Repression
Chapter 2

Repression

As a writer, I feel a commitment to my times, to mankind and to myself. For the last fourteen years I have written almost exclusively about the bonded labourers and the tribals, and about repression and protest, about their heroic endeavour for survival and their rights.

-Mahasweta Devi (qtd. in Katyal 24)

Right to life and personal liberty is the most precious, integral and indivisible part of the fundamental human rights. International Human Rights norms received an impetus sixty years ago following the harrowing experience of mankind of the two World Wars and the holocaust. The world community was appalled by man’s capacity to destroy himself. For the first time the concept of human rights asserted itself formally and prominently in an official international document, namely, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Article 1 of this declaration states that all human beings are born free and in equal dignity and rights. According to Article 2 every one is entitled to all the rights and freedom set forth in this declaration without distinction of any kind such as race (caste in Indian context), colour, sex and language. Article 7 guarantees that all are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination. Besides, Article 13 of the UN World Conference on Human Rights Instruments Proclamation of Tehran (1968) clarifies that, “since human rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible, the full realization of civil and political rights without the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights is impossible” (Dasan 43).
The United Nations Charter hoped to save succeeding generations from self-destruction by proclaiming and establishing equal and inalienable rights to all members of the human family—great or small, virtuous or vicious, rich or poor, wise or foolish—and their inherent dignity, regardless of birth, status, race, colour, sex, language, religion or political or other opinion. But the human rights discourse in our country, rather than the protection and promotion of human rights here cannot be divorced from the structural inequality of caste.

The hierarchical system of caste has for centuries, defined not only the pattern of interaction among the groups but also the pattern of distribution of social, economic and political power. Societal violation of human rights is as serious, if not more, as state violation. The worst forms of human rights violations and infringement of civil liberties are caused by the ‘Varnasram Dharma’—the caste system—directly or indirectly. This caste system and the concept of untouchability continues to hamper the growth of more than twenty five per cent of our country’s people, namely the Scheduled Castes and tribes. These people are denied the fundamental human rights ‘to life, equality and dignity’ which has been embodied in the International Covenants and guaranteed by the Indian Constitution and enforceable by the courts of law in India.

It is generally agreed, even by government agencies that in spite of the protection of Civil Rights Act 1976 (earlier called the Untouchability Offence Act of 1955) and the more severe and stringent act, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989, the violation of human rights of Dalits and tribals have been on the increase. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in its 1994-95 annual report stated that one of its priorities was the human rights of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the status of minorities. The
commission also noted that laws and treaties, punishment and reward, and even structural and systematic reforms are not in themselves sufficient to promote and protect human rights in the country or to defend in particular the rights of its weakest and the most defenceless people and the nation requires a vast programme of social regeneration to deal with ancient wrongs. Since our country's socio-economic and political formation is of dominant caste character, while exalting dominant values it naturally dismisses the indigenous people's values, cultures and languages as insignificant and inferior. As a result, the right over land, right to livelihood, right to education, cultural rights etc., of Dalits and tribals are violated, and they are deprived of their rights by the very same system meant to protect them in the name of order, protection, welfare and development. Thus both society and state through hegemonic violence have attempted to destroy the life and existence of Dalits and tribals.

The Dalit/tribal discourse on human rights in independent India based on Ambedkar and Periyar movements percolated into literary works of Indian writers and it has been gathering momentum. The post-independence and the post-emergency periods witnessed many literary works exposing atrocities on Scheduled Castes and tribes. Though the focus of these writings during the early period was on caste terms, contemporary literary discourse treats it in terms of human rights. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan had set the trend in Indian Writing in English. Writers in regional languages, especially in leftist States like West Bengal and Kerala, are in the forefront expressing concern for the human rights violations to the oppressed, especially Dalits and tribals.

One of the most significant features of the postmodernist movement in India is the academic interest that literature dealing with social outcastes has generated. In the 1970s the meaning of the term 'Dalit' expanded to include Scheduled Tribes, poor
peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. The literature of the Dalits reflects a rejection in the conventional social order of upper caste Hindu practices that have blanked out the Dalit voices from the history books. It focuses on lives lived in the margins, brings them into the spotlight and its method is protest. In effect, it succeeds in instilling a sense of anger and shame in readers and forces them into questioning the mainstream literary theories and the canons of upper / privileged castes and classes. Several social reformers and writers have sought to identify themselves with the Dalit Movement and its literature. Notable among them are writers like Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Daya Pawar, Poomani, Imayam, Bama and Mangal Rathod who have foregrounded the issue of marginalisation and oppression faced by the downtrodden.

Mahasweta Devi stands unique among Indian writers in portraying the societal and state violations of human rights to Dalits, tribals, women and children. The oeuvre of her writings documents the struggles of the subalterns, especially the untouchables, for their basic human right. The fringe dwellers outside the upper caste milieu, particularly the untouchables (the Domes, the Chandals and the Dusads), form the focus of her literary work. Especially the Domes in “Water” and Paatan in “Aajir” are outcastes who suffer human rights violations. These two plays included in the anthology of Mahasweta Devi’s *Five Plays* and translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay vividly illustrate Mahasweta Devi’s commitment and concern for Dalits and tribals who are denied their fundamental rights of which mainstream writers keep an ominous silence. By lending voice to the voiceless, Mahasweta Devi emerges as a fighter for human rights. She writes in the introduction to *Five Plays*: 
It is my conviction that a storywriter should be motivated by a sense of history that would help her readers to understand their own times. I have never had the capacity nor the urge to create art for art’s sake...I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation. (xii)

In her attempt to empower the untouchables struggle for human rights, Mahasweta Devi has become more and more involved with the lives and struggles of the tribals and underprivileged communities settled in the border regions of the three neighbouring States of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, especially the districts of Medinipur, Singhbhum and Mayurbhanj. Her play “Water” portrays how the untouchables among the tribals in a rural area in West Bengal have been denied the basic right to water by the upper caste feudal lords.

This inhuman social injustice may be better understood against the cultural background of Hindu social organisation. The Hindu religion in the course of its historical transition gave birth to the concept of casteism. In the early creation myths of the Aryans who migrated to the Indian subcontinent as an agrarian and pastoral people there is the narrative of the cosmic form of Vratpurusha (supreme, gigantic person) from whose mouth came the Brahmins (teachers), from whose arms came the Kshatriyas (warriors), from whose thighs came the Vaisyas (peasants, traders), and from whose feet came the Sudras (the servants). This is the hymn sacred to the Hindus, called ‘Purusha Sukta’ (Hymn of the Primeval Man) and is part of their ancient scripture the Vedas. It created the ‘Varna’ system, the codes of conduct and values determined by the system of caste to which a member of society is expected to conform, observe and adhere. ‘Varna’ means colour and historians tell us that the fair-skinned Aryans found the indigenous people in the Indus valley region dark. The
system came to be called ‘Chaturvarna’ (four colours) because it identified four stratas of people in society. However, there were people who lived on the fringes of society who were not covered by the ‘Varna’ system. People living within the system scarcely had anything to do with them except to assign to them the task of tending graves and cremation grounds. Over a long period there arose a certain blurring of distinctions between the fourth caste (who were still within the fold of the ‘Varna’ system) and those who were outside its pale.

Originally this concept was flexible and its principle was to represent human occupations quite in accordance with human disposition. Men divided themselves into different groups in accordance with their inner dispositions which determined their outer vocation. Balarama Gupta analyses this problem very carefully:

The Hindu Caste system intended originally, perhaps, as an organisation to facilitate mutual cooperation among different sections of society-eventually degenerated and petrified into an utterly divisive force with destructive effects particularly on untouchables, people who are considered too low and dirty to merit subsumption under any of the four classes. (25)

These untouchables are outcasts whose family occupations constitute sweeping, scavenging, disposal of sewage and dung, gutter and latrine cleaning, and shoe-mending. Their life generates complexes in the high caste Hindus. According to these caste Hindus, the shadow of these low people should not fall on the ‘high’ born people. Their sight and touch pollute the sacredness of things according to this doctrine of religious purity. They should be kept out in an outcast colony at a respectable distance. They should live on the leftovers of the rich people. Dark gloom envelops their lives as they do not enjoy the normal status of human beings and are
treated as lepers to be shunned and hated. This is how Hinduism which was essentially spiritual in its original form and ideal has become ritualistic in its middle and later phase and as a result caste-consciousness has assumed an integral part of the Hindu society. That is why Gandhiji regarded untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism. He prayed, “If I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the insults thrown at them, in order that I may try to free myself and them from that miserable condition” (qtd. in Desai 45).

Almost all the stories of Mahasweta Devi have as their fulcrum the underprivileged and outcastes, who fight a relentless battle in defence of their right to freedom and happiness. Thus her play “Water”, set in the rural Bengal, provides us with an authentic account of the transformation of a subaltern from a traditional water diviner to the position of a leader of the masses, breaking down all those conventional boundaries which have been devised only to deprive his class of its human dignity.

As in her other plays, in “Water” also Mahasweta Devi attempts to give an artistic expression to the age-old sufferings of the weak and the poor at the hands of the privileged. Maghai Dome, the principal character of this social drama, is a traditional water-diviner. As Chandidasi in “Bayen” and Paatan in “Aajir”, he belongs to a section of the society which has been marginalised and exploited from ancient times. He is caught in the same predicament like them as he is compelled to follow the tradition started by his ancestors. However, unlike them, he is not bound to any external force. He is rather revered by all the people of his village for his extraordinary skill of water-divining. So the upper caste people come to him for information about where to sink a hand pump or dig a well. He claims a mythical traditional sanction as Bhagirath of the nether Ganga, by merging the tribal and non-tribal myths in his self-explanation. In a thunderous voice Maghai declares:
The work we were born to may not provide us with food, but was left to us by our ancestors, for ages it has been our work...from the bowels of the earth, the nether Ganga herself spoke: you’re my chosen priest. I’m the goddess, the nether Ganga, whenever men dig for a well or a pond, you’ll gather the offerings, pray for water, and go around looking for where the water lies hidden till I tell you where to dig. (4.111)

In “Water” as in the play “Bayen”, Mahasweta Devi attempts to give an altogether different interpretation to the myths in which the people’s consciousness is steeped in and responsive to and evolves new myths to suit her own message. In an article entitled “Untapped Resources” she writes:

It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to the present time and, following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While I find the existing mythologies, epics and ‘puranas’ interesting, I use them with a new interpretation...In “Jal” [“Water”] I created a new myth of Ganga and Bhagirath. (19)

She reasserts the same idea again in the preface to a collection of her short stories, by saying that she brings legends, mythical figures and mythical happenings into contemporary setting and makes an ironic use of them to capture the continuities between past and present held together in the folk imagination.

