Mahasweta Devi’s “Dhouli” and “Shanichari”: A Gender Study in Terms of Sexist, Economic and Cultural Elements

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Abstract: In the post-independence India, where the movement of feminism is still paving its way and the women empowerment projects are adopted by the contemporary authors, Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali writer, is determined to put the focus on the sufferings and exploitation of women, particularly, the tribal women. Through her literary writings, she is dedicatedly giving voice to the otherwise unheard section in the social order of signification-the voices of the tribals of India. She is concerned for tribals who are forced to live at the fringes and further she is tracing the plight of women who are bread-earners, bonded labourers, victims of male sexual violence and ill-treated wives. In the present paper, an attempt is made to study two stories written by Devi “Shanichari and “Dhouli” underlining the complex relationship between women’s oppression and the socio-political, economic and cultural power structures operative in society. She has depicted and represented at length the nexus between the social mechanisms and natural ‘sex’ which are responsible for establishing patriarchal order and gender categorization in a society and which further contribute in the multi-facet exploitation of the tribal women in that society. Rape and prostitution are the recurring motifs in these stories. Along with the theme and cause of oppression, Devi has depicted a sense of outrage in women. There are images of women who have courage and determination to serve as role models. She has portrayed tribal women in a new way as assertive individuals. Although, the expressions of melancholy, disquiet, and anger appear to be responses of individual women characters in the stories, these expressions have roots in the society to which they belong- the specific mode of production, the governing economic structure which regulates the activity of men and women in a decisive way.

Key words: exploitation, gender, nexus, patriarchal, sex and tribal.

Yes, a woman is the poorer class, she suffers because of her class, she suffers because of her body
(Collu, “Speaking” 145-146).

Mahasweta Devi needs no introduction when it comes to regional Indian literature. As an eminent Bengali writer, Devi has tried to give voice to the dissidents: the native tribes of India through her prose. Her works are extensively translated into English celebrating those indigenous/tribal groups that are branded natural criminals,
marginalized, ‘subaltern’ and ‘the other’ by post-independence critics. Devi’s feminism is ingrained in her writings which strive to free women from the stereotyping they are subjected to in the dominant patriarchal social structure.

Mahasweta’s canvas is vast- from the places of the Queens depicted in the *Mahabharata (After Kurukshetra)* to the urban middle class women (“Chinta,” “Breast Giver”) and to the bonded labourers as *rejas*, and *kamiyas* of Plamau (“Douloti,” “Plamau,” “Gohuan”). In her fiction, she often laments the fate of the tribal girls, specially, young Santhal girls (tribals in Bihar) who are forced to peddle themselves due to abject poverty faced being women. The present paper is an endeavor to examine the patterns of the domination of patriarchy combined with sex, religion, caste and class. The selected stories, “Dhouli” and “Shanichari” are the tales of exploitation of the tribal women who are considered ‘the other’ by the mainstream caste and class conscious society. In “Shanichari” and “Dhouli,” Devi deals with the practice of the trade (prostitution) in which women are used and abused by the mainstream patriarchal ideologies. These patriarchal ideologies are reflected in the nexus of contractors, the brick kiln owners and the intermediaries who scout the poverty ridden villages to entrap these poor unsuspecting girls. The areas which are proposed to explore for the study of tribal women’s exploitation include the sexual exploitation of tribal women as bonded labourers, exploitation on the basis of caste, exploitation as domestic labourers and exploitation caused by the repressive state-machinery by using the parameters of radical feminism (sex), marxist feminism (economic dependence and class) and cultural feminism (ideological gender categorisation) based on the social construction.

The most common form of victimization in Devi’s stories is that of women succumbing to male sexual violence. Rape is the recurrent metaphor in these stories. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony asserts: “the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her” (Castle 94). In each of the stories, sex, the biological difference between man and woman, the absence and presence of ‘phallus’ becomes fundamental and foundational element in the oppressive structure which explains how women’s bodies are used and thought of by the men. Toril Moi explains that the root of sexual exploitation lies in the Phallocentrism which denotes, “a system that privileges the phallus as the symbol or source of power” (211). This biological determinism is best
represented in the philosophy of Aristotle who categorizes woman as “body,” man as the “soul,” therefore she is inferior to him as animals are to humans. Freud and Lacan, the French philosophers, too define woman as a castrated state, as lacking or deficient by comparison with the masculine and depict civilization as the “Law of the Father” (Kotwal 79).

