

THE LOST CONNECTIONS IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S DHOWLI

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Abstract

Woman may have a right to have something for herself but she often faces the delicate tension between 'being happy' and 'keeping happy'; the contrasts between the 'well being of herself' and 'well being of someone else' are keenly noticeable in the lives of extremely poor people. There is a wide separation between the desire of individual well being and the hammering reminder of social responsibilities. The organic connectedness of interests in the family is more likely a subject and part of an upper middle class mode of consciousness, alien to those who are really struggling to survive. In Mahasweta Devi's short stories Dhowli and Behind the Bodice, the individual desire is negated in order to keep happy and well being of others. There is a glaring loss of connectedness and a debased system of values in these stories. The idea of 'being happy' is cherished by the higher class members of the society, where as the poor class has no escape from the urgency of obeying the dictates of 'keeping the family happy'. The real trauma is faced by the middle class which oscillates between the two ways of life. Hence as a natural outcome, these social and economic classes cherish and invent different sets of moral codes of conduct and controls, legitimizing their preferred way of living.

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The idea of 'being happy' is cherished by the higher class members of the society, where as the poor class has no escape from the urgency of obeying the dictates of 'keeping the family happy'. The real trauma is faced by the middle class which oscillates between the two ways of life. Hence as a natural outcome, these social and economic classes cherish and invent different sets of moral codes of conduct and controls, legitimizing their preferred way of living. The crisis occurs when there is an attempt to read and evaluate the delicate relationship of a particular class, with the fixed set of morals of a different class. Exactly like the upper class, the middle class also often misinterprets the social and family requirements of the poor class. Their 'false consciousness' gives a sense of emotional and social superiority, necessary for their social sustenance. According to the high class mentality, to have a joyous 'after-life', one must lead a life of suffering now.

In his short story *A Female Problem at a Low Level*, Manik Bandopadhyaya, a Bengali writer, writes about the poor slum dwelling factory mechanic Noton's daughter Durga,:

For a young girl living in a slum, the path is very narrow between virtue and sin, between surviving and being destroyed.... It is not like female beauty in the babu families....slum life has no privacy at all. Parents can stay awake at night guarding their daughter... the girl, used only to

neglect and deprivation all her life, suddenly senses the presence of powerful desire eagerly waiting for her outside. (Bardhan. *Of Women, Outcastes-153*)

Once the worried and protecting Noton loses his employment after an accident in the factory, he becomes a liability to the family of Durga. Her mother's earnings from cleaning and washing in babu households become the only source of income. Her advanced stage of pregnancy gives her exhaustion and numbness, disallowing her to work in more than two or three houses. She takes Durga along with her to households. They have troubles in buying each day rice, with the borrowed money from their households. Manik Bandopadhyaya writes about the grim realities of Durga's necessity of keeping others happy, "A slum girl and daughter of a laborer cannot mentally depend on her father or brother, like the daughters of babu families... she is used to fending for herself, relying on her own wits." (Bardhan. *Of Women, Outcastes-155*). When one day, Durga finds her fiancée Binod also beaten up and jobless, she re-examines her options and alternatives. Finally she comes to a conclusion and deliberately walks towards the shack of Shukhlal, the contractor, who stared at her and flashed ten rupee notes. The story concludes, "What else can one do... except fight for survival. The survival of oneself, one's loved ones, and the hopes that really matter." (Bardhan. *Of Women, Outcastes-157*)

The predicaments and the course of life in a poor family are often shaped by factors beyond the control. The social dependency on the family has a different matrix in poor families; it is often the search for the attention deficit, later fulfilled by sacrifices to keep others happy. Even in the poem *Hunger* by Jayanta Mahapatra, the fisherman, the father who pimps his daughter, is careless in his offer of the girl: "as though his words sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself". The issues of culture and sets of moral values seldom are the concerns for a hungry and starving family. For the father, the daughter is the only commodity he can depend on to survive. The economics of body forms a different cultural aspect, for the daughter and the pimping father. For the visiting customer this act might be a pleasure-some act of sexual gratification, but for the daughter, prostitution was like working with body to earn food, in the conditions of dismal poverty.

Exactly like the varying values of property, the value of a woman varies in different social contexts. Martha C. Nussbaum writes in her essay *Women and Human Development*, "Indian women frequently judge sacrifice for the family to be a good thing and frequently subordinate their 'own well being' to the 'well being of others'... Indian women cannot

distinguish their own hunger from the hunger of a child, or a husband.” (Susan S. Faistein & Lisa J. Servon, ed. *Gender and Planning: A Reader*.) As a matter of fact, sexual ‘commodification’ is a resultant of the inevitable necessity of keeping others happy.