The cruel irony is the untouchables of the village are not allowed to draw water from the public wells, even though they are dug with Maghai’s help. They are forbidden to draw water even from the wells meant for them. A large part of the rural life in India is subjected to such horrors of caste-discrimination. The Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka poignantly brings out the lacerating pain of this discrimination (in his
case the racial discrimination) in his poem “Telephone Conversation” where over the telephone an African declares his race to a possible landlady in London, only to listen in reply to a brief silence and a deafening question:

‘ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT’?

‘Facially, I am brunette, but madam, you should see
The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet
Are a peroxide blond. Friction, caused—
Foolishly, madam—by sitting down, has turned
My bottom raven black...

Wouldn’t you rather see for yourself?’ (qtd. in Rao 105)

The shift in tone in this work, and its developing tension, convey more than just a commentary on social prejudice. The poem communicates the whole sense of ambivalence that surrounds the search for identity among former colonial nations.

M.N. Srinivas observes in his book Caste and its Twentieth Century Avatar, “Only those who live in villages know how suffocating and traumatic day-to-day life can be for those at the bottom of the ladder” (xxi). Particularly, the people in West Bengal have been constant victims of both natural and man-induced famines. Caught in such excruciating situations, they either flee the villages or die of hunger. Acting hand in gloves with the privileged, the corrupt officials also rub salt into the wounds of the innocent victims.

Struck by consecutive draughts, Maghai Dome and his low-caste brethren, are at the mercy of Santosh Babu who, like Gourdas in “Bayen”, is an archetypal exploiter, a power in the land. This dissembler is an orthodox Brahmin by caste, and for him, “the shadow of a Dome pollutes his pitcher and he’d throw away the water”
(4.107). He makes the innocent poor people suffer for no fault of theirs. Trading in the relief funds meant for the have-nots, he creates an artificial famine. The villagers, having no other better alternative, are forced to accept whatever little amount he fixes for their toil at his fields.

Dhura, Maghai’s son, who is secretly connected to the Naxalite activities, strives hard to make his community aware that Santosh is the cause of their dehumanising existence. So, as Mahasweta Devi exposes powerfully the persecution of the innocent folk, she continues to throw light on the topical issues such as Naxalite activities and their impact on the common lot as it is revealed in “Mother of 1084” also. Surprisingly, Maghai, though aware of the cause of all his misfortunes, continues to work for Santosh. In spite of his significant social role as a water-diviner, he is not able to give even a single drop of water to his low-caste community. He firmly believes that he is fated to starve and never tries to rebel against the injustice of the society as it is quoted by Prof. C.T. Indra in her introduction to Indira Parthasarathy’s The Legend of Nandan, a play espousing the Dalit cause: “Although today they [Dalits] are fighting for the restoration of their dignity as human beings, some people belonging to such unprivileged strata have historically believed that it is because of the Karma in their previous births that they have been born so” (xvi).

In Tagore’s play “Chandalika” also the same sentiment is expressed by the mother of the heroine Prakriti, a chandalini, when she advises her daughter:

The filth into which an evil fate has cast you is a wall of mud that no spade in the world can break through. You are unclean; beware of tainting the outside world with your unclean presence. See that you keep to your place, narrow as it is. To stray anywhere beyond
its limits is to trespass....You were born a slave. It’s the writ of Destiny, who can undo it? (1.150, 152)

But Dhura the angry young man who violently protests against the social system that has subjected his community to the unmerited tortures and humiliations, lashes at his father’s lassitude and his doctrine of fatalism. He declares, “I won’t accept fate. What a shame, we burn our hearts to cinders to divine water, then to raise it from the bowels of the earth, and then they refuse us a drop of water, not a drop for the Domes and Chandals. I spit upon fate, if that’s our fate” (4.110-111).

At this juncture, it is very interesting to note that Mahasweta Devi’s social consciousness and her passionate longing for freedom strike a strong parallel with that of Mulk Raj Anand, a novelist with a mission. The common diameter between them is that both evince keen interest in the eradication of social evils and their literary works are nothing but artistic attempts to arouse and activate the slumbering conscience of the people to remove these evils. So there is no wonder Mulk Raj Anand has also exposed in two of his novels, Untouchable and The Road, the dehumanising and degrading practice of untouchability, India’s shame. In Untouchable, he shows how Bakha, the protagonist, suffers owing to this social evil. Germinating in pain and leading to and ending in despair, it achieves an intimate and inimitable vision of the human condition. Once again The Road centres on the young outcast, Bhikhu, who, unlike Bakha, is an active crusader against this abhorrent practice. These novels are, indeed, rich human documents, having varying degrees of excellence. In the novels of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, a contemporary proletarian novelist of Kerala, particularly in his Thottiyude Makan (The Scavenger’s Son), we have the portrayal of the lives of scavengers, of farmers and of fishermen who suffer the agony of hunger
and poverty owing to their oppression by the privileged class and the absence of social justice.

As Maghai’s voice in “Water” is the voice of an old man who has become helpless in the face of elaborate exploitative mechanism in the modern society, Lakha in Anand’s Untouchable offers a sharp contrast to his son Bakha. While Lakha, who belongs to the older generation of sweepers and scavengers, is fully adjusted and reconciled to his low inhuman status in society, Bakha feels rebellious. The old father urges his son to accept the will of destiny and therefore to show due respect to the caste-Hindus. But Bakha cannot understand why the caste-Hindus should treat the sweepers in a degrading manner. In the same way, in The Road, Bhikhu cannot be convinced when his mother, Lakshmi, pleads with him to be moderate. “Son, we are chamars,” she tried to persuade him, “and they are twice-born” (6). “One is a leather worker by profession and not by birth!” (6) Bhikhu shouted. All these three parents symbolise the stoical and fatalistic attitude of the old generation which fails to understand that caste and karma are two weapons invented by the ‘twice-born’ to keep them in a state of perennial subservience. Dhura, Bakha and Bhikhu represent the tone of young soul vibrating with the passion of a creature that can express itself only in impulsive actions.

The impact of the feudal values on Maghai’s consciousness is so effective that he cannot think of a life other than the one he is doomed to live. There is always a conflict between Maghai and his family on the one hand, and between his community and the establishment represented by the exploiter, Santosh, on the other. In spite of all the odds against it, Maghai continues to do the job as a water-diviner because he feels, “It’s a job handed down to me by my ancestors. I’ll be doomed to hell if I betray that trust” (7.127). So, like Chandidasi in “Bayen”, he too is caught in the web of filial
responsibility and willingly surrenders himself and his community to the evil schemes of Santosh who grabs all the water.

Maghai’s wife Phulmani symbolises his other-self which struggles hard to free itself from the dead weight of the conventions which are thrust on him by the feudal society. Though she has her own sympathies for her husband, she cherishes no illusion about the grand tradition which her husband takes pride in. Being down to earth, she is intensely aware of the grim reality of her penurious background. She is highly sarcastic when she talks about his lineage: “The legend. Haven’t you heard it ever?...your father inherited it from his father. A Dome! And then he lived the same life all through—a naked beggar kicked around by the upper castes. Now it’s your turn” (4.109). It is the pathetic cry of a mother who feels helpless against the passivity and inarticulateness of her husband that is the root cause of all the miseries of the family. She cannot overlook the cruel irony that Maghai Dome, who is a progeny of the legendary Bhagirath, is condemned to pour sand on the burning pyre of his child because there is no water to wash it down. Though Phulmani is not a central character like Sujata in “Mother of 1084” and Chandidasi in “Bayen”, she is more aggressive and outspoken than them.

Mulk Raj Anand in The Road projects Dhooli Singh, a caste-Hindu, as a great crusader for the cause of the depressed class. At the cost of alienation from his caste and even from his family, Dhooli Singh continues to help Bhikhu in accomplishing his mission. What the novelist implies here is that the caste-Hindus and the depressed classes must come together and understand each other. The depressed classes cannot achieve what they want by remaining isolated. The caste-Hindus should not look down upon the depressed classes on account of their low birth. Anand believes that
the coming together of Bhikhu and Dhooli Singh is an indication of the dream becoming a reality.

In “Water” we meet such a champion for the outcastes in Jiten, an ideal teacher and a follower of Mahatma Gandhi’s principles. As Dhooli Singh, Jiten’s identification with the oppressed is complete as he fights for their rights. Moved by their precarious condition, he takes it as his life’s mission to release them from the cobweb of poverty and social degradation. He lives with the Domes and imparts education to the tribal children. Being compelled to work in the upper castes’ households and fields, grazing cattle, collecting fire woods and so on, the children are denied their fundamental rights to attend schools. Jiten enlightens these tribals to raise their voice against injustice, against vicious landowners and moneylenders like Santosh.

When the tribals in the village come to know that Santosh is keeping the relief materials—rice, paddy, seeds, chida and molasses—while people die of starvation they gather before the landlord’s house demanding their legitimate right. Maghai represents everybody and asks Santosh, “You’ve already collected the government relief meant for us. Why haven’t we got the money and materials yet?” (3.103). But Santosh being the Head of the Panchayat can convince the government officials by asserting, “There is no trouble in Charsa. There it’s only the untouchables clamouring for water” (2.100). He brands the young rebels as Naxals and directs the police wrath against them. He complains to the SDO about Jiten who visits the settlements of the Domes and Chandals. When Jiten tries to persuade the government officers to take action against the corruptive feudal upper castes, the SDO expresses his helplessness: “It’s no use. Laws are made because they have to be made. They’re never enforced… I am powerless. If I threaten a moneylender, the minister will jump on me” (8.129).
In the corrupt ethos of modern society, the incapable government officials are also a party to the atrocities perpetrated on the untouchables. Jiten squarely blames the SDO for all the troubles of the people of Charsa, "With officers like you, Santosh carries on with his mischief. It’s your inaction that supports Santosh" (8.131). Here it is the alter-ego of the playwright that speaks. She holds a mirror to the corroding state of affairs by showing how the indifferent bureaucrats dancing to the tune of the privileged, aggravate the sense of insecurity and alienation among the downtrodden.

