

# Beyond Victimhood: *Dhouli's* Resistance and Agency Against Patriarchal Society in Mahasweta Devi's Work

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**Abstract:** Mahasweta Devi's literary works investigate deeply into a spectrum of issues concerning class, caste, and gender within the context of twentieth century Bengal literature. Her powerful narratives centres on the experiences of women within tribal communities residing in and around West Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh etc. This paper embarks on an analysis of her short story "Dhouli," studying it through the lenses of gender, class, and caste. In this article the character of Dhouli deals with a different forms of oppression, predominantly stemming from her social status. This paper explores how "Dhouli" serves as a poignant reflection of the struggles faced by a lower-caste woman, whose societal circumstances propel her towards prostitution. It also investigates how Dhouli, within her unique circumstances, consciously opts for this profession as a means to exercise her agency.

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

This short story *Dhouli* written by Mahasweta Devi revolves around a tribal woman who is from the Dusadh community. The narrative style of *Dhouli* highlights the complexity of a Dalit woman's partiality as both victim and agent. The way she struggles against victimhood makes her identity and gives her a certain kind of action. The social oppression performed a major part in the interruption of class, caste and gender. The assumed commonality of female experience questioned the politics of caste, religious community and economic condition, thus challenges the identity of women. Thus Menon states, "Women is neither a stable nor a homogeneous category". (Menon, 2012)

Mahasweta Devi introduces us the character named *Dhouli* by highlighting her caste and class, emphasizing that she is part of the Dusadh community, a Dalit group in Bihar. *Dhouli*, a young woman, fall in love with Misrilal, a man from a higher social class and caste. However, when *Dhouli* becomes pregnant, Misrilal refuses to marry her and instead marries a woman from his equal social status. She faced with this challenging circumstance, so, *Dhouli* decided to turns to prostitution to provide food for her child and family.

"*Dhouli* cannot practice prostitution in this village. She can go to some town, to Ranchi and do her working 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".

The situation takes a turn to bring another problem when Misrilal convenes a Panchayat, a local assembly, to determine *Dhouli's* fate. The Panchayat sentenced that she cannot continue her profession as a prostitute in the village, where most of the families are Brahmin in the village. To continue her work, she is instructed to move to the town of Ranchi. *Dhouli's* mother suggests that if she became the mistress of Misrilal's brother-in-law, she can be protected for her family, however, she declines the offer and opts to practice

prostitution outside of the village. (Devi, 2002). Mahasweta Devi's narration tells us that the exploitation of a lower-caste woman's body, which is both exploited and controlled by the patriarchal society. *Dhouli's* story illustrates how she seeks liberation from this domination by taking control of her own body through engaging in prostitution.

“How simple to sell one's body in a loveless exchange for salt, corn, maroa. If she had known it was that easy, she would have done it much earlier. Her son too would have been well fed, healthy.” (Devi – 18)

*Dhouli* liberated herself from various forms of oppressions and exploitations. Her resolution is encouraged by an indomitable determination. She demonstrates that even women who face social and economic discrimination, being marginalized from mainstream society, can live a normal life. When Misrilal inquires why she hasn't chosen to end her life, *Dhouli* responds with fearless courage:

“I tried to Kill myself. But then I thought why should I? You can get married, run a shop, see movies with your wife, and I have to kill myself? Why? Why? Why?” – (Devi – 31)

*Dhouli* represents those who are socially, politically, and economically marginalized, having been denied their rightful privileges. They are regarded as "untouchables" by the evidently privileged segments of society, highlighting the inequalities between higher castes and classes. This persistent ailment endures even today, but it is imperative for this injustice to be eradicated. These individuals deserve protection and the rightful respect they are owed.

Mahasweta Devi through her portrayal of Misrilal's character shows us how marriage itself is a tool of oppression. Despite knowing that *Dhouli* was pregnant, Misrilal marries someone to get rid of her and the responsibility of the child. If *Dhouli* belonged to the Brahmin upper-class, would Misrilal react in a same manner? In the Brahmanical society, marriage holds significant importance in upholding the class and caste hierarchy. B.R. Ambedkar highlighted that the practice of endogamy is instrumental in fostering growth within these communities. He tells that the caste system emerges from the combination of endogamy, which involves marriage within the same caste, and exogamy, which involves different Gotras (Ambedkar, 1916). This system is connected to the practice of preserving the perceived qualitative characteristics of a Jati, leading to the establishment of a hierarchical structure. Misrilal assumes the role of an esteemed figure in society, upholding Brahmanical Patriarchy. He is the individual who safeguards the so-called communal framework by abstaining from entering into a hypogamous relationship with *Dhouli* through marriage. Brahmanical Patriarchy represents a sophisticated framework in which patriarchal norms are interlaced with the caste system, resulting in the formulation of distinct cultural norms that differentiate and exploit women and individuals belonging to lower castes. (Chakravarty, 2018) *Dhouli's* presence, influenced by her caste identity, turns into the fragments of the Brahmanical marriage system.