In “Dhouli,” the main character Dhouli becomes a victim of patriarchal sex ideology. She knows, “it was because of her tremulous eyes, her slender waist, her blossoming breasts” (Devi, “Dhouli” 7). This is not for the first time that a girl belonging to tribal community received such a treatment. Many more girls have been ruined and raped by the high-caste men. These girls have borne their children. In fact, biological reproduction becomes the root cause of oppression in this case. Firestone argues that the root of female oppression lies in the identification of women with their sexualized bodies because women can bear children. The sexual ability of reproduction makes them more easy victims of rapes, of sexual male oppression (Scholz 21).

Dhouli was too young when she had her gouna (the ceremony to mark a girl’s attaining puberty, when she is sent to live with her husband). She was a victim of child marriage in which she was abused and beaten by her husband and fell as an easy victim of domestic violence. Her body became a site of physical abuse. Her husband soon died of fever and Dhouli became a widow. But her troubles did not end rather triggered to another level of genital mutilation. At her in-laws’s place, her husband’s elder brother began eyeing her. So, she left her in-law’s house and saved herself from sexist oppression. Such violence against women, whether in the form of domestic abuse, ritualized social practices and genital mutilation, is the physical manifestation of sexist oppression on women’s bodies. Dhouli’s escapism did not work for long. When she came back to her native village, another tale of sexual violence awaited. She started working as a domestic servant at the Misras’ place. There, Misrilal fell in love with her. Although Misrilal did not rape her, but eligibility of the woman to be raped is because it is believed that a woman’s honour lies in her inviolated body (Sen, Nivedita 244). In this case, Dhouli was already married which incorporated the idea that she was not a virgin. More so, when her husband was dead, she was impregnated by Misrilal after being seduced. Misrilal eventually left her under his family’s pressure. This behavior of Dhouli, where she continued struggling, retaliating and seeking love from Misrilal, provoked the men of the village to further molest Dhouli, to convert her into a mere body to seek sexual pleasure.
Her resilience acting as an independent woman in a male-dominating community further aggregates the process of exploitation.

One night, while sleeping, Dhouli could hear someone pelting stones at her door. She verbally retaliated. But the other day she was caught by a head coolie who made obscene gestures in front of her. He had all the intentions to molest her. Then, Dhouli realized “this was her fate” (Devi, “Dhouli” 27). Dhouli is forced to prostitution by the male community because of her body’s availability that no longer belongs either to her husband or to Misrilal. She is forced to welcome every male’s sexual urge because of her attractive ‘body.’

In “Shanichari,” the story of Shanichari takes the level of sexist oppression to another level. The need to cover the body with clothes becomes the cause of getting stripped off every day. The idea of being raped and being without clothes bound her into forced-prostitution at Rahmat’s brick-kiln. In the story, Shanichari is a dusad girl who is about to marry Chand Tirkey, a tribal man. But the shots of Bihar Military Police while suppressing the Adi Jati Raksha Morcha of tribals in Rata village kill Chand Tirkey. Here, the reference to the real incident by Mahasweta Devi confirms the role of the unidentified contribution of the state machinery in the sexual exploitation which Shanichari would face. Shanichari too, during the shooting by police, becomes the victim of Military force. Although not killed by a shot, she is raped by the protectors of law:

The reign of terror that was unleashed in Rata after Raksha Morcha meeting continued unabated, forcing the young women to flee to the forest. They didn’t have any clothes. The BMP had burnt down their huts along with the saris . . . the BMP took the young girls into the forest and raped them. (Devi, “Shanichari” 46)