Dhura in his vehement protest against the existing social establishment closely resembles Brati in "Mother of 1084". Like Brati, Dhura too is influenced by the Naxalite activities and he wants to do away with the system that has subjected his community to the unmerited tortures and humiliations. He becomes restless and is seized with a strong desire to finish off Santosh, the canker that eats away all their fundamental rights. But Jiten, the practical, disciplined, the veteran leader of the poverty-stricken, comes out with a new proposal to solve their water problem. As Ananda, the Buddhist monk, in Rabindranath Tagore’s "Chandalika" advises Prakriti, a chandalini, "Don’t humiliate yourself. Self-humiliation is a sin, worse than self-murder" (1.148), Jiten boosts up their self-dignity. He suggests that the people should fight for their rights by building a dam across the river which will redeem them from their eternal curse. Jiten’s deep commitment to the cause of the untouchables undoubtedly recalls the old widow in Bharati Sarabhai’s story "The Well of the People". This old Brahmin widow sinks a well for a temple where no untouchable would be denied water. When her hard earned savings are inadequate, she takes a loan from a banker and to repay the loan she volunteers to be a slave in his house for the rest of his life.
Jiten’s solution to put an end to the tribals’ misery once again reminds us of Mulk Raj Anand’s Bhikhu. In *The Road*, Bhikhu feels that it is difficult to change the mentality of the caste-Hindus. He thinks of a mass scale of work which symbolises concerted and organised action on the part of the depressed class. He feels that work is a means of deliverance and their co-operative enterprise provides a new dimension to an eternal problem. Bhikhu possesses a formidable forward-looking disposition. “Strong and sincere but calm, he was spiritually too pure to hate and had learnt through long submission, to endure evil and violence from upper castes, without protest, only hoping that, through work and more work, he would be liberated, some how, he did not know how” (45). His plan to build an approach road which will link the village with the town is Mulk Raj Anand’s new ideal whereby people can work together for their emancipation from social stigma.

Like Anand, Mahasweta Devi also believes in the gospel of work which is a major source for liberating the depressed class from indignity and wretchedness. The very thought of building a dam across the river boosts up Maghai’s morale and works out the maximum metamorphosis. He indulges in a sweet reverie, “We’ll start at once, teacher! I can see the dam, it’s real, we have built it now, we have gathered the water, we’ve taught the whore of the Charsa a lesson at last, she won’t keep us in the throes of her bitter, dry love any more” (9.135). In spite of his life-long love-affair with the river Charsa, he fails to realise his dream—a dream to quench the thirst of his community. But now he can decode, for the first time, the offering of perennial water the river carries in its seasonal bounty.

Though pretending to be unconcerned, Santosh senses a threat in the construction of the dam. He can realise that it is an act of protest and self-assertion against the retrograde conventionalities of feudal society of which he is a
representative. So he and his caste brethren, threatened as they are by the adventure of the Domes, turn the authorities against them. This context where the upper castes wield subtle power to put down the rising lower castes is effectively projected by Indira Parthasarathy in his play The Legend of Nandan. The hero Nandan, being discontented with the lack of understanding and aspiration within his lower caste community, consciously tries to elevate himself to the dignity and fullness of the self which is the privilege of only the higher-caste Hindus. This is construed as a definite attempted subversion by the privileged and enlightened caste-Hindus who begin to feel threatened by the rise of Nandan as a challenge to their hegemony. They all band together and devise a ploy to finish Nandan. Likewise, believing Santosh’s words that all the outcastes have turned Naxals and Jiten is the main instigator, SDO orders the police officers to open fire at the slightest provocation during the opening ceremony of the dam.

As Maghai and his men indulge in fun and frolic celebrating their achievement, Santosh has brought the police force to break the dam. Maghai cannot stand the sight of his dream being shattered. All the villagers headed by Maghai who cries, “I’ll die, but not before I’ve killed...Santosh! After all the water I divined for you, you had to get me killed!” (13.146) are brutally attacked by the police. Maghai is severely wounded and is profusely bleeding. He falls down after declaring, “It’s the Bhagirath of the nether Ganga....I can’t let them carry me as a corpse into their bloody morgue. My last journey will be with the water” (13.146).

As the play ends, we see the dam being crumbled, the gushing waters of mad Charsa, Maghai’s beloved raises him on the crest of her wave. Maghai, an ardent worshipper of nature becomes one with it by taking refuge in her lap. Maghai’s union with Mother Nature closely resembles the climax of Rabindranath Tagore’s “Mukta-
dhara” where the Crown Prince Abhijit, in whom, love of freedom and sympathy for
the oppressed discover their appropriate symbolism, determines to sacrifice his life in
an attempt to liberate the imprisoned flood of the river Mukta-dhara. He succeeds in
breaking the dam. The leaping torrent breaks free, carrying away the body of Abhijit
to her bosom. Mukta-dhara, the foster-mother of Abhijit, with the fetters that bound
her broken, rushes to her own freedom, thereby bestowing freedom or ‘mukti’ both to
the erstwhile slaves of Shiv-tarai and to the chained spirit of Abhijit himself. Sanjaya
reports to King Ranjit, “Mukta-dhara, like a mother took up his [Abhijit’s] wounded
body in her arms and carried him away” (3.76).

The play “Water” ends with a fine blend of idealism and realism. As Bhikhu
in “The Road” poses the vital question, “When will the caste-Hindus change their
hearts and stop being harsh and inhospitable?” (74), witnessing the tragic end of
Maghai, one tends to ask-when will the leopard shed its spots or is it possible to build
the kingdom of God on earth?

Mahasweta Devi has taken themes from contemporary life and transformed
them into plays of artistic excellence. Real life experience and factual details are the
ground on which her play is inscribed. For example, a gruesome incident against the
age-old oppression took place at East Venmani in Tanjore district, Tamil Nadu, on
December 25, 1968. Forty-four Dalit agricultural workers, including women and
children, were burnt alive by the caste-Hindu land-owners of the village because they
demanded higher wages and were increasingly assertive as members of the farm
workers’ union. It shocked the entire State, and Tamil writers of the period recorded
their anguish and anger in various stories and poems. When the authorities strike, they
strike from a sense of threat from a community that has begun to threaten the
dominance of the present system.
Mahasweta Devi knows that six thousand years of caste-Hindu superiority cannot be wiped out in a day. It requires a long passage of time and transition. Maghai's dream regarding the emancipation of the oppressed is yet to be fully attained, because custom, superstition and habit hang like a dead weight, clouding one's vision. A 30-metre wall, segregating the Dalits from the caste Hindus, variously described as "caste wall", "wall of bias", "wall of shame" and "wall of untouchability" (qtd. in Viswanathan 123), which was raised by caste Hindus in 1989 at Uthapuram in Madurai district, Tamil Nadu, was demolished on May 6, 2008, thanks to an effective and timely intervention by the Tamil Nadu Government to protect the social and democratic rights of the Dalits.

Even now, in many parts of India Dalits are barred from entering many Hindu temples. In November 2004, villagers beat up four Dalit women for entering an 18th century Jagannath temple at Keradagarth village in the coastal district of Kendrapada.

In Bhubaneswar on January 14, 2009, a purification ritual was performed in a Hindu temple in after a Dalit minister visited the place of worship:

Women and Child Welfare Minister Pramila Mallick entered the sanctum sanctorum of the Akhandalamani temple, a highly revered shrine of Hindu lord Shiva at Aradi village in Bhadrak district.

Temple chief priest Gokulananda Panda said they performed the purification ritual because Dalits were not allowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum. The priests closed the temple for over an hour and washed it soon after the minister left, Panda said.


As the play follows the growth of Maghai Dome from a traditionally defined water-diviner to a leader of men defying traditionally defined class roles in a
community, Mahasweta Devi seems to suggest continuity inherent in Maghai’s emotional attachment to the processes and movements of nature. With his total commitment to nature and its life, for which he claims a mythical-traditional sanction as the Bhagirath of the nether Ganga, he has an instinctive understanding of nature, and what the idealistic teacher contributes is a kind of germinal politicisation of the instinctive. Early in the play, Jiten suggests that there must be a science behind Maghai’s mysterious water-divining skills. There is poetic irony when Maghai, after a lifelong love affair with the river Charsa, and the deeply felt sense of a betrayal in the river’s seasonal bounty, seems to decode for the first time the offering of perennial water that the river has made to him all along, and feels guilty for having misunderstood nature.

In “Aajir”, another play in the anthology Five Plays, Mahasweta Devi once again attempts to expose yet another area of struggle, exploitation and oppression. As she has commented that there are some histories which are applicable to all times like “Aajir”, this play deals with an age-old social evil which has reduced humanity to a subhuman level, that is, bonded labour. “Bonded labour, also known as debt bondage, is a form of debt servitude in which a person works to pay off a debt owed to the employer” (A.N. Roy 78).

The terms of such arrangements like bonded labour are usually so biased in the employer’s favour that the bonded labourer, far from settling his or her debt, becomes even more indebted with the passage of time. This allows the debt holder to further consolidate control over the bonded labourer, whose very person becomes the property of the employer as security on the debt. Under these exploitative conditions, the human rights violations associated with bonded labour have led the activists to describe it as a contemporary form of slavery.
Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, will long be celebrated as a moral giant for leading the successful fight to end the evil of slavery in the United States. His incisive arguments against slavery is applicable to the practice of bonded labour. “In particular, his insight that the exclusion of any one part of humanity starts an infinite regress of exclusions to which no one is immune constitutes a total condemnation of slavery” (qtd. in Hindu 17, Feb. 2009: 8).

Though the practice is explicitly prohibited by several major human rights protocols and is illegal according to the laws of many of the nations in which it occurs, enforcement of such laws has proved to be very difficult. Unlike the historic practice of indentured servitude, to which it is related, bonded labour agreements do not usually specify a period of time during which the debtor will work to settle the outstanding debt. Instead, bonded labourers are paid extremely low wages against which the employer deducts interest on the debt, enormously inflated food and housing costs, and other unilaterally imposed fines or punishments. So persons who enter bonded labour arrangements to pay off a small sum of money, in the long run owe progressively greater amounts as their debt bondage perpetuates itself. As A.N. Roy points out, “In India, where estimates suggest that as many as fifteen million children are held as bonded labourers, low-caste and indigenous children are particularly at risk because of their parents’ poverty, lack of education, and low social status” (79).

Literature, according to Mahasweta Devi, is artistically controlled personal myth, the spring or source of which lies in the author’s love for the fellow human beings. The writer must embrace this love in order to arouse cathartic pity in the hearts of the readers. While Mahasweta Devi’s “Water” deals with the lives and fortunes of the disinherited, her “Aajir” presents a mirror reflection of the internalised
sense of bondage felt by a bonded labourer held so by a bond signed by an ancestor. The term ‘aajir’ in Bengali language stands for one who has sold himself into slavery for a paltry sum. The playwright herself says in the introduction, “I got the idea of “Aajir” from a slave bond executed by a slave who sold himself into slavery, reproduced in the family history of the Mustafis of Ulo-Birnagar” (xii). In this social play she gives an artistic expression to the sufferings of the under-privileged in their confrontation with the powerful exploitative mechanism which “operates beyond the law and with the tacit acquiescence of an exploited class held in thrall by a load of conventional role obligations. Legal reforms or legal defences for the exploited have rarely affected the exploitative mechanism sustained by the illiteracy/ignorance of the exploited” (xiii).

