

# Women in Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver*, and *Dhouli*

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## Abstract:

Women's status in society, particularly those of marginalized ones positions are very preoccupied with the sense of submissiveness and negligence. The word 'Marginalized' used as the substitute of poor/ tribal/ peripheral. Marginalised women, the tribe or the poor women and the outcast or the rebellious women, do not have any 'proper' position and identity in society. Their sufferings have long been avoided, and were not even considered as 'wrong' but the usual consequences of everyday life. Every woman does not belong to the upper class or face the fate of misery or not, every single woman has the same tragedy to endure but many of them have similarities. They have similar stories uncaring pronunciation and different situations. Mahasweta Devi's stories articulate of this unspeakable truth of women's misery and their power of enduring and resistance. In her stories, readers get the linear story which is derelict in mainstream literature. Her fiction offers an array of female's figurative situation/ position in society as well as their materialistic use of the body for the social and economic purpose. In this paper study the her short stories such as, *Breast-Giver*, and *Dhouli* in order to explain the paradoxical position and representation of women in society as well as their uneven voices.

**Key Words:** Tribal Women, Marginalised, *Breast-Giver*, and *Dhouli*.

## Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's stories are not only about her surroundings rather it reciprocates marginalized women's voices. It tells the grand narrative of the unspoken story of a peripheral woman in existing society. For constructing the authentic narrative, Mahasweta Devi travels to remote tribal areas of India, gets an empirical understanding of the harsh living of these indigenous masses. Moreover, she also 'forms' and 'leads' a number of 'grassroots' organizations to fight against domination for justice. Additionally, in roaming around these remote places she is able to connect herself with the roots and that helps her to understand the root level situations and thus comes to the arena of 'subaltern discipline' to discuss.

Mahasweta Devi's writing stands out as a powerful tool that subverts the authority of upper caste in tribal society, particularly marginalized women's subjugation by society. Her writing questions the whole discourse of caste prejudice and women's suppression; by suppression I also mean the objectifying of the female reproductive body for material purposes. She chooses the tribal women who are in many ways are submerged by society and economy. Their positions in society are being exploited for the benefit of others. Not only this, but also their female body is being mutilated in the benefit of others.

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In "Breast-Giver", Devi is telling a story of a subaltern woman Jashoda, who has been appointed as a professional mother of 'Haldar family', in post independent Bengal, after the accident of her husband Kanganicharan. She agrees to do the job in order to support her family. As a Brahmin woman she is portrayed as "goddess" (Spivak, 228) and "a portion of mother" (Spivak, 233) however, in the long runs her position has changed due to her inability to continue the job. She becomes like other maids in the family. She does not belong to the class of 'goddess'. In her story, she 'becomes the infants' suckling mother' (Spivak, 228) to save the 'figure shape' of the daughter-in-laws of Haldar family. It is very ironic for me that, Jashoda is sacrificing her own body, to support her employer in return for nothing only a good amount of food. She demonstrates that how a subaltern woman's reproductive body is employed to create economic value. As Spivak argues, quoted in Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak by Stephen Morton,

Jashoda's sale of her maternal body to the household of a wealthy Brahmin family to support her own family effectively reverses this traditional sexual division of labour between men and women (126).

Moreover, she also points out the economic exploitation of women's work. In her view women's reproductive body is always exploited through many forms. A woman, whether a mother, daughter, wife, is always subjugated physically and mentally. Her womb, a maternal feature, is also used as the materialistic reproduction for economical purposes.

In Spivak's perspective, a woman particularly a marginalized woman and,

The protagonist subaltern Jashoda, [whose] husband [was] crippled by the youngest son of a wealthy household [after the husband tries to rob the household], becomes a wetnurse for them. Her repeated gestation and lactation support her husband and family. By the logic of the production of value, they are both means of production (126).

Ranjit Guha mentions this as the 'exploitation of productive labour' (Guha, 5) in his analysis of subaltern studies and also said that this is the part of a system to subjugate the 'other' or 'subaltern'. He said that these conditions of exploitation come within the domain of elite historiography in which,

... the subaltern classes were subjected in varying degrees of domination [...] [particularly in the sector of] productive labour [in which] workers and peasants [do not have any voice to arise] (Guha, 5).

Similarly, Shanichari's story from "Shanichari" by Mahasweta Devi says the same thing. She becomes a brick lane worker where she is both sexually and economically exploited. She has driven out of

her village purposefully and then forced to work in brick lane. Then, she is used as low paid worker where she has to work all most whole day and at night she becomes a sexual product.

Furthermore, after feeding 50 children (20 own and 30 in the master's house), Jashoda was attacked by breast cancer which has been ignored at the beginning stage. For example, the head of Haldar's family said,

Yah! Cancer indeed! That easy! You misheard, all she needs is an ointment, I can't send a Brahmin's daughter to a hospital just on your word ( 235).

She spends her most of the life for her family and for her master's family, but in return she does not receive anything from them. Even in her dying situation nobody from Haldar family receives the phone call from the hospital. She is ignored and erased as if she does not exist and ever existed. She is manipulated in two or more layers, first as a woman and second as a subaltern. She is Brahmin but poor that determines her as 'other' or 'marginalized' in society.