Without clothes, the girls accompanied by Shanichari, are forced to hide in the forest where Gohuman Bibi lures them to go to Kolkata to work in the brick kilns. Gohuman Bibi seems to appear like an angel to rescue, but the notion is nullified when she puts all the victimized girls into another hell of sexual abuse. Bibi promises these girls to give them clothes. Obviously, “Don’t some of you buy saris worth thousands of rupees every Puja” (46)? At the brick-kiln, ‘body’ of the tribal girls becomes the site of oppression and this oppression continues due to economic needs, to satisfy the pangs of hunger, and to meet the body’s requirement of clothes. The rape scene is
again natural, quite familiar as if it is a daily routine matter. The narrator sarcastically describes the familiarity of such sexist oppression:

Imagine the scene. Familiar to you, no doubt, from innumerable story books—the lush green forest and a group of Ho-Oraon- munda girls who look as if they have been exquisitely carved out of black stone. Only, the bestial howls of BMP would have been left out such a picture-book scene. (46)

Such “familiar” description shakes the feminist sensitivity. Later in the story, Shanichari is turned into a reja, a bonded labourer in Rahmat Khan’s kiln. Many rejas are introduced in the brick kiln of Rahmat Khan. Josmina, Lughri, Jhini, Parai and Phulmani—each one has been raped by mastaan and munshi within the high walls of kiln. There is a different world of oppression within the kiln which is quite beyond the outer world. Everyday, after laborious labor in brick making, the rejas are tired to keep their eyes open. But their labour did not end, neither physically nor mentally. They are called by the mastaans, munshi and drivers in the claustrophobic walls. Then follows the tragic tale of mutilation: “They force liquor down your throat till you pass out. Pull off your clothes. What happens next, only your body knows” (51). Beauvoir says:

Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him . . . She is called “the sex,” by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (xvi)

To believe in the biological difference between man and woman as the cause of woman’s oppression, does not mean to support Darwin’s theory of evolution that women are less evolved than men.

Now, this whole analysis of body and sex in terms of radical feminism has neglected the lives of women who are ‘invisible’ or ‘marginal.’ Women are subaltern to men and tribal women are doubly subaltern who manifest gendered politics based on caste (religion) and class (economy) to establish patriarchal order. In
In these stories, there is a very subtle form of constructed subordination which has roots in gender ideologies based on stereotypes, religious myths, economical dependence, and so on cultural factors. Similarly, in some cultures women perform domestic work only, and are associated with the home and family. In other culture, however, women perform paid work and are religious leaders, healers, and warriors in the public sphere (Wells 411). Such variety of cultures can be seen in Mahasweta Devi’s select fiction where on one side there is dominant non-tribal mainstream culture where women, especially tribal women, become the victims of sexual oppression and on other side, tribal sub-culture where they are given respect although by their own community only and also they do domestic chores as well as work outside their homes. Kamal Misra and Lowry in their combined study in *Recent Studies on Indian Women* assert that a critical perspective on examining gender relations in tribal areas in the Indian context is missing (63). This is primarily because gender relation is considered a non-issue since tribal women supposedly has a higher status compared to their non-tribal counterparts. But, it is important to mention that all freedom of the tribal women is exercised only within tribal culture which is losing its existence in dominating patriarchal non-tribal culture and the same has been represented in the selected stories. The dominant culture has dictated and established a stereotypical image for woman to reconfirm her submission to the patriarchal ideology. Ideology, in any of the Marxist senses, is “a system of meanings and values” which is “the expression or projection of a particular class interest,” (Williams 108) particularly a class which controls the primary means of production. The classical indicators of measuring status of women are influenced by the Hindu customs and ideology. The same indicators define the status of tribal women as tribal world is dominated by the mainstream Hindu culture. Hinduism has elements of patriarchy which describe women’s role as primarily or solely pertaining to the family. Often, they also include fairly explicit statements about the inferiority of women. Such description of women inculcates power in men over women and shame in women to accept men’s dominance. To the psyche of the Indian men and even women, there exist certain clear role models of an ideal woman derived from the folk models and myths and religious literature. As Gregory Castle says, there is “the construction of femininity and masculinity in ancient literature, philosophy, mythology, religion, or art” (191). Deepsheekha Kotwal explains that these “myths, legends and
history are in fact politically motivated narratives controlled by dominant discourse to perpetuate its ideology. The subjugated are either silenced or made complicit (97). For instance, no girl in India is ever named as Kaikeyi, because in Ramayana, her husband king Dasarath had cursed her saying that no father is going to name his daughter after her. However, one comes across numerous Sita and Savitri and Sulochanas in Indian homes (Misra 41).