Like the social stigma untouchability, the barbaric system of bonded labour also has its origin in the ‘Varna’ system of the Hindu religion. This religious doctrine, instead of being a source of help, became a hindrance to human progress. The Sutras were denied a right to property, education and choice of occupation. Since they had to totally depend on other caste-Hindus for their survival they were reduced to the status of slaves. Even today most of the bonded labourers belong to this section of class.

According to an estimate made by the Gandhi Peace Foundation and the National Labour Institute, “out of the 2 million bonded labourers, tribals formed over 18 per cent and the Scheduled Castes 66 per cent. Together they accounted for nearly 85 per cent of those in bondage” (Ghatak xix). Though the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes had been reporting to the Parliament about this system since 1951-52, it was only in 1974-76 the abolition of the system, identification of bonded labourers and their rehabilitation started, as a package of populist measures by
the Government of India. But as Mahasweta Devi’s reports in Dust on the Road
amply demonstrate:

The rehabilitation measures had, by and large, failed, because they
were inadequate, and moreover provided through officials and
sometimes the very people who were owners of bonded labourers.
The land given was insufficient and unfit for raising any crop. The
animals provided by the contractors mostly died within days. Some
of the released labourers were getting entrapped into bondage
again. Others were being taken away…as contract labour, on terms
which were extremely harsh. (ix-x)

N.D.Kamble rightly analyses this social evil in his book Bonded Labour in
India:

In practice, bonded labour in India...is an outcome of socio-
economic system prevailing in India. Some people who were
deprived of the socio-economic and political powers had to depend
on those who enjoyed these powers. Criminal poverty of
vulnerable sections exposed them to exploitation in the built-in-
mechanism of socio-economic system. Economic dependence and
poverty of the under-privileged sections of the society forced them
to be slaves. (3)

As a social activist, Mahasweta Devi has been a witness to the pathetic lives
and struggles of the under-privileged communities. Even after six decades of
independence, the innocent people in India still experience the trauma of inhuman
subjugation by the cruel landlords who reign supreme in the villages. So being a
progressive writer like Arnold Wesker, Mahasweta Devi in “Aajir” brings to light
those grim areas where an individual, being a descendant of a family of slaves, is subjected to unmerited tortures and reduced to the subhuman level which denies him even the right to love and marry.

“Aajir” is essentially a realistic play. Māhasweta Devi projects the awful and degrading picture of slavery that has been prevalent in most of the parts of agricultural West Bengal by vividly picturising the illiterate and ignorant as victims of exploitation and eternal servitude. Paatan, the protagonist in “Aajir” is a bond servant, a descendant of a great family of slaves. Like Bakha in Anand’s Untouchable, Paatan has to confront a society that denies him a right to live a life of an equal human being.

Unlike his ancestors who had willingly spent their lives in servitude by selling themselves and their progeny happily into the perpetual slavery for a meagre amount of three rupees, Paatan yearns for a free life. He always dreams of a world where there is no master and where he can have a family of his own. He cries to his Mistress, “But where can I go? Where’s there a place without a Master, without the villagers, without you, with the aajir’s bond?” (4.48). He is caught in the conflict between a world which despises and degrades him and a will that wages a relentless war against it to keep his identity. Despite his craving for freedom, Paatan is a silent protester like Sujata in “Mother of 1084”.

In the opening scene of “Aajir”, as the curtain rises on a dark stage, a voice is heard repeating thrice. “The term Aajir stands for one who has sold himself to be a slave for a paltry sum” (1.35). The major part of rural life in West Bengal is dominated by three incorrigible exploiters—Bhuniya the Zamindar, Sau the moneylender, and Barari the ‘Jotedar’ (tenant with secure, heritable tenancy rights over substantial amounts of land). Running a parallel government in the villages,
these three hoard up the essential commodities during famines. They create an artificial scarcity of food and misuse the relief funds meant for the under-privileged.

Impoverished both by natural and man-induced calamities, the poor are forced to mortgage their property and themselves to the landlord-cum-money lender. They become indebted for generations together, being unable to repay the amount. Once a plot of land has got into the book of accounts, there is never a chance of its coming out again. Any kind of land, dry or fertile is like Abhimanyu in the Mahabharata, the one who knows the way into the destructive formation made by the enemy but does not know how to get out of it, or it is like food in the maws of a python. Being left with no other alternative, the hapless sell themselves to the moneylender who in turn provides for generations—oil for their hair, clothes for their bodies, and rice for their stomachs. “Aajir” begins as a street-play, where Paatan recalls how he became an Aajir:

PAATAN. I am an aajir...watch, gentlemen, how a man becomes a slave from birth. Please allow me to become my forefather, Golak Kura.

GOLAK KURA. Is there anybody here to buy me? Husband and wife, we're here to sell ourselves.

RAVON. I'll give you three rupees. Have you ever seen three rupees in your life?

GOLAK and his WIFE. (in thrilled disbelief) Three rupees!...It's too much....Just too much. (1.35-36)

This passage exposes the whole process of pauperisation and resultant enslavement of the famished and the poor. Since bondage becoming a habit of the
mind, the deprived become addicted to it, for ‘freedom’ as a feeling or idea has never struck them. This is the supreme irony of this inexorable universal practice.

The cruel practice of a human being bargained away like an animal continues even in the modern age and the society which is responsible for this social evil remains a passive spectator. That is why Golak Kura lashes at the onlookers, “Did you hear that, you bunch of worms? The famine blows the horn of doom, and brings death to all around. You can all go to your deaths. I’ll have my three rupees” (1.36). It is interesting to note that this amount three rupees is used as a leitmotif in many a scene in the works of literature. Munoo, the protagonist, in Mulk Raj Anand’s Coolie is offered the same amount three rupees by his mistress, telling that three rupees a month is a good wage, more money in fact than his mother or father ever saw. Anand’s Munoo, like Paatan, is a representative of millions of unfortunate souls. However, Paatan, unlike Munoo, does not yield to the circumstances as he strives hard to get himself free from the bondage of slavery.

Paatan is whip-lashed like an animal by his master Maatang Shunri, a landlord and moneylender, for dreaming of enjoying his basic human rights, “of marrying, having a family of his own, looking upon the face of his own son” (2.38). Though Paatan is endowed with a strong physique, he is overwhelmed by a sense of fear and insecurity. Initially he meekly submits to his cruel master who is physically no match to him. Aung San Suu Ayi, the Nobel Laureate, rightly observes that within a system which denies the basic human rights, fear tends to be the order of the day.

Maatang Shunari uses brutal force to suppress the tide of revolt surging forth in Paatan. But his wife protests against the merciless beating and attests that Paatan is a gem of a boy and helps her a lot. She can sympathise with the lot of Paatan because she is also in an enslaved position. She tells Paatan, “Master has made an aajir of you
and me too” (2.40). Despite her opulent background, she, like Sujata in “Mother of 1084”, is a victim of the male dominated society and its patriarchal values. As Paatan is enslaved by a bond of slavery, she is bought in the marriage market for her share of the cropland and jewellery. She is outspoken and never hesitates to defy her husband, “Why did you, you old dotart, you bloody eunuch, marry me? You never realise it’s a fire burning within me...that drives me diving into the slush again and again” (2.39). Realising that the husband can not quench her sexual thirst, she secretly longs for physical intimacy with Paatan who definitely can make a mother of her. Though, with all sensuality she indulges in the immoral act of wooing Paatan, the audience do not lose their sympathy for her. Mistress of a womaniser, she is one of the many tragic characters of Mahasweta Devi.

Even Punnashashi, a professional prostitute, in the play is also a victim of the high-handedness of lusty agents of feudal institution. She is made to walk naked on a new moon night to propitiate the rain god. Her tale of woe is:

I have to fast the day through and then roam through the night till the evening star crosses to the other end of the sky, I can’t bear it any longer....Isn’t a whore’s body a human body after all? You bastards, you had to tear me apart, and then I have to fast without a drop of water. (3.45)

Paatan wishes to marry only to please the souls of his dead ancestors, believing that if they are denied the offering of water from their descendants, they will burn in hell forever. Though initially Paatan thinks of marriage as a fulfilment of filial responsibility, when his master scornfully comments, “Is there anyone who’d give away a daughter in marriage to an aajir?” (2.38), it becomes a clear hint of revolt
against traditional constraints and a sure proof of realisation of one’s inalienable right to happiness.

Paatan pleads with a gipsy woman to marry him and even attempts to escape with her. But this escapade of Paatan miserably fails and he has to pay heavily for having dreamt of a new life. The master’s wife herself sets men on him and captures him because she does not want to lose him once for all. The cruel flogging is repeated and the feudal high caste mob decides to shed the blood of this aajir believing that shedding of human blood will bring prosperity to them. “Paatan falls, is beaten, rises to his feet, made to walk with voices roaring ‘Stone him! Stone him’. Paatan seems to cower under a torrent of stones and writhes in pain as they hit him” (3.45-46).

Paatan realises that his fate is doomed as long as the bond exists and dreams of a day when he too can lead the life of a human being. He is sure “an aajir can have everything, once he tears the aajir’s bond to pieces” (4.50). He raves at his ancestors in a moment of uncontrollable anger, “You, bastard, Golak Kura for a paltry three rupees you signed an aajir’s bond and left generations enslaved for life. I’ll bring your line to end. If it were no death for the aajir’s bond I’ll finish it off with my death” (4.48). He feels that there is no escape for him, because there is no place in the world where there is no master, mistress, an aajir’s bond and drought scorched villagers dancing in glee at the sight of an aajir’s blood. But the consoling words of the mistress and her promise of setting him free for ever once again raise his hope. When she tells him that she has the aajir’s bond bound in a gaamchha (towel), all his apprehensions about the consequence of elopement with the Mistress have been subdued.

He is strongly tempted by the desire to live a human life in a world where class and status are obliterated and where everyone is regarded as human. Defying not
only the tradition but also the dictates of his conscience, he ventures to elope with the 
Mistress, who is decked up in ornaments. As they flee, when his demand for his bond 
is relentless, the Mistress casually reveals the truth:

THE MISTRESS. Paatan dear, listen to me. (Pleadingly) There’s 
no bond to bind you, it’s all turned to specks of dust. (In pain) 
Look at me. Where d’you hope to find a woman as luscious as
me?

PAATAN. You drag me down to damnation, and then you don’t 
give me my bond. (4.49)

Paatan is not ready to believe this and he thinks she has left it behind to have him 
flogged once again. He hears voices screaming:

An aajir, you! An aajir you!
No escape for you! No escape for you!
No life for you! No life for you!
An Aajir, you! No escape for you! (4.50)

With impotent rage, being gripped by the fear of being thrown once again into the 
abyss of servitude, he becomes aggressive. He holds her by the throat and strangles 
her and the Mistress becomes a prey to her own selfish designs.

