

GENDER AND SUBALTERNITY IN SELECT SHORT STORIES OF MAHASWETA DEVI

Sarika Misra

Assistant Professor,
Department of English
Dyanprassarak Mandal's College and Research Centre

Abstract

Literature is the representation of the finer sensibility of human beings and is a powerful instrument to give voice to the silent suffering of humanity against the prejudices and unhealthy practices of social system. Subaltern studies in the post-colonial era have raised the issues of the subalterns and the marginalized, who are oppressed by the established society. Subalternity can be of different types based on race, caste, class, culture and gender etc. Gender subalternity explores the issues of women subjugation and suppression in the marginalized section of the society. Subaltern women have always been doubly oppressed; first being a subaltern and secondly being a woman. Women have always borne the brunt of discrimination and subjugation being labeled as the weaker or 'Other' sex. They are merely the marginalized 'other' who are oppressed and victimized in the patriarchal society. Mahasweta Devi's short stories portray how women are seen as objects and subjugated to sexual molestation like rape. Rape is commonly viewed as a way of punishing a female in a patriarchal society. Mahasweta Devi stresses on the materiality of what women are for men: literally a target on which they can exercise their power. It is the objectiveness of a woman which reduces her to the position of the 'other' in a male dominated society. This paper aims at analyzing the treatment of subaltern women in the short story of Mahasweta Devi; particularly how sexual punishment like rape is used as means of victimization for the low caste women.

Key Words: Gender, Subalternity, the other sex, sexual oppression, exploitation.

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Literature is the representation of the finer sensibility of human beings and is a powerful instrument to give voice to the silent suffering of humanity against the prejudices and unhealthy practices of social system. In the post-colonial scenario literature has become instrumental in registering the voice of the voiceless against the domination of the rulers who were the masters of the destiny of the poor and the downtrodden. Subaltern studies in the post-colonial era have raised the issues of the subalterns and the marginalized, who are oppressed by the different sections of the society. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defines subalterns as people 'removed from all lines of social mobility'- the 'illiterate peasantry' who have no access to education or other resources that would allow them to better their position in society. In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' she draws attention to the doubly silenced position of subaltern women who have to face the double standards of subjugation and exploitation; first being a marginalized and secondly being labeled as the 'Other' in the male dominated patriarchal society. The social and political thinkers made efforts to identify the sections of society that were doomed to survive in isolation and darkness. The perception and description of experiences as 'marginal' is a consequence of the binary structure of various kinds of power mechanism prevailed in the society. The binary of power structure is revealed in the terms of patriarchy, imperialism, capitalism and caste based social structure. The marginalized were forced to bear the burden of the hegemony of ruling class.

Mahasweta Devi, one of India's foremost writers, a prolific author of Bengali short fiction and novels and a deeply political social activist, has relentlessly worked highlighting the problems of rural poor and the tribal people. Her portrayal of women and their haunting tales of exploitation and struggle have always been the rich site for feminist discourse. Most of her works portray women as victims of the politics of gender, class and caste played at various levels of social relationships. The present paper attempts to emphasize the role of society- both mainstream and marginal, as culprits in exploiting the very existence of tribal women and present an insight on the position of subaltern women through the study of her collection of short stories *Outcast: Four Stories*.

Mahasweta Devi's *Outcast: Four Stories* is a treatise on the pathetic plight of four marginalized women characters – Dhoulī, Sanichari, Josmina and Chinta- who are doubly challenged for being women and also marginalized by the society. In her stories she excavates and exhibits the gendered causes lying underneath the socio-political and economic exploitation of the four women belonging to backward minority. She reveals the true picture of bonded labour among the north eastern tribal groups and to the predicament to which these women are subjected to, where they are regarded only as sub humans and treated as commodities both within and out of communities.

