Chapter 7

Gender-Based Violence in the Dynamics of Caste and Class

in Mahasweta Devi’s Short Stories

Mahasweta Devi is known for her ground-breaking and prolific literary work focussing on the plight of the dispossessed tribes as well as of other marginalized people such as landless labourers of Eastern India. As editor of the journal *Bortika*, Devi has penned several stories that are often the product of her meticulous research as a journalist. Her narratives document the tribal communities’ struggle to overcome the oppression and violence wrought by high-caste landlords, money-lenders, and corrupt government officials. Through her writings – translated into several Indian and foreign languages – she has championed the cause of the denotified tribes of India. The denotified tribes are the indigenous groups who were tarnished by the British Colonial State as being ‘natural criminals’ mainly because they led a nomadic life. These tribes face discrimination even today for they are still investigated by the police and are often categorized as ‘habitual offenders.’ Hence, all her work is dedicated to highlighting the suffering of all those dispossessed and downtrodden individuals pushed to the periphery of society and forgotten as a part of humanity. Her most celebrated novel *Hajar Churashir Ma* is based on the Naxalite movement that initiated in Naxalbari area of North Bengal and spread throughout the state in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Devi brings a sense of comprehension, compassion and rationality to one of Bengal’s most
turbulent times when aggrieved tribal communities and landless labourers rebelled against their exploitation at the hands of landlords and moneylenders. This work also marked the beginning of Devi’s explorations of gender relationships in the context of “subalternity” (Bhattacharya 97).

Devi’s literary work exposes the legacy of violence that has been passed on into the lives of generations of women. She has, however, always refused to accept the tag of feminism along with any other ‘isms’ that certain critics assign to her writings. Nonetheless, her works portray women as victims of the politics of gender, class and caste played at various levels of social relationships. Her stories are a study in brutality and degradation wrought on women for centuries. She narrates horrific tales of women forcibly strait-jacketed into the mythical assumptions of ‘womanhood’ perpetuated through patriarchal ideology; she also documents women’s reprisals against subjugation, which become the means to their potential emancipation. Her fictional works are based on those rarely disclosed, or constantly overlooked, accounts where women are stripped of their honour and humanity. It is the physical, emotional, psychological rape that forces woman to strip the cloak of chastity, obedience and meekness off her, transforming this act of disrobing into a symbol of female power.

In “Dhowli,” a widowed Dhowli risks starvation to escape being her brother-in-law’s mistress only to fall into the same trap with a wealthy Brahmin landlord’s son. Dhowli’s sexual exploitation and other atrocities meted out to her are a consequence of the pitiable socio-economic condition that is characteristic of the life of a subaltern female (Literature of Nature 322). Another short story by Devi entitled “Douloti the Bountiful” is an eye-
opener on the abject poverty in which the Indian tribal population lives and, also, on the terrifying fate that awaits those who attempt to escape their pathetic circumstances. Douloti, daughter of a deceased bonded slave, is tricked by a wealthy upper-caste man’s promise of marriage. She is sold into prostitution. As prostitute, her body is turned into a “gleaming orifice”. It is transformed into an object that is valued through being “consumed at the will of the user” (“Ethical Encounters” 153). After being sexually exploited by several men Douloti is infected with a venereal disease. Her attempts to get treatment for her illness are thwarted by the hospital officials who ask her to seek medication at another faraway hospital. However, she decides to walk back home and dies on her way. Her corpse is found sprawling in the courtyard of a school where the teacher has inscribed a large map of India in celebration of Independence Day. Mohan, the tutor, wants his students to imbibe the lesson of nationalism. Instead they discover Douloti’s corpse lying on the map. The story ends with Devi’s statement that “Douloti is all over India” (*Imaginary Maps* 160). Spivak says that the persistent agendas of nationalisms and sexuality are encrypted in the “superexploitation” of Douloti’s gendered body (“Woman in Difference”).