The last scene is a tour de force of dramatic moment and has a deep symbolic 
meaning. As Maatang shrieks at the sight of his dead wife, he also confirms that there 
has never been an aajir’s bond, “I haven’t seen it myself, my father hadn’t seen it, it 
had turned to dust long ago” (4.50). The realisation that he is a free man leads Paatan 
to challenge his master, “Come, bind me, do whatever you like to me. There’s no 
aajir’s bond. So it seems I was never a slave after all....Like everyone else in the
world, I was a free man. (looks at the dead woman lying at his feet). This luscious woman was for me. I didn’t know” (4.51).

Paatan realises that though he is a free man, at present he will have to face legal charges as a murderer. He accepts his ultimate fate. As the mob moves closer, the man who knows that he is now free but trapped because of his crime walks voluntarily to the police station, his hands stretched out in regal dignity.

Arundhati Roy’s the prestigious ‘Booker Prize’ winning novel, The God of Small Things, has a lot of similarities with Mahasweta Devi’s plays “Water” and “Aajir”. Like these two plays, The God of Small Things is also spun on the very fabric of social stratification, the ‘cross caste’ conflict. All these works argue that despite constitutionalised watch words, ‘Equality, Liberty and Justice’ to all citizens for years. The Indians at large are still moaning under the unshruggable burden of the ‘Chaturvarna’ pyramid. Even the most progressive of democrats are unwittingly perpetuating social inequality, religious intolerance and racial discrimination.

As it has been handled by Mahasweta Devi in “Water”, Arundhati Roy has shown a very fine sense in enlivening the whole scenario with discreet correctness. Velutha, the prodigal Paravan, an untouchable, becomes her spectrometer for the purpose. He displays diverse colours of her experience in varied wavelengths of caste-feeling. Velutha is deprived of the opportunity of developing his innate engineering skill to full fruition due to his social inferior position as a Paravan. Maamachi’s remarks that, “if only he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer” (75), constitute a proof enough to prove the cruelty and injustice done to even potentially promising talented persons of the untouchable caste since generations. The novel reveals that in all walks of life Velutha suffers stock scorn and segregation of the upper caste people as Maghai and his community suffer in
Mahasweta Devi’s “Water”. The scourge of rigid caste system and naked brutality of the police system are convincingly evidenced by both these women writers in their respective works of art.

Ammu, the protagonist of the novel, a caste Christian, a divorce with two children, reminds us of the mistress in “Aajir” who is a victim of unquenchable ‘fire’ burning within her. As the mistress longs for physical intimacy with Paatan, Ammu’s biological response to Velutha’s muscular, well-built body is but spontaneous as her suppressed womanhood gets aroused after several years. But the male-chauvinistic and caste-bound social system permits no allowance for such human considerations. In “Aajir” the mistress gets killed by Paatan but in The God of Small Things Velutha’s sexual relationship costs him his life. He is brutally killed in the police custody. Ammu is forcibly separated from her children to die unwept, unhonoured, unsung and unremembered. All these victims are more sinned against than sinning.

As per the versions given by Mahasweta Devi’s translators, the language used by Mahasweta Devi is at times no less difficult to read and comprehend as it must have been to understand and translate. As the freelance critic Nilanjana S.Roy opines, “Mahasweta Devi is a translator’s nightmare: the simplicity and directness of her prose is deceptive, making it easy to convey the plot, the essential concerns, but none of the nuances of what she has to say” (35). Many years ago Adil Jussawala, an editor had complained, while searching for English translations of stories and poems by Indian writers for the Penguin Anthology: New Writing in India (1974), that many of our authors are notoriously unconcerned about how well or ill they are rendered into English. But this can not be said of Mahasweta Devi. Samik Bandyopadhyay who has translated Mahasweta Devi’s Five Plays testifies that she produced her own draft translations for reference and collaborated in other ways with the process of being
transplanted into English. In the introduction to the anthology he profusely acknowledges Mahasweta Devi’s active participation in the translation work:

In fact, for both “Bayen” and “Water”, Mahasweta Devi provided me with rough translations, a kind of first draft, for me to work upon…. Both “Water” and “Aajir” use a lot of dialect in their originals, and carry nuances alien to standard Bengali, and I couldn’t have tackled them without her assistance. (xv)

Though it is true that Mahasweta Devi always prioritises her urgent human themes over form and technique, one ought not to assume that she is indifferent to the latter. While analysing the essential dramatic strategies adopted by Mahasweta Devi in her plays, it is obvious that her theatre professedly employs realistic technique. She avoids the claptrap of dramaturgy to achieve simplicity. As S. Mokashi-Punekar rightly observes, “Quite often we forget that simplicity in art is quite a complex thing which has to be created after much sophisticated effort” (145). Thus, Mahasweta Devi’s plays are written in scenes. The devices like recorded tape, mime, gesture and chorus are used to a greater advantage in her plays. Her theatre like that of Badal Sircar is free from the burden of external trappings like settings and other devices that are generally connected with commercial theatre. The stage is free of superfluous theatrical properties which gives the playwright great freedom to present different situations more by suggestion than by scenic displays. The shift in the scene is suggested by darkening the stage partly.

Mahasweta Devi never tries to disguise the stage apparatus so as to make the audience aware that they are sitting in a theatre. In “Aajir”, in the opening scene, a voice—probably from an invisible ‘Sutradhar’—is heard three times which explains the
meaning of the term 'aajir'. This repetition highlights the predicament of humanity which has been exploited and marginalised from time immemorial.

The influence of Brecht is discernible in Mahasweta Devi’s practice of making the characters directly address the audience. In “Aajir” before assuming the role of his forefather, Paatan requests the audience’ permission, “Watch, gentlemen, how a man becomes slave from birth. Please allow me to become my forefather, Golak Kura” (1.35). As in the street plays, the important characters in “Aajir” and “Water”, transform in full view of the audience to enact the episodes in the past. In both the plays Mahasweta Devi uses the dramatic device of a character in the present enacting a happening in the past: in “Water” Maghai becomes his ancestor to forge his bond with the nether Ganga and in “Aajir” Paatan acts as his ancestor Golak Kura selling himself and his wife to perpetual slavery. The device itself becomes a metaphor for the continuities in the process of exploitation. As Samik Bandyopadhyay puts it in the introduction:

Set apart from the somewhat similar device of the flashback, the present device, with its deliberate recall/enactment as opposed to the spontaneity/memory drift of the former, emphasises historicity over nostalgia. As the character in the present becomes a character in the past, there is a natural lift in the style, an element of the ceremonial often verging on the ritual, to give the event a metaphoric charge. (xiii)

In order to produce singleness of effect, Mahasweta Devi makes use of the devices of parallels and contrasts in her plays. In “Water” the illiterate Maghai’s extraordinary insight in divining water and understanding ‘nature’ is contrasted with
the pompous officers from the Geological Survey of India. "In Aajir", the strong, well-built and virile Pattan is a docile slave to an old weakling like Maatang Shunri. Mahasweta Devi states in the introduction:

I have a reverence for materials collected from folklore, for they reveal how the common people have looked at an experience in the past and look at it now....To capture the continuities between past and present held together in the folk imagination, I bring legends, mythical figures and mythical happenings into a contemporary setting, and make an ironic use of these. (xii)

So in both the plays with songs, rituals and evocations Mahasweta Devi provides a historical field for the action.

As Mahasweta Devi believes "using dialect is necessary because it enriches language" (Untapped Resources 19), she powerfully employs common man’s speech in her plays to bring a realistic flavour. The ordinary language without any constraint of stage artificiality enables her to catch the rhythm idiom and vocabulary of the social class she writes about. There is an abundant use of colloquialism, slangs, unconventional swear words and 'four letter words'. To cite an example, in "Water", when Phulmani breaks out, "Santhosh is the government’s favourite son-in-law. The bastard filches from the government relief....The demon of demons that he is, when it comes to digging wells from the relief funds, he wouldn’t take our men for labourers" (6.119-120).

Usually Mahasweta Devi hurls irony at the higher-ups of the society to shake them out of their complacency and hypocrisy. Her skilful use of irony is a powerful stylistic tool in all her works. In "Water", Maghai, a water-diviner by profession and a progeny of Bhagirath who brought the river Ganga down is denied water and he
pours sand ironically on the pyre of his dead son. In “Aajir”, Paatan who is held as a slave by a bond signed by his ancestor—a slavery that denies him the right to love and marry—discovers that the bond has long turned to dust, but only too late. It is a heart-rending irony as Samik Bandyopadhyay remarks:

This is a metaphor, for the traditional constraints that bind the individual in India long after their legal authority has given way. Exploitation in India operates beyond the law and with the tacit acquiescence of an exploited class held in thrall by a load of conventional role obligations. Legal reforms or legal defences for the exploited have rarely affected the exploitative mechanism sustained by the illiteracy/ignorance of the exploited. (xiii)

Mahasweta Devi’s art is born out of impatience and rage. She claims that she does not understand art. But what she does not understand is, art cut off from its roots, that is, life. Life, as she has come to know through her lifelong close contact with the poorest classes of village people is hard, cruel and merciless. It is to the expression of this life, and to the exposure of a social system that makes this life a reality, Mahasweta Devi dedicates her artistic gifts. As she has chosen to keep certain social, economic, political, and psychological realities at the centre of her creative vision her novella Rudali highlights continuing battle against naked poverty due to shameless exploitation. Mahatma Gandhi himself once commented that poverty is the worst form of violence. As Mahasweta Devi puts it, “It is not possible to write romantic stories around hunger” (qtd. in Chatterjee 20), Rudali is about mankind’s basic need—hunger.

Rudali, focussing on hunger, is a powerful critique of an exploitative and repressive socio-economic and religious system and the nexus between them. In this
painful struggle between human beings and overpowering hunger, everything else loses its count. Confronting this, the author positions the issue of survival, with an assertion of belief in the necessity for, and benefits of, community. Similarly in Kamala Markandaya’s novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful Rice*, their tragedy is a result not of a tragic flaw or of man’s primal fall from grace, but of inequalities in the whole structure of society. Under the pressure of the hungry stomach, the characters begin to scorn the society and Rukmini, the narrator and leading character in *Nectar in a Sieve* says, “Fear, constant companion of the peasant. Hunger, ever at hand to jog his elbow should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear for the dark future; fear for the sharpness of hunger; fear for the blackness of death” (79).