The first story of *Outcast: Four Stories* presents the sad plight of Dhoulī, a *Dushad* (supposedly an untouchable, low caste) young widow who is seduced and impregnated by Misrilal, the son of a wealthy, upper caste Brahman, Hanumanji Misra. Though initially Dhoulī resists the love advances made by Misrilal, but soon she succumbs to his so called 'true love'. Being pressurized by the family, Misrilal gets rid of the responsibility of the new born child and its mother by marrying another woman belonging to his own caste and settles down in a town in Ranchi. Carrying the thorn of pregnancy in her womb, Dhoulī keeps holding on to the promises made by Misrilal, but she does not realize that she is not the first girl to whom Misras have made promises. The author here presents the sheer helplessness of a tribal girl who is destined to this cruel fate. This is evident in what Dhoulī's mother explains to her, 'they always make such promises. You are not the first *dushad* girl Misras have ruined. *Dusad, Ganju, Dhobi*- who have they spared?' (Outcast 3)

Though the village has several illegitimate Misra children growing up in the *dushad - ganju - dhobi* quarters, for Dhoulī it becomes an unforgivable offence because it is the outcome of her love for a *deota*, an upper caste. The village community holds Dhoulī solely responsible because she has fallen in love. If Misrilal has used force, they would have provided for her and would not have spurned her. Unable to resist the circumstances, Dhoulī begins to sell her body in order to earn bread for her son and herself. But in the panchayat meeting Dhoulī is given the verdict to either desert the village or practice prostitution elsewhere and is threatened of being burnt alive.

'Hanumanji announced, Dhoulī cannot practice prostitution in this village. She has to 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. Puja is still done in their homes every day.' (Outcast; 32)

The irony lies in the fact that the fate of these subaltern women is jeopardized by the members of the same subaltern community under the label of 'otherness', conferred by the

powerful dominant social structures who have always exploited the marginalized and suppressed their voices. *Debasish Chattopadhyay* in ***Frames of Marginalization in Mahashweta Devi's Outcast: Four Stories*** discusses the hegemony of class and caste structures:

It is significant and pertinent to note that even the tribal untouchables, the dushads and ganju's, do not make any protest against this verdict. The narrative thus overtly points to direct repression, which is the product of a societal power structure interlinked with the hegemony of a dominant class. An exposure of the outcome of the exploitation of power-the acceptance of the verdict of Hanumanji even by the marginalized-is shown to be the consequence of the created culture of the privileged, which results in the desertion by the marginalized of even one belonging to their own community.

It is significant and pertinent to note that Dhoulis is punished and forced into prostitution for an act for which she is not responsible.

In her second story 'Shanichari', Mahasweta Devi portrays the predicament of a young tribal girl in the societal hierarchy. Shanichari, a teenage tribal girl from Oraon village community voluntarily gives herself up to the fangs of Gohuman Bibi, the king pin, despite being aware of the sex racket run by the latter by luring the tribal girls with dreams of a promised world. The girls of Oraon and other such villages are forced into taking such decisions due to natural calamities and due to the atrocities of the military and police force. Young girls from the village are taken into the forest and are raped brutally by the BMP (Bihar Military Police). The girls are forced to survive in the forest as they have no clothes to wear. It is at this time that Gohuman Bibi would appear like a veritable goddess with a promise of nice clothes, food and pots of money and lure the victimized girls into prostitution.

The tragic fate of the tribal girls like Shanichari is explicitly presented by Mahasweta Devi in this short story. The Indian paramilitary forces victimize the tribal people by burning their huts, looting their possessions and killing them, and by gang raping their women.

'The BMP [Bihar Military Police] took the young girls into the forest and raped them. Imagine the scene. Familiar to you, no doubt, from innumerable story books, the lush green forest and a group of Ho-Oraon-Mundra [three Indian tribes] girls who look as if they have been exquisitely carved out of black stone. Only the bestial howls of the BMP would have been left out of such a picture-book scene.' (Outcast; 48)

'In a tone of cutting irony, Mahasweta Devi discriminates between the civilized mainstream reader, reading a short story about the condition of the exploited tribal sitting in his or her comfortable hearth and home, and the condition of the "Ho-Oraon-Mundra girls". (*Debasish Chattopadhyay*)

Sanichari and the young girls are taken to the city and are sold in a brick kiln at Barasat in West Bengal. The girls are sold as workers in bricks kilns to work as rejas, (labour at brick kiln). They are further subjected to sexual exploitation by the owner and the other men. Their voices do not reverberate in the brick kiln and they are muted by the vulnerability of their situation.

'At the end of the day, when you're too tired to keep your eyes open, the head *mastaan* will call out your name in the daily auction. Today you go to him, tomorrow the driver, the day after the *munshi*.' [Outcast;52] 'Festival days were much worse. The girls were forced to drink liquor till they pass out and were repeatedly gang raped.'