“The Hunt” also dwells on the theme of sexual harassment. Devi focusses on violence that is often employed to subdue and control women. Here a tribal woman falls prey to a rich man’s lascivious desires. But Mary – the semi-subaltern protagonist – puts a stop to his sexual advances by resorting to violence. She murders the offender with her machete. This turning point in Mary’s life comes on the night of a tribal spring festival when after a period of thirteen years gender roles are momentarily reversed as women assume the
role of hunters and men that of clowns. By assuming the role of a hunter as per
the ritual, Mary gains courage and eliminates the threat looming over her,
thereby averting her own destruction. “The Hunt” shows Mary’s revenge
against “sexual patriarchy” (Literature of Nature 318). Devi’s stories thus
highlight the dismal conditions in which the subaltern women are forced to
live where they continually bear degradation at personal, socio-economic and
political levels. However, her work also highlights the fact that it is primarily
woman herself who can transform herself from a victim to a subject who
follows the courage of her convictions and brings about a metamorphosis in
her life.

This chapter shall read Devi’s two anthologies of short stories entitled
Breast Stories, After Kurukshetra, and another story “The Fairy tale of
Mohanpur” to analyze representations of violence against women. In Breast
Stories, Devi twice evokes female characters from ancient Hindu mythology,
envisions them as subalterns in the imagined historical context and, creates a
link with the female protagonists of her short stories. As the title suggests,
Breast Stories is a trilogy of short stories; it has been translated and analyzed
by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak and, in Spivak’s view, the ‘breast’ of a woman
in these stories becomes the instrument of a vicious denunciation of
patriarchy. Indeed, breast can be construed as the motif for violence in the
three short stories “Draupadi,” “Breast-Giver,” and “Behind the Bodice,”
respectively.

After Kurukshetra is Anjum Katyal’s English translations of Devi’s
interpretation of the war of Kurukshetra where she attempts to reveal those
aspects of the war between Pandavas and Kauravas that have always been
viewed as redundant. *Mahabharata* is an ancient Sanskrit epic that forms an important part of Hindu mythology. The war of Kurukshetra is the highlight of this epic but Devi concentrates primarily on the aftermath of this battle. She straddles two trends in epic appropriation, that is, realistic representation of the epic and thematically inspired original tales (*Popular Culture* 91). The anthology comprises three stories, namely “Five Women,” “Kunti and the Nishadin,” and “Souvali.” Banibrata Mahanta says that *After Kurukshetra* is primarily in the context of subalternization of Indian (Hindu) women. The text comprises of three short stories which are based on subaltern women’s perspective of the supposed war for ‘justice’ that has been declared by the royals. The narrative focusses on characters that exemplify the “twin problems of cast and gender” (“The Subaltern as Subject” 26). A study of the stories highlights that the lives of the tribal women as well as women belonging to the royal family are linked with each other as almost all have lost their husbands to the war. The royal widows lament over the loss of their husbands and the luxurious lifestyle that came along with it. They foresee a bleak future ordained for them filled with religious fasting and rituals. The tribal women, on the other hand, believe that disaster and destruction are just temporary barriers in the way of living a joyous, meaningful and complete life. These stories reveal the bigotry of the royal men and women who talk about piety, righteousness and dharma and the qualities that can help one attain “moksha”¹³, but treat anyone below them like dirt.

“The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur,” Spivak’s English translation of Devi’s fictional Bengali narrative, sheds light on the inaction of government in

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¹³There is an entire chapter devoted to the concept of Moksha in Mahabharata. A Sanskrit term, Moksha means to liberate or emancipate oneself from the sins or bonds of existence.
helping the poverty-ridden and the illiterate people of lower class and castes. It focuses on the scheming corrupt officials who make false promises to win elections only to manipulate the administrative system and exploit their position of power. The narrative describes the utter neglect and victimization undergone by individuals belonging to the marginal sections of society. It focuses on the plight of a poor elderly woman named Andi who almost loses her eye-sight because of the machinations of a wealthy politician and landowner named Hedo Naskar. The tragedy lies in the fact that Andi feels fortunate to be allowed to receive medical treatment in a dilapidated hospital that lacks even the basic amenities. Prema Nandakumar says that Devi’s delineation of Andi’s plight is, in fact, a strong critique of the socio-economic oppression in India where the “implementation of appointments [is] on the basis of political reliability.” In the narrative, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, the ideology of national liberation takes place as both tragedy and as a farce (“Translation as Culture” 9).

