

Mahasweta Devi's *Dhouli*: the politics of caste, class and gender

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Abstract: Leftist Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi works explore various issues around class, caste and Gender of 20th century Bengal. Her intense stories revolve around women's experiences in tribal communities of West Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. In this paper, I will be analysing her short story *Dhouli* through the lens of gender, class, caste and gender. The character of *Dhouli* as written by Mahasweta Devi faces a manifold of oppression that is solely based on her social status. This paper explores how *Dhouli* reflected the plight of a lower caste woman whose social conditions pushed her towards prostitution and how she chose this profession to practice her agency.

Key Words: Gender, Class and caste system, Prostitution, Mahasweta Devi, Bengali Literature

1. INTRODUCTION :

*When has my life been truly mine?
In the home male arrogance
Sets my cheek stinging,
While in the street caste arrogance
Splits the other cheek open.
As a babe in the womb
depicted as an untouchable
stamped with a low caste, I was born.
That day itself branded a slut
amidst senseless rules
in the cesspools of superstitions
cast away, I became forbidden woman.
I carry the legacy.
In this holy land of 'karma'
As a newborn infant yet to open eyes
Credit for the identity as a 'prostitute', is mine.*

- An excerpt from Challapalli Swaroopa Rani's *Forbidden History*, translated by T. S Chandra Mouli

Mahasweta Devi's Bengali short story *Dhouli* revolves around a woman named *Dhouli* who is from the Dusadh community. Devi weaves *Dhouli*'s story in a manner that accentuates the complexity of a Dalit woman's subjectivity as both victim and agent. Her struggle against victimhood shapes her identity and gives her a certain kind of agency. The oppression performed against her lies in the interjunction of class, caste and gender. The politics of caste and religious community and economic condition pose a question mark over the assumed commonality of female experience, thus challenging the identity of the woman. Thus Menon writes, "Women is neither a stable nor a homogeneous category". (Menon, 2012)

2. DHOULI'S STORY AT AN INTERSECTION OF CLASS, CASTE AND GENDER :

The first thing that Devi notifies us about *Dhouli* is her caste and class. She belongs to the Dusadh community, a Dalit community in Bihar. She is a young woman who fell in love with an upper class and upper caste man, Misrilal. When *Dhouli* becomes pregnant, Misrilal denies marrying her and instead marries a woman who matches his class and caste identity. In this precarious situation, *Dhouli* starts prostitution to sustain her child and her family. But soon Misrilal calls

a Panchayat to decide Dhoulis fate. The panchayat declares that she cannot work as a prostitute in the village since it has Brahmin families. If she wishes to continue with her prostitution she must do it in the town of Ranchi. Her mother tells her to take the private of Misrilal's brother in law and be his *kept woman* and in return, her family would be protected. But she denies it and decides to be a prostitute away from the village (Devi, 2002). Devi's story tells us how the body of a lower caste woman is exploited and then policed by the patriarchal society. And the only way of subversion from this domination was to be the owner of her own body through the practice of prostitution.

Mahasweta Devi through her portrayal of Misrilal's character shows us how marriage itself is a tool of oppression. Despite knowing that Dhoulis pregnant, Misrilal marries someone to get rid of her and the responsibility of the child. Would Misrilal act the same way if Dhoulis was a Brahmin upper-class woman? Marriage in the Brahmanical society plays a vital role in maintaining the class and the caste structure. B.R Ambedkar pointed out that it is through endogamy there is an expansion within the communities. He says that the caste system is formed with the superposition of endogamy i.e within the same caste on exogamy i.e different *Gotras* (Ambedkar, 1916). It is linked to the practice of maintaining the so-called qualitative attributes of a *Jati* and further yields hierarchy. Misrilal becomes the nobleman of the society practising *Brahmanical Patriarchy*. He is the man who saves the so-called social system by not engaging in a hypogamous relationship by marrying Dhoulis. The Brahmanical Patriarchy is an elaborate system where the patriarchal codes are ingrained within the caste system and creates these distinct cultural codes that distinguish and exploit women and the lower caste people. (Chakravarty, 2018) Dhoulis existence due to her caste identity becomes debris of the Brahmanical marriage system.