Stereotypes, class and caste system contribute to the oppression of Shanichari and Dhouli. In “Dhouli,” Dhouli’s non-confirmation to the stereotypical image of a woman belonging to her father or husband becomes the cause of her exploitation. When a woman does not belong to a man, she belongs to all men. This is the ideology maintained to strengthen patriarchy which finds its origin in religion as discussed above. Dhouli is a low caste, a tribal, the dominant Hindu culture enforces the patriarchal ideologies to exploit Dhouli and other tribal girls in every possible way. Dhouli is a widow and works for the upper caste Misras.

After becoming a widow, a randi, you were not supposed to look into the mirror. Not supposed to wear shellac bangles, a dot of sindoor on your forehead, anklets of cheap metal... She couldn’t marry again... (Devi, “Dhouli” 7)

What matters only is “dot of sindoor” which she does not possess. But Dhouli overcomes this image by making love to Misrilal claiming her free will to choose a life partner. She also gives birth to a child without getting married. If Misrilal would have taken her by force, she could get mercy of the Misras and a get a piece of land to till to bring up her child. But Dhouli is punished “for not considering a brahman’s owner” (13). A tribal girl can be raped by the high caste man, but she is not allowed to love a high caste man. This is against the mainstream patriarchal ideology. Mostly the upper caste males, under false promises or greed, tempt the tribal girls to involve sexually with them either willingly or willy-nilly and then leave them for they regard it as their right (Misra 48). Misrilal’s elder brother Kundan Misra exemplifies this. He has his children born in the houses of tribal girls because he thinks it is the right way to keep them in control. To upper caste men, the tribal girls are meant to this only. Sometimes the upper caste males actually fall in love with tribal girls but do not marry them because of their respect in the so called upper society. To them, marrying a low caste would bring stigma to their reputed upper caste families. Such is the case with Dhouli. But the irony of the situation is that on one side they regard
tribal girls low born creatures whom they should not touch or marry; and on the other side, they seek physical pleasure out of them. Consequently, deserted women have to surrender in the male chauvinist society and have to earn their living on prostitution.

In Hindu scriptures woman is always shown having her identity in relationship to man alone and Indian women have been expected to follow the role models of Sita, Savitri and Draupadi who always suffered and sacrificed for the comforts of their husbands as if they have no individualities of their own. They are supposed to exhibit only commendable forbearance. Tejinder Kaur in her study notices how Manusmriti also known as Manav Dharamsastra spoke of the dependence of women at every stage of her life on her father, husband, and son (Kaur 71). In the story, Dhouli belongs to none of the males. So, she is supposed to suffer the stigma of prostitution. Similarly, in “Shanichari,” constructed ideology does not allow her to think of herself worth-living. Shanichari is about to marry Chand Tirkey out of free will. But he is killed by the shots of BMP during Morcha. Then, being raped by BMP, Shanichari is not allowed to lead a normal life. She belongs to none of the men. In the beginning of the story, Shanichari along with her grandmother enjoys the train ride to Tohri and listens to the folk-tales narrated fragmentarily by her grandmother:

Don’t you know the one about the carpenter who carved a girl out of wood and became her father? The weaver who gave her clothes and became her brother? The goldsmiths who gifted her jewelry and became her uncle? Didn’t the sindoor wala bring her to life by giving her sindoor? (Devi, “Shanichari” 35)