7.1 “Breast-Giver”

The short story “Breast-Giver” highlights the commoditization of the ‘breast’ – which is considered to be the emblem of Motherhood – as an object which vacillates between notions of filial piety and gendered violence. Here the wet-nurse Jashoda’s\textsuperscript{14} fertile maternal body with its milk-laden bosom becomes the root cause for her suffering in isolation and her consequent demise. Simone de Beauvoir criticizes motherhood by calling it the prime impediment in women’s search for freedom. Her aversion to women who readily assume the

\textsuperscript{14}Devi’s Jashoda is an allusion to the venerated foster-mother of Lord Krishna in Hindu mythology.
role of mother arises from the existential perspective which abhors the absurdity of life which is contented to repeat itself over and over again. Marxist feminism, on the other hand, critiques the trivialization of women’s domestic duties. It prophesizes that economic revolution will ensue only after women protest in order to receive income for domestic chores like cooking, cleaning and child-rearing. “Breast-giver” is a challenge issued to the miscalculated assumption of Western feminism about childbirth and child-rearing being an unwaged domestic labour. Jashoda has made a career out of the feminine and maternal processes like gestation and lactation. But this ultimately become the cause of her acquiring a life-threatening disease like breast cancer. Spivak, however, states that the character of Jashoda is a parable for India after colonization (*Breast Stories* 78). Jashoda is a metaphor used to describe decolonized India as being mother-by-hire. However, instead of being valued and cosseted, both are abused and exploited by those bureaucrats, diplomats, and wealthy classes who are the inheritors of the British Empire in India.

“Breast-Giver” is filled with instances of violence that are very commonplace in the religiously fanatic community of India. Devi focusses on the hypocrisy, superstitions, selfish greed and callousness that are the cause of gendered violence. For instance, the immoral behaviour of a rich man’s son, named Haldar, leads to misery in those around him. Haldar’s young son is a thief who steals things from home and sells them. Haldar is perplexed and upset over his child’s behaviour primarily as he and his wife “created” him by diligently following the timings according to the astrological calendar (41). However, the parents refuse to chastise their errant son and, instead, encourage
him by covering up his misdeeds. Meanwhile, the delinquent son targets the female servants around him with his lascivious attitude and maims a man in his wont to indulge his taste for misplaced adventure. The boy tries to force himself upon the family cook but does not succeed. The cook decides to keep quiet about the incident. But the boy fears that she might tell the family about his misdeed. So he gets her dismissed from her job on a false accusation of thievery. This incident highlights the manner in which the low-caste poor people are treated by the rich. The cook is a real ‘marginal’ character in the story for she is humiliated, thrown out and is never to be heard of again.