Mahasweta Devi wrote this story of rudalis (professional mourners in Bengali under the title *Nairetey Megh* and later it was made into a play script in Hindi by Usha Ganguli in 1992. Since then it has had well over a hundred shows playing to packed houses, and has drawn the attention of both critics and theatre audience. Anjum Katyal translated both the story and the play into English and published them along with a detailed critical introduction. By showing the dire poverty of the villagers, the ways in which they are exploited, the burden of ritualised religion, the absolute power of the malik-mahajans (the landlord moneylender class) who have dispossessed the poor of this land in the years following Independence, and the corruption within the privileged classes, Mahasweta Devi constructs a powerful indictment. This indictment is spoken by the villagers, or through direct authorial addresses placed throughout the text, which almost acts as a refrain: “Everything in this life is a battle” (7).

Set against this exploitative system is the issue of survival. “Rudali is about... how to survive....It is very important in my story. The whole system is exposed
through this….These are stories of people’s struggle, their confrontation with the system” (16) says Mahasweta Devi in the introduction to this novella. The text explicates the various strategies of survival employed by the subalterns as individuals and as a community. The story sees an evolution in the central character, Sanichari, who emerges at the end as better equipped to adapt, survive and manipulate the system. In other words, she becomes more empowered than she is at the beginning.

The familiarity with the life of the protagonist facilitates the readers to be familiarised with the life of her community. As in “Aajir”, here also the protagonist is historicised and not highlighted to the exclusion of context. Even as the story begins, Mahasweta Devi situates Sanichari in a socio-economic context, and firmly establishes that Sanichari, who shares the condition of poverty with the other villagers, is one of a community: “In Tahad village, ganjus and dushads (untouchable castes in Bihar) were in a majority. Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty” (54).

Sanichari’s mother-in-law would often remark that, being born on an unlucky day of the week (Saturday or Sanichar, hence her name, Sanichari), she was cursed, doomed to suffer. But Sanichari cannot see that those born on so-called ‘lucky’ days have an easier time of it. It is not fate but it is a question of economic condition. Thus Mahasweta Devi underscores the tension between fate and the historicity of a politically and economically constructed situation, challenging the concept of a ‘natural’ order.

Right from the beginning Mahasweta Devi places the central character Sanichari in her historical situation, provides a socio-economic context and emphasises that her problems are common to her class, caste and gender. There is a continuous suturing of Sanichari’s private life to the socio-economic situation, to
history. This insistence on embedding Sanichari in the broader context continues throughout the story, in various other ways. The basic observation Mahasweta Devi makes is quite simple—these marginalised and dispossessed have been reduced to bondage, beggary and prostitution. It has become worse, not better, with the economic developments that have taken place after Independence. It is nothing new on the Indian scene, just the same troika—poverty inequality and injustice.

Mahasweta Devi never individualises Sanichari through a description of her appearance, her clothes, mannerisms and habits of speech. When Sanichari speaks, she uses the same dialect, sounds like any of the other villagers of her class. Direct authorial comments like “In this village everyone is unhappy. They understand suffering” (54), link Sanichari’s story to a larger discourse of struggle and exploitation. In Mahasweta Devi’s story, Sanichari is a woman like others, a person like others and like the other villagers she too lives in desperate poverty. By making this point clearly right at the beginning of her simply written narrative, Mahasweta Devi somberly points out that every person who suffers from such poverty has a story within.

All the personal events in Sanichari’s life have a direct connection with the exploitative system. From the beginning of the story, she has to face so many obstacles from social and economical levels because she not only belongs to the downtrodden community, but also to the economically weaker section. She is a poor, low-caste agricultural labourer for whom nothing has ever come easy, just the daily struggle for a little maize gruel and salt is exhausting. Every loss she suffers is because of the dire poverty, the constricted life and the total lack of hope of any change or improvement.
Malik-mahajan Ramavatār embodies a system which dehumanises, brutalises and invades the most private space of an individual—the emotions—so that even grief is distorted in the desperate struggle for survival. For example, when her mother-in-law died Sanichari did not cry. At that time, her husband and his brother, both the old woman’s sons, were in jail because of Malik-Mahajan Ramavatār Singh. Enraged at the loss of some wheat, Ramavatār Singh had all the young dushad and ganju males of the village locked up. “There wasn’t even a cupful of grain in the house...handling all the arrangements for the cremation, she [Sanichari] was so busy that there was no time to cry” (54-55). When her brother-in-law and his wife died, Sanichari is once again not able to weep, because she is so tensed up over the fact that Ramavatār is trying to have all the dushads and ganjus evicted from the village. She muses Weep or worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbours cheaply at the ‘shradh’?” (55)

When everyone explains the fact that she and her husband do not shed any tears by the sentiment that their grief must have hardened into stone within them at the frequent deaths in the family, Sanichari sighs with relief to herself. The number of mouths to be fed with the meager scrapings they bring home after labouring on the Malik’s field is reduced and at least the living ones’ own stomachs would be full. This is not self-centredness but the ugly face of cruel poverty. But Sanichari has never thought that she will be not able to cry at her husband’s death also. And yet, such is her destiny. Her husband dies of cholera after drinking the contaminated and putrid ‘sanctified’ milk donated to the Shiva idol by the rich. When he dies, she has barely had time to register the fact and cry:

The government officers didn’t give her any time to shed tears.

They burned the corpses quickly. They dragged Sanichari and
Budhua off for a vaccination against the disease....She washed off the sindoor from her head...broke her bangles, and returned to the village...and after paying for Badhua's father's shradh, she was so hardpressed to feed her little son, that she never had time to cry for her husband. (56-57)

Sanichari is made to pay twice over for ritual offerings and in order to appease the local village priest she is forced into indebtedness to Ramavatar. As in the case of Sanichari, every death is mediated by the religious demands that follow for rituals which further impoverish the already poor. This aspect of the religious beliefs have been under scathing criticism earlier by writers like Prem Chand, T.S. Pillai and U.R.Ananthamurthy.

Paralleling the economic stranglehold of the malik-mahajans is the social oppression of a religious system which controls these have-nots through fear and superstition. Not even once, in the story, religion is shown as offering some solace or succour to the poverty-stricken. But it further impoverishes and enslaves them causing indebtedness through its web of demands and obligations. Sanichari is the best example of how the system oppresses and exploits a poor being. All one sees of religion is superstition and ritual. The rich can afford its rules and regulations and even they benefit by it financially when it comes to the tax benefits from acres of land dedicated to family deities. For example, Gambhir Singh's handsome payment to astrologers and pandits to find out that his only sin has been that of striking a pregnant cow as a boy is a fine illustration of how the rich manipulate religion to their own ends.

One would perhaps see parallels in Indira Parthasarathy’s The Legend of Nandan where theatre is used as a space to critique hegemony which finds itself
located in Indian society in the ideology of brahminism. Using the Hindu institution and discourse on the caste system as the context, Indira Parthasarathy deconstructs the traditional story of Nandan, a paraiyan. In no uncertain terms, he presents the invidiousness of the higher-caste Hindus who fan Nandan’s religious fervour and devotion to Lord Nataraja to beguile him. Indira Parthasarathy in this play questions the authenticity of the supernatural and presents it as a device to secure legitimation of upper caste hegemony.

In Rudali through Dulan, who is acknowledged by the members of his community as a knowing one, Mahasweta Devi projects a subaltern view of local politics and the hypocrisy of the privileged classes. The episode in which Lachman Singh makes his appearance beside the murdered corpse of his kinsman Bhairab Singh exposes the hypocrisy and corruption of the landlords. In a single passage the author spotlights their criminality, greed, vicious discrimination against the lower castes, power to manipulate police and investigative procedures, infighting, and the determination with which they close class ranks in the face of a possible threat. In his attempt to explain their present conditions and analyse how they are caused, Dulan his community reminds of a past heroism and courage. “It explained clearly how the ruthless Rajputs infiltrated this remote area of tribals and from zamindars gradually built themselves up to the status of jotedar / moneylenders and established themselves as the masters of the area” (73).

Sanichari, who borrows a meager amount of twenty rupees for her husband’s ‘shradh’ has to repay fifty rupees through bonded labour over the next five years, while thousands of rupees is carelessly spent on the lavish ‘shradhs’ of her masters. The dispossessed’s preoccupation with earning enough to subsist on, the references to getting by on a half-empty stomach, the hard struggle to produce food, the imposed
austerity with even little indulgences like bangles or a wooden comb appearing to be impossible dreams, are juxtaposed against frequent references to the wanton way in which the rich spend money on funeral ceremonies:

When someone died in a malik-mahajan household, the amount of money spent on the death ceremony immediately raised the prestige of the family. The price for this is paid by the dushads, dhobis, ganjus and kols, from the hides of whom the overlords extracted the sums they had overspent. (68)

Malik-mahajans like Ramavatar Singh, and later his son Lachman Singh, are shown as controlling and influencing almost every aspect of the lives of the lower caste villagers. Not only can they have the men locked up whenever they feel like it, they can use and discard the women and extract years of unpaid labour as repayment for small debts. The villagers repressed and forced to submit to their powers, cherish no illusions about the greed, miserliness or moral bankruptcy of their masters.

Sanichari’s son Budhua is shown as sensitive, thoughtful, gentle, caring, both towards his mother and his wife, though the two are not compatible. He understands both these very different women and is capable of being compassionate and not judgemental. His characterisation is an unusual reversal of the normative male-family-member type. Mahasweta Devi underscores Budhua’s sensitivity, first towards his mother, whose anger at his wife he understands and with whom he expresses solidarity and then towards his wife’s restlessness and longing for more than their stringent circumstances can offer. Instead of merely using his authority as a husband to forbid her leaving home, he strives to find a solution, providing her with something to do and a means of earning a little more to indulge her unappeased
appetite. He is fully aware of his wife's limitation, yet does not condemn her by the normative standards of expectation of a wife's duties.

Sanichari values this gentle son so much that when it comes to the experience of losing him, the entire language of the text alters. The dry, staccato statements which describe the death of Sanichari's husband, are replaced by a more repetitive, intense, emotional rhythm:

That day—not just that day, for several days before that—Budhua's condition had worsened. The 'vaid's' medicine was not working.... Sanichari herself went, running all the way she went, to ask the 'vaid' for some other medicine. She went even though she knew that no medicine could help him now. Sanichari got home to find her son dead and her daughter-in-law gone. The baby was crying in the room. (61)

The loss of Budhua to Sanichari is the loss of a sympathetic, supportive and caring companion. Sanichari cannot imagine a life without him. But in all this, she does not cry for her son either. Nor can she cry. She sits like one stunned then falls into exhausted slumber.

After Budhua's death, when Sanichari finds herself totally alone, she experiences the support and bonding a community can offer. It is Dulan who at every stage contributes to Sanichari's growing empowerment. He is an embodiment of the resistant will, the sharp intelligence, the irreverance, the cynicism, and the cunningness that the subaltern uses to subvert the total control of the masters. He is the one who constantly questions authority and teaches the others to be critical of it. Throughout the text, Dulan's is the voice that strips away sentimentality and blind prejudice in favour of adaptation and rational argument. This voice criticises, accuses
and condemns the upper classes, highlights their moral corruption, greed and hypocrisy.