Sanichari is dressed in with clothes by the owner of the brick kiln, but only to be stripped and raped repeatedly. 'Rahamat would dress Shanichari in good clothes and nice jewelry, rub fragrant oil in her hair-and then tear into her ruthlessly.' [53] She becomes the mistress of the owner, Rahamat, and remains 'privileged' till the time she gets pregnant and is replaced by another tribal girl.

Underpaid, half-fed and treated as a beast, when Sanichari ultimately returns home with a 'dhiku's' child in her womb, she is not accepted in the village. In spite of repentance feast and rites, which are supposed to be performed as a mark of seeking forgiveness from their own community, both she and her son are treated like outcasts by their own community. She realizes that it is not individuals but society that is to blame for the situation that she and many others like her find themselves in. Till the time society dares to change tragedies like Sanichari's, they will continue to happen. Mahasweta Devi here points her finger at the society, both mainstream and marginalized, for the unrelenting pathetic situation of the tribal village girls and the tragic fate imposed on them by the societal norms. A tribal woman is doubly marginalized.

"**The Fairy Tale of Rajabhasha**" the third story in the collection of the short stories *Outcast* provides a graphic portrayal of the sexual exploitation of Josmina, a Ho-tribal girl. In pursuit of a livelihood, Josmina and Sarjom, a tribal couple from Rajabhasha, a nearby village of Ranchi, is sold in a far-away Indian state of Punjab, where Josmina faces the same treatment as Sanichari. While buying the couple Niranjan Singh, a Punjabi agriculturalist carefully examines the two with keen and lustful eyes. He pinches Sarjom's arms and

shoulder muscles to test his bodily strength, and glances at Josmina's body and breasts greedily when she feeds her infant son. Niranjan mused,

'Feed her for a week and these goods will be just right. Milk, *rotis*, vegetables.' (67)

Mahasweta Devi shows here that the very core of the mainstream-marginal issue lies in the typical power dynamics of a feudal master-slave relationship in which the former treats the latter sometimes as a commodity and at other times as an instrument of labour, a beast of burden. In the story she strongly suggests that the subaltern women are nothing but '*maal*', '*goods*', '*commodities*', to those at the top of the social hierarchy. To Niranjan, Josmina is just a piece of fresh meat, dark jungle (savage) flesh for which he has paid. He strips and rapes Josmina in front of her child, and puts them under lock and key at night as if he has bought everything that belonged to Josmina. Under the bonded labour system, the masters treated their slaves as they pleased, subjected them to "16 to 18 "hours labour, and kept them under lock and key like buffaloes and cows. Josmina is repeatedly raped by the many masters to whom the couple is sold.

After spending months of torture, the couple eventually manages to escape from the relentless physical and economic exploitation at the hands of their reputed masters, the so called *Punjab ka kisan*, *adarsh kisan*. They return to their tribal village to begin life afresh, but this bright vision of hope turns out to be a hallucination as Josmina realizes that she is carrying the seed of the of the Punjabi man in her womb who has raped her innumerable times. Knowing that her own tribal community would never condone that, and both she and her husband would be socially ostracized, Josmina ends her life by drowning herself in the river. In the story, Mahasweta Devi, through her narrative, brings forth the helplessness of a marginalized woman who finally succumbs to the fate, imposed on her by the brutal and dominant societal norms of the ruling class.

Mahasweta Devi's fourth story Chinta, in the collection of stories, is about a tribal widow who migrates to Calcutta lured by the promises of marriage by Utsab, a young man. She leaves behind her infant son and village only to be ruined by Utsab, who after making her mother of two daughters, absconds. Utsab brings Chinta to Calcutta on the pretext of marrying her, but only ruins her sexually and economically. He leaves Chinta and runs away, imposing on her the burden of two daughters born of him. Left alone in the big city, and unable to make both ends meet, Chinta sells her two girls only to arrange money to return to her native village and perform repentance rites, so that she can be accepted by her community. In the story the author highlights the plight of a subaltern woman who is forced to sell both her daughters for rupees 10 and 8 each into the flesh trade. What is noticeable here are the merciless circumstances and the rude social customs to which a tribal marginalized woman ultimately submits her fate.