Kangalicharan is a poor man who has to resort to stealing food in order to feed his family. But he also poses to be a devout Brahmin who can never stoop to pettiness in his life. After his legs are crushed under the vehicle of a Haldar’s son, Kangalicharan exacts as much profit as he can from the situation. And Haldar goes along with it. The motivation behind this wealthy man’s monetary aid to Kangalicharan is to ensure his own welfare. Haldar is not a compassionate man by any means. He may be living in an independent India but he firmly believes in the divide and rule policy introduced by India’s colonizers. He dislikes and distrusts anyone who does not hail from his own community. He is a fanatic in the matter of following the dictates of his religion. According to Haldar, “there is no East or West for a Brahmin. If there’s a sacred thread around his neck [one] has to give him respect even when he’s taking a shit” (45). The character of Haldar thus shows double standards of the upper-caste rich men who give in to their charitable inclinations only if the unfortunate beneficiary is from a respectable caste. Kangalicharan receives treatment with support from Haldar primarily because
the latter feels that he should do penance for the sin his son has committed against a Brahmin. Later, Kangalicharan makes his wife Jashoda his meal-ticket by allowing her to become wet-nurse to the wealthy Haldar’s grandson. Thereafter, Kangalicharan assumes the responsibility of a house-wife and makes a decent attempt to cater to the needs of his three children. In Devi’s words, Jashoda encompasses all the ideal qualities that are required of an Indian woman, that is, an “unreasonable, unreasoning and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children” (47). She is the quintessential Indian woman who believes that the female species exist only for reproducing and nurturing mankind. The Hindu religion states that every woman is an incarnation of the Divine Mother and her destiny is to take care of man in whom the spirit of the holy child resides (47).

Jashoda considers her husband to be her teacher, guide and master, and she blindly follows his dictates. She is a deeply religious woman who believes that she has been ordered by goddess Durga to take up the responsibility of nourishing and bringing up several children around her. While suckling her twenty children as well as thirty babies from the Haldar family, Jashoda is given the status of the “legendary Cow of Fulfillment” (known as Kāmadhenu in Hindu religion) that is reared by her wealthy employers (50). In the Haldar household there is a “constant epidemic of blanket-quilt-feeding spoon-bottle-oil cloth-Johnson’s baby powder-bathing basin” (49). The sons of Haldar do not want their wives’ figures to be ruined by breast-feeding. Their mother also feels that they might cheat on their wives owing to their misshapen breasts after feeding the children. Hence Jashoda is hired to “preserve the progeny” of Haldars of Harisal (52). She conceives
every year in order to provide milk and nourishment to her employer’s offspring. Jashoda does not realize the painful consequences of her constantly getting pregnant and nursing so many children. Her only concern is that she must adequately carry out the role of a “fruitful Brahmin wife” to her crippled husband (51). Her position is that of the “Mother of the world” who faultlessly breeds every year (52-54).

Jashoda gives birth to seventeen children in order to be able to provide her milk to the Haldar’s progeny. But as soon as the matriarch of the wealthy family dies, Jashoda’s profession as a mother also ends. The new generation of Haldar family carefully follows family planning, thereby depriving Jashoda of her sole means of income. Moreover, as the Haldar sons get married they prefer starting their nuclear families in other states of India. Hence, with no child to rear, Jashoda is forced to ask for financial aid from her husband. However, Kangalicharan tells her that he owes her no favour because her breasts became profitable only after his legs got crushed in the accident. Her sons too do not come forward to support her. She realizes her uselessness for her family as soon as the milk in her breasts dries up.

A jobless Jashoda is abandoned by her husband and sons and forced to reside as a servant in the house of the Haldars. Her revered status in the Haldars house soon ends as she is treated harshly by servants. The treatment meted out to her forces Jashoda to retreat into a shell. Soon it is detected that her breast has malformed, suggests that it is an indication of breast cancer. However, both Haldar’s eldest son and Jashoda consider treatment given at the hospital to be ineffective and thus a waste of time. They distrust modern science and hospitals. The eldest Haldar son believes that cancer is not a life-
threatening condition and that every disease can be cured with an ointment.

On the other hand, Jashoda has always been proud of being a “year-breeder” without the bother of doctors or medicine (54). Moreover, she is hesitant to show her body to a male doctor. On display is the inflexible attitude that is primarily the product of patriarchy-infected religious ideologies where the individuals rely on prayers and the medicines prescribed by priests. It is only in the last stages of her life that the Haldars force Jashoda’s family to take care of her. They do not want any curse to befall them after the death of a Brahmin in their house. Initially, Kangalicharan displays some anxiety about his sick wife. He and his sons are informed by the doctor that Jashoda is going to die soon. They stop visiting her and start acting as if she is already dead. Jashoda ultimately dies all alone in hospital with no one from her blood relations or from those grown men whom she has nurtured with her milk, around.

