it. The three writers therefore present three connected forms of cultural memory. In Mahasweta Devi, memory often appears as subaltern memory, holding onto histories of political violence, poverty, caste, class, tribal marginalization, and gender exploitation. In Krishna Sobti, memory mainly becomes intergenerational memory, passed through conversations between women, family ties, language, personal experience, and everyday cultural practices. In

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, memory takes the shape of diasporic memory, linking women to their homeland while forcing them to navigate cultural change in a new location.

These differences are not divisions that hinder comparison. Instead, they show the various forms women's cultural memory can take. Memory is shaped by social background. A tribal woman facing state violence remembers differently from an elderly mother speaking to her daughter and differently from an immigrant woman trying to maintain cultural identity in America. Yet all three experiences challenge the view that history is made only through formal institutions.

The female body is a particularly significant point of connection. In Devi's work, the body becomes a record of violence and labor. In Sobti's writing, it serves as a space for sexuality, motherhood, aging, and female independence. In Divakaruni's stories, it represents cultural transition and identity. The body thus becomes a form of historical evidence. This understanding is crucial because women's bodies have historically been managed by social institutions like marriage, family, caste, class, motherhood, and cultural expectations. When women share their experiences, they reclaim the power to interpret their own stories. The body stops being merely an object controlled by society and becomes a source of knowledge. The home works in a similar way. It may be tempting to see the home only as a symbol of women's confinement, but these writers complicate that view. The household can be oppressive, but it can also preserve memory. Kitchens hold recipes and food traditions, clothing carries memories of marriage and identity, family conversations tell stories, letters maintain relationships across distances, and domestic rituals connect generations. The home thus becomes an alternative archive. This is particularly evident in Divakaruni's stories, where immigrant households turn into reconstructed cultural spaces. The physical home in America may differ from the home remembered in India, but memories of the earlier home continue to influence the immigrant family. Sobti also transforms domestic conversations into a major literary form in *Ai Ladki*, while Devi highlights the economic and political structures underlying domestic labor in "Breast-Giver."

Oral tradition provides another significant connection among the three writers. Indian culture has long preserved knowledge through stories, songs, proverbs, family tales, religious customs, and everyday conversation. Women have often played a key role in sharing this knowledge. A grandmother telling a story, a mother advising a daughter, a servant recalling an event, or an elderly woman reflecting on her youth can all be seen as informal ways of passing down history.

The writers turn these informal forms of speech into literary narratives. Devi creates voices that challenge dominant political narratives. Sobti gives women a strong voice and uses conversation as a vehicle for intergenerational memory. Divakaruni weaves letters, family stories, remembered cultural practices, and domestic conversations into migration narratives. The shift from oral memory to written literature thus moves from private experience to a cultural record.

Yet the women in these texts are not just victims whose memories need saving by the writer. They actively interpret history. Dopdi's resistance shows that even a woman facing extreme violence can challenge the meaning placed on her body. Jashoda's exploited role as a mother reveals the hidden economics of motherhood.

Sanichari's life highlights the unequal social value of grief. Mitro's speech confronts the cultural silence around female desire. The mother in *Ai Ladki* has a history that grants her authority in the narrative even as her body weakens. Mrs. Dutta's memories connect her to a cultural world that the younger generation cannot easily erase.

Thus, these women do more than hold memory; they engage with it. They choose what to remember, what to discard, what to pass on, and what to reinterpret. Memory becomes a form of power. This holds particular significance for feminist literary criticism. If women are seen only as keepers of tradition, they might come off as passive. The works of Devi, Sobti, and Divakaruni reveal a more complex story: remembering can act as a form of resistance. Preserving the story of a marginalized woman pushes back against her erasure. Remembering an oppressive experience means refusing to let it fade away. Passing on cultural knowledge creates continuity. Reinterpreting inherited traditions claims authority over the past. The term "silenced histories" refers not only to histories deliberately hidden but also to experiences that remain culturally invisible because they seem too ordinary, domestic, feminine, or marginal to fit into standard historical narratives. The literature of these authors challenges this hierarchy. A woman's memory of marriage can unveil the structure of patriarchy. A servant's recollection can reveal class relations. An elderly mother's story can save a fading cultural world. An immigrant woman's experiences with food and clothing can uncover the psychological impacts of displacement.

The short story form is particularly suited for this purpose because it condenses an entire history into a small piece of experience. A conversation, object, memory, bodily sensation, or moment of awareness can hint at a broader social history. These fragments become important because marginalized histories often exist only in bits and pieces. There may be no official record capturing a woman's emotional experience, no institutional archive keeping a servant's account, or no historical documentation of how migration affects a family's psyche. Literature opens up imaginative space for these experiences without pretending to replace factual historical records. The comparative study of Mahasweta Devi, Krishna Sobti, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reveals that women can be alternative historians of Indian society. Their memories preserve not only the past but also the emotional and cultural meanings tied to that past. Their stories challenge the idea that history belongs mainly to public institutions and powerful figures.

Mahasweta Devi's women bring marginalized histories to light. Krishna Sobti's women maintain and reinterpret close, intergenerational stories. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's women carry cultural memories across borders and negotiate their meanings in diasporic settings. Their differences highlight the richness of Indian women's literary traditions, while their shared focus on memory creates a meaningful point of comparison.

Ultimately, the women portrayed by these authors are more than just keepers of memories. They are witnesses, storytellers, archivists, interpreters, and sometimes rebels. Their memories confront historical erasure by insisting that experiences of poverty, violence, sexuality, motherhood, migration, domestic work, aging, and cultural displacement deserve recognition. Their stories show that history exists not just in monuments, government documents, political speeches, or institutional records. It also lives in bodies, homes, kitchens, clothes, letters, languages, conversations, silences, and memories. Remembering, then, becomes a form of

cultural resistance. Remembering a silenced woman asserts that her experience mattered. Preserving an everyday domestic memory acknowledges that ordinary life is also history. Passing on an inherited story prevents cultural disappearance. Reinterpreting the past affirms the right to shape history.

Mahasweta Devi, Krishna Sobti, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, therefore, create alternative archives through their fiction. Their women carry histories that official narratives may miss, but they do not simply bear them passively. They reshape those histories through speech, resistance, storytelling, memory, and reinterpretation. In this way, these writers show that recovering women's voices is not just a feminist literary effort; it is also a reconstruction of cultural history from views that have often been unheard.

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