In Shanichari’s life, Chand Tarikey is “Sindo wala” that could bring her to life. The absence of “sindo wala,” implies her total destruction. One can understand these ideologies of stereotyping, Hinduism and caste as part of the ideological state apparatus (ISA) as defined by Althusser. He suggests that ISA functions by passing along, and passing off as natural and unchallengeable, the fundamental belief system of a society. The ideologies mark and assign proper roles to the individuals or groups or communities and these ideologies have roots as well as circulation in religion, educational institutes, legal system, political parties, media, arts and literature. Althusser remarks, “All ideological State apparatuses . . . contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation” (22-31)
Another glaring factor is that the mainstream patriarchal structure has succeeded in establishing its hold on women particularly because of the economic dependence of women on men at the first place. Marx says:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. (173)

It seems to legitimate the priority of the economic over any other mode, to suggest that all forms of experience will be determined by the prevailing economic mode of production. This determination is visible in the representation of the economic dependence of Dhouli and Shanichari. Class is an economic status which also determines social status or social mark. Misra avers in his study that a tribal woman is more empowered and independent both socially and economically. Adivasi women are self-reliant. They have capacity to work harder than their male folk and are as independent as the males. The most visible aspect is their contribution to the subsistence economy. The principal economic activities in the village are centered around agriculture, both on the hill plots and plain land. Every “individual cultivates around 37 decimal of plots” (Misra 63-65). All the female members contribute and help their male counterparts in agricultural activities. On the contrary, in the mainstream society, the girls are also supposed to be dependent for food, clothes on the male member of the family whether it is father, brother, or husband. To understand this, one has to begin with the possible connection of feminism and Marxism. Michele Barrett’s Women’s Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis attempts “to formulate a materialist aesthetics and insists on integrating Marxist class analysis with feminism in analyzing and influencing gender representation” (Habib 670). Friedrich Engels in “The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State” uses Marx’s critique of capitalism and the method of historical materialism to trace the emergence of the oppression of women. He asserts:

“The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children” (Scholz 17).
Dhouli is economically independent, a working woman. She is right hand of her parents. Like any tribal girl, she takes the mahajan’s grain to the market, earns money. When she returns to her native village, she starts working as a bonded labourer for Misras. Her father has taken loan from Misras for Dhouli’s gouna and then he died. So, Dhouli and her mother start working at Misra’s place. They graze cattle, sweep their orchard. Her boldness, her economic independence can be seen as a criminal bent of mind and a threat to the patriarchal set up. So, she is punished and humiliated for her offence. Her practice of prostitution hurts his male-ego. She is not under his control. She is supposed to be dependent on the mercy of the Misras or die either. So, Misrilal threatens Dhouli, “I will show you that I am both a man and a Brahman’s son too!” (Devi, “Dhouli” 31). Dhouli is given two options. Either she will be burnt alive, or she has to adopt the path of prostitution at some other region. Hanumanji announced, “Dhouli cannot practice 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” (31).

In “Shanichari” too, Mahasweta Devi has provided us the information how tribal women fall prey to the false promises made by the middle men or middle women who assure them a prosperous future in economic terms but indeed destroy their very existence. The story says, “The pangs of empty stomach are hard to resist. If they worked in the brick kilns of Kolkatta they would get enough to eat, wear dazzling clothes and see the sights of the city” (40). Tribal women are equally hardworking having same strength as their men possess. Even, the are more efficient in baking and carrying bricks in kilns. Due to this reason, the tribal women from tribal regions are often considered a better choice of labours. Such regions include Santhal and Chhotanagpur of Jharkhand from where these women are transported as luggage to be used in different corners of India as labourers and sex workers at a meagre wage. The states of Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, and Haryana are known for such exploitation of daily wagers and the same has been depicted by Devi in “The Fairy Tale of Rajabasha.”

In other words, one type of oppression, in this case material oppression, carries the weight of another sexual oppression. Such exploitation gives rise to the trade of human trafficking. Women and girls are recruited on the promise of a large payoff, sold into servitude by parents or guardians, or stolen from their homes.
Thus, there is a clear-cut distinction between a natural sex (restricted to bodies) and a cultural “gender” (defined by social factors) and in both the processes, women become a site of suppression, oppression and exploitation. The present study of stories explains that the differences between the sexes are produced and constructed by social mechanisms in the form of gender categorization only to reinforce, reconfirm and re-establish the patriarchal order in the society.

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