From time immemorial, women's identity has been suppressed in different ways by the forces of patriarchal society. **Outcast – Four Stories** by Mahasweta Devi, exposes the exploitation of subaltern women physically, sexually, socially and economically threadbare, by the mainstream and marginalized society. Though the four stories are of four different characters, what brackets them together is their subalternity and 'Otherness' that sticks to their existence. It is interesting to note that all protagonists are represented as the 'other' in the discourse of being tribal, woman and peasant- a subject of non-hegemonic group. It is significant to realize here that it is not the individuals but society that is to be blamed for the situation that these female protagonists find themselves in. All the four short stories in the **Outcast** are examples of an eclipsed system of wrenching women within patriarchy, caste, impoverishment and local politics.

Mahashweta Devi hints at the continuity of the cycle of the dehumanizing exploitation that is likely to continue in the name of progress and development, with the tribal people, especially with the tribal women, at the receiving end. Caught in the cross currents of the hegemonic male discourses of patriarchy, both within their own community and others, the tribal woman is thus repeatedly pushed into a position of powerlessness and becomes the object of violent sexual harassment, in addition to the already existing exploitation faced in the name of class and tribe. The tribal woman is made an outcast when she gets pregnant with an upper class man's child. The paradox lies in the fact that she is doubly punished by her tribal community for a sin which is enforced on her by the lustful attacks of the 'upperclass' men. In this way, Mahasweta Devi basically represents the voice of the grass-root levels subalterns particularly women, and through it presents the psychological trauma of the sufferers. She represents the voices of the marginalized, not as a distant observer, but as an insider. Her approach in the process of the reconstruction of the voices of the marginalized women is humanitarian and dynamic. Her method of articulating the voices of subalterns is a serious effort to mark a new horizon in creating an awakened consciousness toward the upliftment of the subalterns.

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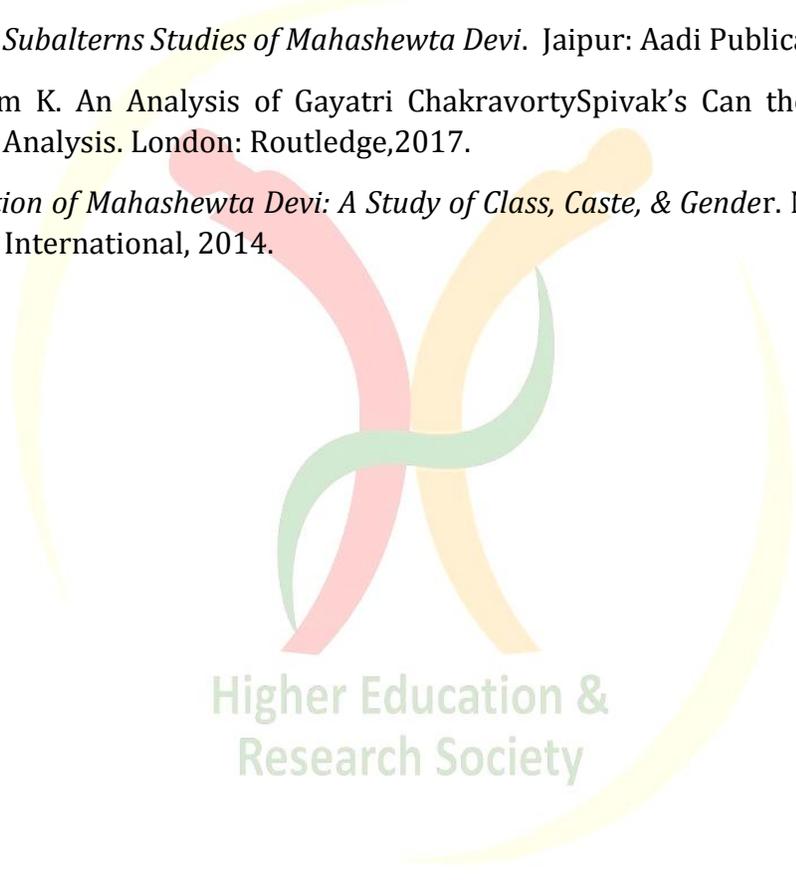
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