Dulan maintains a critical perspective on the system. He refuses to believe or allow his community to believe that there is anything ordained or natural about their situation. As Antonio Gramsci asserts:

Every social group coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.(5)

the figure of Dulan in Rudali is configured as just such an ‘organic intellectual’.

But at the same time, he is positioned as a leader in any formal sense. He speaks as one among them, no more or no less. The community, while valuing his sharp mind, is not especially in awe of him. There is no aura of authority surrounding him and he does nothing to achieve it. Though at every stressful juncture of Sanichari’s life he intervenes to advise, help, educate and enlighten her, they interact just as peers, unselfconsciously free from any hint of asymmetry in their relationship. After her daughter-in-law Parbatia and her grand son Haroa leave her because they refuse to submit to the harsh conditions of poverty, though their options being prostitution and the insecurities of a wandering life, it is Dulan who diverts her mind from helpless despair to a realisation that actually she is angry about the unfairness of her situation. He presents her with a survival strategy, a way of turning the situation around so that she can use the system instead of just being used by it. Here Sanichari resembles Vellyyamma, the narrator’s grandmother, an ordinary faceless woman who
lives an extraordinary life in Tamil Dalit writer Bama’s *Sangati*. This old woman takes control of her life without bitterness or rancor after her husband deserts her, fights starvation and lives on to become one of the most sought-after persons in the village by becoming a mid-wife.

Like Dulan’s characterisation, the relationship between Sanichari and Bikhni, Sanichari’s childhood friend, is a major fictional strategy used by Mahasweta Devi to inflect a whole gamut of signification. Usha Ganguli who did the dramatic version of this story feels, “Sanichari and Bikhni don’t appeal to me simply because they belong to a different class. There is something very human in them, and that breaks the class barrier. Everybody is able to communicate with them, their struggle becomes everybody’s struggle” (qtd. in Katyal 28).

When Sanichari accidentally meets Bikhni at a local mela, she has already lost every member of her family. She is a woman shorn of all roles—no one’s daughter, wife, mother, mother-in-law or grandmother. Bikhni is also abandoned by her son and has left home with no plans and nowhere to go. Socially and financially they are equals; both are equally without family and equally abandoned. These women are not related; they have only their circumstance in common—both have been abandoned by the members of their family, who could have provided them with support in their old age. They construct their comradeship on the basis of their common situation. By pairing up they provide each other with company, and pool their resources to ensure a degree of economic stability. The subtly nuanced closeness between these two women is very poignant. It is very rare, particularly in Indian literature, to come across an intimate relationship between two old women treated with such sensitive, affectionate tenderness.
Compared to Sanichari, Bikhni is more rebellious and her bold readiness to break out of the restrictions imposed on women like them by religious and social custom gradually rubs off on Sanichari. Later, when Dulan suggests that they can become rudalis, Bikhni welcomes the idea immediately, and her willing acceptance helps Sanichari to get used to it. When they need reinforcements and Dulan suggests bringing in the prostitutes from Tohri, it is once again Bikhni who readily agrees to go and negotiate with them. While Sanichari demurs “Won’t there be talk in the village?” (71) Bikhni dismissively replies, “So let them talk!” (71). Sanichari’s life with Bikhni is happy and fulfilling. As Dulan, Bikhni is also equally instrumental in the gradual empowerment of Sanichari. Companionship, closeness and mutual dependency, these come through clearly as does Sanichari’s loneliness after Bikhni’s death.

The news of Bikhni’s death in far away Ranchi is handled by Mahasweta Devi in her characteristically understated style, which through its unemotional lack of emphasis, actually heightens impact. Sanichari sits down and takes stock of her life after receiving the news. As stated by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, sorrows do not come in single spies but in battalions to the wretched mortals like Sanichari. The passage immediately after Sanichari learns of Bikhni’s death is a good example of the way the author moves from negative—and weakening—emotions like fear, to self-knowledge and finally to positive action, without minimising the grief Sanichari feels. She will not cry for Bikhni. Her loss lies deeper, but life must go on:

There had always been grief in her life. But she never felt this devouring fear before. Bikhni’s death affected her livelihood, her profession, that’s why she’s experiencing this fear.... If Sanichari has survived so much grief, she’ll survive the loss of Bikhni. She’s
devastated, but she won’t cry. Money, rice, new clothes—without getting these in return tears are a useless luxury. (88-89)

Once again, to the shattered Sanichari, Dulan acts out his role as a friend, philosopher and guide. He clinches the issue, “It’s wrong to give up one’s land, and your profession of funeral wailing is like your land, you mustn’t give it up” (89). The class of malik-mahajans who have dispossessed the poor of their land in the years following the Independence, generally hold elaborate funerals at which orgiastic weeping and ululation is performed by the rudalis. Sanichari, the poor, low-caste agricultural labourer, after she becomes a professional mourner, all she has to do is weep, wail and ululate, roll on the ground, strike herself on the breast, belly and forehead, and she will receive fine meals, cash and clothes. The malik-mahajans are obliged to compensate Sanichari handsomely for shedding tears in memory of her ‘benefactors’, their deceased kith and kin.

The rudalis, the exhausted agricultural labourers, have nothing to sell but their howls and some of them have been seduced, ruined and thrown into the whores’ quarters by the same malik-mahajans. Their deep stressful lives can cripple human communication. But the tears which would have been a meaningful rite of socialisation for Sanichari, when she herself was genuinely bereaved remained unshed, only to reappear now in a perverted saleable form and human tears have become commodified.

Sanichari’s display of grief is valuable because it papers over cracks and fissures in the social system, making it appear as if the poor care for the rich as human beings, as though they have a sense of loyalty and charming old world feudal obligation which they express in ‘spontaneous’ grief. As Sanichari gathers together a motley band of rudalis from among the whores, victory is ultimately theirs. The
liminal, shadowy pictures of the night now take pride of place in the elaborate performance of a rich man’s death ritual. Sanichari commands authoritatively, “Malik said, make a great noise, a big fuss, something people will talk about...Move, move, let us get on with our work. The malik belongs to us now” (91).

If community can be a tool of offence and defence for the exploiters, it is a form of protection and strength for the exploited. Mahasweta Devi never passes up a chance to emphasise the value and necessity of community, partnership, fraternity and sisterhood as essential survival aids for the poor and oppressed. She posits class solidarity as the strongest weapon against exploitation. She does this through direct statements like, “There are some debts that can never be repaid...If her fellow-villagers had not rallied around in this manner, would Sanichari have survived?” (62).

When Sanichari finds herself totally alone after her husband’s death, she experiences the support and bonding of her community. After her son’s death, she is deserted by her daughter-in-law and the responsibility of bringing up her infant grandson falls heavily on her. When the child does not stop crying, Dulan’s wife comes by and picks up the child, stating matter-of-factly that her daughter-in-law will breastfeed the child along with her own. She also brings news of a job repairing the railway line which can help Sanichari earn some money. Dulan and his family look out for her. Her neighbour Parbhu ganju comes up with an offer to shift her hut into his own compound. Natua dushad willingly sells Sanichari’s vegetables for her in the market.

These are perfect examples of networking, solidarity and communal mothering which are performed in a matter-of-fact, down-to-earth manner with no nuance of condescension or charity. Sanichari is fully aware of the truth that how essential to survival community is. “In order to survive, the poor and the oppressed need the
support of the other poor and the oppressed. Without that support, it is impossible to live in the village even on milk and ghee provided by the malik” (63), Sanichari reflects. In Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novel So Many Hungers also we witness the bitter and gruesome spectacles of endless miseries of the famished uprooted millions in the Bengal famine of 1943. But beneath them, as in Rudali there is almost always present the novelist’s unflinching faith in life and its invincibility, indestructibility and worthiness. Though all the villagers are almost starving, they are strengthened, and not subdued, by oppression and terror. In Coolie, as Mulk Raj Anand brings home to the reader the living conditions of the poor and the heartlessness of the rich, he suggests that true comradeship of man for man exists only among the very poor people.

‘Unity is strength’; ‘United we stand and divided we fall’ are common sayings which signify solidarity is the key to unlock oppression. Mahasweta Devi underlines this message in Rudali, as Bama does so in her novels Sangati and Vanmam, which foreground caste differences. Bama’s stories are an attempt to formulate a Dalit feminism by examining the twin oppressions of caste and gender together. Throughout her novel Sangati, for all the violence that the women suffer at the hands of their own men and the upper caste communities, there is a strong sense of cultural identity that these women share which gives them the strength to withstand all other oppressions.

Vanmam highlights that amidst the difference is the convergence of the communities to empower themselves towards upliftment, converged on the point of harmony which lead them to gain victory in the society. In this novel, the Pallars and Paraiyars as a community depute a common candidate for the election. The candidate from the lower caste contests with the upper caste and has a landslide victory and
becomes the president which is their first victory. And the community does not want to stop with their first victory and they work ahead for their progress with dreams that the Dalit voice must resonate in the state legislatures and in the national parliament.

They may be everyday stories of oppression but Bama desists from making it a mournful, bitter tirade against oppression. She knows that in spite of everything life can have its celebratory moments for the Dalit woman. As in the stories of Mahasweta Devi, in the short fictional world of Bama there are various instances of this kind of resistance for achievement of recognition.

In the whole text of Rudali there is no act of meanness or exploitation among the low caste villagers, neither between women nor between men and women. The only exception is Sanichari’s daughter-in-law, Parbatia, who deserts her child and runs away, but even that treachery is resolved by Sanichari’s understanding and her inclusion at the end. But the text bristles with references to the malik-mahajan’s veniality and callousness, showing them killing, cheating and betraying even close relatives for monetary gain. Among the wives of the malik-mahajans we see mutual jealousy, spiteful gossip and one-upmanship, as well as internalisation of class values and attitudes such as pride in displays of wealth and power. At the same time, Mahasweta Devi highlights how women across class lines remain objects of similar kinds of discrimination and social prejudice in the sequence in which Nathuni’s middle wife complains to Sanichari about how she is looked down upon and denied respect because she is the mother of a girl, whereas her co-wives, by giving birth to sons, have secured their privileged positions. This social attitude, widely internalised by the women, which holds a woman solely responsible for all the so-called ills and misfortunes echoes Sanichari’s mother-in-law’s accusations that it is the unlucky, accursed Sanichari who is to blame for all the hardships in their family. The irony is
that the upper-class women who feel privileged are also bound by the same social and cultural prejudices that affect the poor women.