Devi tried to show how Dalit women like Dhoulis are given the choice of prostitution. This profession becomes a choice based on her caste identity and economic status. Class relationships were also tied to the caste system. Uma Chakravarty in her book *Gendering Caste* says that dominance is based on wealth, i.e the control over land that is directly linked to the upper class and the upper caste who has the control over the land power. She further states that in that sense there are only two castes: those who hold land and those who do not. (Chakravarty, 2018) Ironically, in the story, Misrilal once said to Dhoulis that her love had made him her slave. But it is men like Misrilal from the dominant castes who have a history of exploiting the lower castes like Dhoulis and treating them as their slaves stripping them off from all social and economic agencies. This repressive effect of the caste system on the lower class of the society has its umbilical cord tied to the religious and Brahmanical notions of the social structure. Thus, Ambedkar said, "Caste is not a division of labour but the division of labourers". (Ambedkar, 2014)

Dhoulis story gives us a clear picture of how the structures create a woman's position within it. Devi through her writings shows us how and why Dhoulis was coerced into prostitution. Geetanjali Gangoli in the book *Prostitution and Beyond* tells us in a Third world country like India there are many reasons why one chooses prostitution over begging, destitution or some other badly paid informal work. Gangoli says that there are narratives that make the prostitutes homewreckers but there are many Dalit women like Dhoulis who maintain a link with their family and supports the family deviating from the Brahmanical Patriarchal norms of being a good, pure, upper-caste woman whose life is controlled by her husband. A character like Dhoulis can be also seen as an inversion of patriarchal values. (Sahni et al., 2008) For Dhoulis prostitution is like any other job that woman like her can access, it is not a moral condition. She acknowledges that she is coerced but it is ultimately her survival strategy just like a man who migrates to another city works in the industry. It is men like Misrilal who try to police her and control her body and question her morale. In most of Mahasweta Devi's stories, the sexuality of the subaltern female protagonist plays a pivotal role. Why?

Devi tries to show us how sexuality is one of the major tools that men use to subordinate and structure a woman's position. Since Dhoulis is a prostitute she is a bad woman, she is a threat to all the Brahmin upper caste men and women of the village. No one for once questioned Misrilal for impregnating Dhoulis but the entire village agreed with Misrilal's statement against Dhoulis, being the *bad* woman. One cannot construct a bad woman if there is no construction of a bad woman. "There is a dichotomy between the upper caste Goddess and the lower caste whore". (Arya & Singh Rathore, 2020) The Brahmanical Patriarchy created an idea of *stree jaat* that incorporates the ideology of chaste wives and pativrata women, who are also oppressed by the Brahmin men to institutionalize the caste system, maintain the hierarchies and purity. The history of the caste system tells us that the upper caste men can always access both an upper caste and lower caste woman's body. Thus he systemically constructed disparaged and demonised Dalit women's sexuality. When Misrilal's brother in law an upper-class and upper-caste man offered the position of a kept woman to Dhoulis it shows how these men construct an identity for a Dalit woman just to exploit her sexual labour. And yet these are the same men who vilify her for using her sexual labour to sustain her family. She is constantly victimized. She

becomes the woman with 'loose' sexuality for having a child out of wedlock that becomes one of the many reasons she has to choose the profession based on the label she was given by society. But how does she perform at an agency through the struggle against her victimhood?

The Panchayat threatened to burn her house down along with her family and son if she does not leave her profession. She has to leave her profession to stay in her village. If she had taken the offer as a kept woman she could have stayed in the village. But she did not want to be possessed. She thought being a kept woman would be a lonely life. She would be ultimately stripped of all her power just to be able to be in a society that coerced her to become who she is, a prostitute. She would rather embrace the profession, go to the city and live among others like her. There is more power in collectivity rather than being all by herself she thought. (Devi, 2002) It is through the process of her being an outcast she chose who she wanted to become. Women like Dhoulī have to constantly negotiate with the structures of society to create their subjectivities. Dhoulī chose to create hers outside her structure, her village as a prostitute. Even within the claustrophobic Brahmanical society, she performed in her very narrow space of agency to transgress the rules.

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