In another story named "Dhouli" represents woman's suffering as sub-caste and sub-class which lead to an objectification of the female body. Dhouli falls in love with Misrilal, an upper caste Hindu, whereas Dhouli herself is a *dusad*, an untouchable. Her marginalized position does not allow her to express her 'love' rather it becomes a sin to commit. She bears Misrilal's son, but does not get any recognition for it. She manages her family by force prostitution, which in the latter part of the story becomes an unacceptable issue for Misrilal. He neither accepts her as his wife, nor allows her to stay in the village. He makes an issue of it and calls a *salis* in order to confiscate her from the village. It is to notify that in few times before he was in love with her as he also mentions that he is 'the slave' of Dhouli, but in a moment when society strikes them for caste 'miscegenation' he simply discards her and forcefully from the village. Debasish Chattopadhyay explains:

Misrilal gets rid of the responsibility of the newborn child and its mother by marrying another woman belonging to his own caste become and by settling in Ranchi. When Dhouli begins to sell her body in order to earn bread for her son and for herself, Misrilal returns and becomes 'instrumental in forcing her to leave her village' and move to the city to become a prostitute (106).

As she is a *dusad* woman, she is poor and bores a un-fathered child which makes her position more vulnerable. Only for daily needs she is forced to sell her sexual attribution to others. As a matter of fact, her psychological world is susceptible due to the social restriction and so called value of the class and tribal dilemma. Her body becomes a product that is objectified through sexual usage. On the other hand, Misrilal is just a material product/ instrument of his caste who does not bother about the consequences of his own deed. And as a matter of fact, he does not get the blame but more specifically, they charge the other 'other' for the consequences which Misrilal is solely responsible. So, ultimately Dhouli, the *dusad* subcast woman, becomes the ultimate victim for his flaw and finds no other way to counter back.

In Chattopadhyay' words,

the plight of these women who usually have no one to turn to, nothing to look forward to, and have only a few to lend them a voice--- women who are regarded as sub-human and treated as commodities both without and within their own communities (105).

Moreover, Dhoulī as the female protagonist in "Dhoulī" shows the underlying situational result of tribal custom. Dhoulī becomes pregnant because of Misrilal, who belongs to both upper caste and upper class, but does not get any attention while Misrilal leaves her. Later, while she starts prostitution without having any choice of different livelihood, thus it comes to the knowledge of the so called good society; in those times Misrilal becomes the custom/ value saver. He denies his responsibility and motivates others in the society to cast her away from the society. They called a Panchayat to declare their order:

Dhoulī cannot practise prostitution in this village. She can go to some town, to Ranchi, and do her whoring there. If not, her house will be set on fire and mother, daughter; child will be burned to death. Such sinful activities cannot continue in the heart of this village. This village still has Brahmans living in it ( 31).

Panchayat summoned a notice to justify their decision that Dhoulī has no right to live in a village with her prostitution profession and thus she has to leave the village and can do prostitution in any other places.

While leaving the village Dhoulī's mother asked her to stay with Misrilal's brother in law, as they ["so called local level 'rules-framing' body"] mutely proposed her to become a personal product of sexual pleasure to brother in law, in return they will offer the immunity. Dhoulī denies that, but why? Dhoulī's position in the village becomes narrowed for her docility and profession which has occurred because of the situations of the village. And same position is reversible and will be 'agreeable' if she agrees with the panchayat's decision. She can live in the village if she becomes a private gratification product of Misrilal's brother in laws. Moreover, she is not married to Misrilal so Misrilal's brother cannot be her legal brother in law. Rather, it becomes a de-humanizing for her. They are selecting her options of living without her consent and knowledge. However, Dhoulī refuses to choose their option and make her own decision. As Devi narrates,

But now she was about to become a professional randi. When you are a kept woman, you're all alone. But now she would be a part of a community. The collective strength of that society was far more powerful than [an] individual's strength. And those who had forced her to be a whore were the ones who controlled the society. They were the most powerful! (32)

On the other hand, if she stays with Misrilal's brother in law "she would have been a randi in her private life" (32). She will be alone and isolated from the outer world. She will be confined in a restricted place where she will be able to have a life but will not be allowed to have a dignified life. Dhoulī will live as the desire of somebody else's which she clearly rejects. In comparing this situation with Julia Kriesteva's

idea of abjection, I draw a situation where Dhoulis rejects the idea of male support to live her life. She abjects the social customs and restrictions and moved to urban area to find herself.

In other words, Dhoulis finds her banishment as blessing because she finds her liberty to live and have the power of her own body. She now is able to decide about her future and particularly she becomes a part greater community.

## Conclusion

Devi's stories are giving a voice to these voiceless marginalized women. Her stories are explaining the exploitation of female body as well as forming a resistance factor of female body. After analyzing these texts, in my thesis, and reading the criticism, I have come to conclusion that these marginalized women do exercise a power within a restricted structure. This power is subverted and in some case is mutilated like her identity and body. This power has achieved through a long term suffering by suppressing her voice and sacrifice which is by mutilating of female body. However, they possess a voice in many forms but ultimate goal is to be heard which is done by Mahasweta Devi, wonderfully. Therefore, Devi's stories are echoing the repressive power of resistance.

## References

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