*Dhouli's* narrative provides a vivid portrayal of how social frameworks describe a woman's role within them. Through her literary works, Devi illustrates the process and reasons behind *Dhouli's* entrapment in prostitution. Geetanjali Gangoli, in her book "Prostitution and Beyond," discusses the factors that drive individuals in countries like India to opt for prostitution over alternatives like begging, extreme poverty, or poorly compensated informal labor. Gangoli notes that while some narratives paint prostitutes as disruptors of families, there are numerous Dalit women like *Dhouli* who maintain connections with their families and provide support, thereby defying the Brahmanical Patriarchal expectations of being a virtuous, pristine, upper-caste woman subservient to her husband's control. Characters such as *Dhouli* can also be interpreted as a subversion of patriarchal ideals. (Sahni et al., 2008) *Dhouli* perceives prostitution as a pragmatic employment opportunity accessible to women in her circumstances, rather than a matter of morality. She acknowledges the pressure she faces, yet views it as a means of survival, much like a man who relocates to a different city for work. It is individuals like Misrilal who endeavor to regulate her actions, asserting authority over her body and scrutinizing her ethical standards. Throughout many of Mahasweta Devi's narratives, the sexual agency of the marginalized female lead assumes a central role. What prompts this recurrent theme?

Mahasweta Devi's intention is to illustrate how sexuality serves as a primary mechanism employed by men to dominate and establish hierarchies in women's lives. As *Dhouli* is engaged in prostitution, she is labeled as morally deficient, posing a danger to the Brahmin upper-caste men and women in the village. Interestingly, no one ever questioned Misrilal for his role in *Dhouli's* pregnancy. Instead, the entire village aligned with

Misrilal's characterization of *Dhouli* as a morally tainted woman. The concept of a "bad woman" can only be constructed if there exists a framework for such construction. "There is a dichotomy between the upper caste Goddess and the lower caste whore". (Arya & Singh Rathore, 2020) The Brahmanical Patriarchy has formulated the notion of "stree jaat," which encompasses the ideals of virtuous wives and devoted pativrata women. These women are also subject to oppression by Brahmin men, a tactic used to institutionalize the caste system, uphold hierarchies, and safeguard notions of purity. The historical backdrop of the caste system indicates that upper-caste men hold the power to exert control over both upper-caste and lower-caste women's bodies. Consequently, they systematically stigmatize and vilify the sexuality of Dalit women.

The offer from Misrilal's upper-class and upper-caste brother-in-law for *Dhouli* to become a kept woman exemplifies how these men construct an identity for Dalit women solely for the purpose of exploiting their sexual labor. Paradoxically, these same men condemn her for utilizing her sexual labor to provide for her family. *Dhouli* remains a perpetual victim, grappling with being branded as a woman of 'loose' morals due to having a child outside of marriage. This societal label becomes one of the driving factors behind her choice to enter the profession. Amidst this struggle against victimization, the narrative explores how *Dhouli* navigates her agency and confronts her status as a victim.

The village council threatens *Dhouli* to set fire to her house along with her family and son if she didn't abandon her profession. In order to stay in her village, she had to get rid of her occupation. While she had the option of becoming a mistress and stay back in the village, she resisted this choice to avoid being possessed. She believed that becoming a mistress would lead to a solitary existence, stripping all of her power in exchange for social acceptance that had forced her into her current role as a prostitute. Preferring a different path, she opted to fully embrace her profession, moving to the city and residing among peers who shared similar experiences. She recognized the strength in unity rather than isolation, believing that collective empowerment held more power than solitary independence. In the narrative (Devi, 2002), her status as an outcast led her to define her own identity. Women like *Dhouli* are in a constant state of negotiation with social frameworks to shape their sense of self. *Dhouli* opted to construct her identity outside the limits of her village, embracing the role of a prostitute. Even within the constricting boundaries of the Brahmanical society, she maneuverer within the limited sphere of her agency to challenge established norms.

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