The relationship between Sanichari and Bikhni, childhood playmates who rediscover each other as ageing, lonely women and decide to team up, is the major statement of bonding and support within the community. These two are not related, they have only their circumstances in common. Both have been abandoned by members of their family, who could have provided them with support in their old age. Both are poor and struggling to find means of survival. By teaming up they provide each other with company, and pool their resources to ensure a degree of economic stability.

Mahasweta Devi expands the notion of community to include the prostitutes, women who are traditionally seen as outside community, or as forming an outcast, separate community of their own. Women from the village who have become prostitutes have families within the village community. Some have been used and discarded by the malik-mahajans; some have mothers who were kept women and are forced into prostitution in their turn; others become prostitutes because they have run away from home, looking for better options than the humdrum, circumscribed existence that poverty and social class lock them into. Mahasweta Devi strongly presents prostitutes as the victims of the corroded oppressive system. They too are exploited, and they struggle to feed themselves, just like the other villagers. Any immorality or social shame associated with them exists only in the eyes of the upper classes, which are held responsible for their condition anyway. Dulan explains at some length the socio-economic causes that have led to their becoming prostitutes, and accuses the malik-mahajans of being responsible. He undoes the common belief that the prostitutes are ‘other’, and establishes that they are poor working women
trying to fill their stomachs like everyone else. He advises Sanichari and Bikhni to work with them and to take them into the community.

Sanichari’s daughter-in-law, Parbatia is a good example of the way in which Mahasweta Devi resolves the issue of prostitutes. She escapes from a severely circumscribed, poverty-ridden existence, leaving behind all duties and responsibilities driven by a hunger and need in excess of what her daily life can offer. Running off with a wandering medicine man, in a few years she is back as a prostitute in Tohri. At the end of the story, she is drawn back into the fold by her erstwhile mother-in-law, who invites her to join the community of rudalis by emphasising that this profession will stand them in good stead when they age and other means of livelihood fail them.

The story strongly presents prostitutes as the victims of a system—poor, exploited, struggling to feed themselves—just like the other villagers. Any immorality or social shame associated with them exists only in the eyes of the upper class who are held responsible for their condition any way. Mahasweta Devi in Rudali projects the prostitutes as equals and co-victims and talks of mutual co-operation and there is no condescension of decent women setting out to ‘help’ the fallen women. At no point does Sanichari imply that her profession as a rudali is better than their profession. Nor does she bring up the concept of ‘self-respect’ with all its accompanying baggage of moral and social judgements and patriarchal formulations. The story does not draw a moral distinction between the labour of prostitution and ‘honest hard work’. In fact, the story repeatedly stresses that all forms of work are equal—mourning, prostitution, working in the fields—each is a way of keeping the stomach fed.

The text closes on the note of Sanichari’s organising and training the prostitutes into a group. Unlike the upper class wives of the maliks, Sanichari is free
to define the boundaries of her existence. She collaborates with the whores to create a socially desirable feminine role, and the reader can see the seeds of Sanichari as a leader as she encourages her troupe to wail louder, hit their heads on the ground: “The randi rudalis surrounded the swollen corpse and started wailing, hitting their heads on the ground. The gomastha began to weep tears of sorrow. Nothing will be left! Cunning Sanichari! Hitting their heads meant they had to be paid double!” (91).

Mahasweta Devi is firm in rejecting the idea that this text could be especially identified with women in anyway, since gender is subsumed into the discourse of class. To emphasise the former at the expense of the latter is a denial of history as she sees it. As she explains:

The background of Rudali extends much beyond [the story]. I have travelled the whole of Palamou extensively by foot. I have seen all kinds of exploitation including bonded labour...A good number of my stories,...and Rudali are placed in this particular locale. These are stories of people’s struggle, their confrontation with the system. (16)

In Rudali, the ritual weeping breaks the banks of personal or even gender based experience and bereavement becomes part of the whole absurd human condition evoking sobs and laughter simultaneously. Using this eerie custom of the rudalis as a metaphor, Mahasweta Devi has created a story of a heart-rending ‘survival strategy’ or ‘coping mechanism’. She has rendered a powerful and complex symbol—rich in ironies—in the closing image of her text: an organised band of women, the marginalised and outcast, intervening to subvert the solemn hypocrisy of an occasion which is metonymy for a patriarchal, exploitative system.
In the foreground, Sanichari and her friends, Dulan ganju, her guru of survival strategies, Bikhni, her alter ego, and the poor women labourers who become prostitutes out of sheer hunger, act out the real drama of Indian society. Here this is how the marginalised individuals, for whom rebellion is not a feasible option, band together, time and again, to fashion some means of livelihood which will mesh with the life style of their oppressors, thus forming yet another patchwork of caste on the fraying social fabric. The ritual flattery of the rudalis provokes thought on the tragic compulsions that make people simulate grief.

The story closes on the upbeat. Sanichari is positive and the prostitutes are having a good time. There is a distinct feeling of an encounter, with the round going to the rudalis; of a skirmish which is won by the women. There is a definite evolution in Sanichari, leaving her stronger, freer and more in control of her situation. The story has traced Sanichari’s growing empowerment, which is helped by Bikhni’s more open and adaptive attitude to new ideas and opportunities. The Sanichari one can see at the end of the story—outgoing, shrewd, manipulative—is very different from the stoic, long-suffering but repressed woman in the beginning of the story. Rudali with its lively interchange between Sanichari and her friends, and the fiercely triumphant ending, allows the reader to breathe free at last with a sense of ‘justice’ having been meted out to the rich malik-mahajans.

A major concern of this text is to establish itself as reality, not fiction. The harsh realities of poverty, exploitation and death are exposed in brutal detail with all their attendant degradation. Mahasweta Devi uses the movement of Sanichari’s evolution to empowerment as the organising principle around which other aspects of the agenda, such as the critique of the socio-economic system, are arranged. She uses the composite character of Dulan gangu to embody the politicised subaltern. She
skillfully breaks narration with dialogue, ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’—allowing the characters to speak for themselves and simultaneously establishing authenticity. She punctuates this discourse of deprivation with death, orchestrating it so that each death grows progressively closer and more devastating to the central character, maintaining as ironic counterpoint those other deaths, the deaths the rich.

Mahasweta Devi masterful use of irony is perhaps her most powerful creative tool. In her hands the social custom of rudalis, accumulates rich layers of ironic symbolism, variously explicated by Dulan and Sanichari, until it takes on all the power of a weapon of subversion. As Mahasweta Devi herself claims, her work as a journalist, creative writer and activist overlap. Anjum Katyal comments:

I see Rudali...as activist fiction. It sets out to support the process of struggle she writes about—by enlightening, educating, celebrating, reaffirming and inspiring. It participates in the struggle by attacking, through accusation and exposure, the exploitative system the struggle targets and the individuals through whom this system functions. Fiction is honed into a weapon by being presented as its apparent opposite, reportage. Just as Dulan’s work in Rudali is consciousness-raising, Rudali’s work is conscientizing. (27)

In many ways, Rudali has its kinship with “Mother of 1084”. First and foremost, the common thread of mourning runs through both. In both these works a woman is placed at the centre and in both there is a corpse or a number of corpses, the protagonists have to deal with. In fact, their relationship with the dead will eventually define them, and for good. In both situations the women are not merely survivors by coincidence; they are ‘forced’ to survive. And yet, they grope in two different landscapes. In “Mother of 1084”, the central character, a bereaved mother, circles
around her grief with a strangely moving numbness. In Rudali, there is no space for personal grief, because surviving an inhuman economic ordeal is the overwhelming concern. Both the texts deal with the business of mourning without shedding any tears. In both the protagonists (because they are women) are considered unnatural, even monstrous, by the community around them for not shedding any tears. And yet, it is precisely at this juncture, that Mahasweta Devi takes up the narrative of their lives to examine it with clinical precision.

While the mother in “Mother of 1084” finds her own life intensifying, the closer she moves to the dead body of her son, the central character of Rudali finds herself only by moving away from her dear, dead ones. She herself is so precariously close to death from hunger, that she cannot allow herself the indulgence of grief. Her penury has completely divested her of all human dignity:

Somewhere along the way she discovers the market for staged lamentations among the upper classes as they look for the safe-keys of the deceased. What reads like a farce can be appalling in real life. And to imagine that this practice is rampant in many parts of India even today! (Gill 30)

The crassness with which the business of mourning is handled among the upper classes is only symptomatic of a deep rot at every level of the social order. Since the woman in question here was the weakest of weak, it is she who will emerge the strongest of them all. This is after all, true poetic justice. And yet, nowhere does this book become predictable. Unexpectedly, one day Sanichari discovers the price of her tears. Like Pozzo in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot who says that one day he went blind and one day Lucky went dumb or like the character in Kafka’s Metamorphosis who wakes up one day to find that he has been transformed into a cockroach, in
Rudali, it is a great moment in time, in history, in the text when this woman discovers the price of her tears. Tears become a commodity and the destitute women become the pedlars of grief. Great epics have followed from just such a moment. But who, if not Mahasweta Devi, would know better the perils of spinning epics out of such wretched human suffering! So, she once again lowers the pitch of a revelation here.

"Albert Camus claimed in his 1957 Nobel Prize speech that the sympathy of the artist should lie with the victim" (qtd. in Noor 356). Mahasweta Devi demonstrates the veracity of this statement in all these three works. Successfully she draws the readers' sympathies towards the struggling bodies and minds of these wretched protagonists. Her trenchant pen is as ruthless as ever in delineating the socio-economic oppression in which all these characters are forced to live.

These are not just mere narratives of individual struggles, but probes into the identity of a community of the suppressed. Though marginalised and living on the fringes, their resistance, indomitable determination and aspirations make their otherwise unremarkable lives worthy of admiration. These subalterns who have worked hard all their lives, but never found a space for themselves in the record books of society are heroic in their own right and march towards the realization of Tagore's prayer in Gitanjali:

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.(20)
Dr. Ambedkar has said education, organisation and agitation are the triple explosive which would demolish the edifices of any oppressive system. As Mahasweta Devi reflects in the introduction to her novel Chotti Munda and His Arrow, “It is my firm belief in the last phase of my creative years of my life, that this solidarity is resistance” (xiv), though not educated, Mahasweta Devi’s characters, victims of multilayered repression can bring out the power of collective and collaborative resistance either through public or hidden transcripts.

Respecting another as much as we would want to be respected; allowing someone else to have as much as we have; giving another the same opportunities that we want for ourselves and our family—all these are not just idealistic theories, but the pathway to a real non-violent way to life. These great truths have been the blueprint for good living throughout history. Through these stories, Mahasweta Devi attempts to sensitize and channelise the readers towards these great truths.

This ‘hydra-headed’ repression becomes all the more devilish when its victims happen to be women. Ruthlessly it wields its tentacles to injure and exploit them sexually and that is the main focus of the next chapter entitled “Injury”.