Mahashweta Devi’s story *Dhowli* is about the caste discrimination and the exploitation of the poor women. Dhowli is put into a prearranged marriage at a very early age where there was no love between husband and wife. She accepted eating the daily left over food and being beaten by her drunkard husband. She returned back to her mother after her husband died and the elder brother of her dead husband tried to molest her.

She wanted to have a better life than other untouchable ‘Dusadh’ women of the village. The elder boy of the landlord Mishras, Kundan, has ‘kept’ several dusadh women in the village, but Dhowli does not want to be like them. She covers her body well with a saree and stays with her mother, while they work in the house of Mishras. But the youngest son of Mishras, Misrilal falls in love with her, and wants to marry her, caring little for her caste. Amid fears and apprehensions of the powerful landlord family, Dhowli surrenders to his love, and very soon she becomes pregnant. The landlord does not approve their relationship, and Misrilal is sent away to another town to run a business, and later he is married. Dhowli gets no financial support even after Misrilal’s assurances, and after some time Dhowli gives birth to a boy. Dhowli and her old mother try different odd jobs to stay alive and feed the baby. She is still hopeful that they might get some kind of assistance because she has the child of the Mishra family with her. The powerful Mishra family made living difficult for Dhowli and her old mother. The men in the village are watching Dhowli with interest, and one night, a clod of earth strikes her door, Dhowli shouts, “Whoever you are, you should know that I keep a knife beside me.” (Bardhan. *Of Women, Outcastes, Dhowli*-200) Such knocks continue at her door every night. Dhowli keeps silent.

Dhowli has to reexamine her options and she finally decides to commit suicide, leaving the boy in the care of the mother. But before she could commit suicide, a coolie supervisor grabs her and Dhowli changes her mind and invites him to her cottage in the night, on the condition that he will bring money and corn. She prepares herself for the ‘customer’ putting on one of the sarees gifted by Misrilal. “When he (the customer) asks her not to let anybody else come in, she says that whoever will pay can come, her only rule is that she will not sell on credit.” (Bardhan. *Of Women, Outcastes, Dhowli*-202).

Mahasweta Devi's Dhowli accepts to become a prostitute to keep others happy. She succeeds in taking on a revenge on the Brahmin Landlords and Misrilal, by surviving in the same village by selling her body. The body which was loved/used by a Brahmin boy and delivered a boy to him, has been used as a powerful weapon of revenge to destroy the ego of the landlords. She refuses to die and takes this course of life in a calculated way. When Misrilal objects to her becoming a prostitute and inquires why she did not kill herself, Dhowli blasts, "At first I wanted to do that. Then I thought, why should I die? You'll marry, run your shop, go to the cinema with your wife, and I'll be the one to die? Why? (Bardhan. *Of Women, Outcastes, Dhowli-240*)

Dhowli has won a moral victory by entering into this so called immoral business of prostitution. It is very painful to see that later, with the help of Kundan and Hanumanji Mishra, Misrilal, calls a panchayat to punish Dhowli. She is made a pariah and sent to Ranchi to get herself registered as a prostitute there. Dhowli's mother sobs aloud that it would have been less terrible if she had stayed with her husband's brother. Dhowli ponders thoughtfully with a wry smile, "In that case, she would have been a whore individually, only in her private life. Now she is going to be a whore by occupation. She is going to be ...a member of a part of a society. (Bardhan. *Of Women, Outcastes, Dhowli-205*) The powerful class of the society could not succeed in preventing her from becoming a part of the society, ultimately.

Even in her story "Behind the Bodice", Mahasweta Devi describes the tragedy of the life of a poor migrant laborer Gangor, who unfolds her breasts while she is nursing her child, to a photographer, for money. It is true that the exposure of her breasts makes her the object of disgust in her own community as well as a sexual object in the eyes of the police, but she is again making a decision to use her body as a commodity, to survive and keep others happy. She also adopts to become a prostitute to earn an occupation. The pictures of Gangor's bare breasts entice the police. They stalk her and she is said to be teasing them by constantly evading their path. They kidnap and gang-rape her. Instead of backing down, Gangor chooses to file a police complaint against the offenders. Later she is also deported to a flesh market.

Devi's literary work exposes the legacy of violence that has been passed on into the lives of generations of women. Her stories are a study in brutality and degradation wrought on women for centuries. It is the physical, emotional, psychological rape that forces woman to strip the cloak of chastity, obedience and meekness off her, transforming this act of disrobing into a symbol of female power.

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