After twenty five years of suckling fifty babies, Jashoda’s services are permanently terminated through what she believes to be the “evil counsel” of new-age daughter-in-laws of Haldar family. She says that she has been deprived of the good fortune of her life (55). She bemoans her inability to give birth to any more children because she believed it to be the sole evidence of her worth. Jashoda thus becomes the victim of gendered violence as part of larger socio-economic violence. The gendered violence directed at Jashoda comes about through her being revered as the “universal mother.” It encourages her to keep on conceiving and lending her lactating services to feed other people’s babies. In her analysis of “Breast-Giver,” Spivak interprets Jashoda’s mother-by-hire scheme in order to earn her livelihood according to the Marxist feminist theory. Spivak categorizes the milk that is given by
Jashoda to her children as a “use-value”; and after their need for milk expires, she uses her lactating ability as “exchange value” whereby she earns money by commoditizing her milk-laden breast (86). But when even the exchange-value of her milk becomes superfluous, she is dumped by all those who catered to her in their hour of need. Hence, the breast, in this story, again can be construed as the motif for violence for it becomes the means through which Jashoda is exploited and, consequently shunned by those around her. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari say that it is no longer “the age of cruelty or the age of terror, but the age of cynicism, accompanied by a strange piety” (Anti-Oedipus 225). The thirty men that Jashoda nursed during childhood have no consideration for their “milk-mother” (“Breast Stories” 63). For them, she is merely a “silly person” who knowingly took up the task of rearing numerous children (70). They quickly dump her in a hospital when they realize that cancer is incurable. The Haldars fear the thought of a Brahmin woman dying in their house. They do not want to go through the hassles of performing a “penance-ritual” (71). Amongst them, only one man – the second son – feels a twinge of guilt for ignoring Jashoda during her time of need. However, his sense of culpability dissipates quickly owing to his notion that it was Jashoda’s fate to die of cancer. The second Haldar son quickly absolves himself of all wrongdoing against Jashoda by convincing himself that it is God’s will for her to meet such a painful end.

An analysis of “Breast Giver” reveals that Jashoda’s breast is basically a “deteriorриториized mammary gland” (A Thousand Plateaus 69). According to Deleuze and Guattari, deterriorриториization is the process by which “one leaves the territory” (508). Here territory can be any form of structure –
conceptual, linguistic or social. The “vectors of deterritorialization” operate within these structures through the process of reterritorialization (509). In Deleuze and Guattari’s view, the process of reterritorialization does not involve the return to original territory. On the other hand, it refers to the manner in which deterritorialized elements recombine and enter into new relations in the formation of a new assemblage or modification of the old. Before becoming a professional mother, Jashoda’s “capacious” breasts – courtesy her constant pregnancies – are a source of “imminent pleasure” for Kangalicharan. Jashoda too allows Kangalicharan to “drill her body like a geologist” during sexual intercourse and get a child in her belly year after year (“Breast Stories” 39). She never protests against Kangalicharan’s constant sexual demands that result in her multiple pregnancies. Her misgivings are overcome by the “power of Indian soil” that turns the women into mothers (47). However, Jashoda finally objects to Kangalicharan’s “filial inclinations” after being hired as a milk-mother for the Haldars’ newborns (41). Now, she considers her breasts to be the most “precious objects” (51). Her breasts become a source of pride and self-worth for they are her means to pull the entire family out of misfortune. But Kangalicharan manipulates Jashoda’s reservation towards maintaining sexual relations by convincing her that continuous pregnancies are the only way for her to establish her profession as a mother; a child in her belly every year would ensure the milk flowing from her breasts. Hence Jashoda willingly gets impregnated seventeen times by Kangalicharan to rear the thirty Haldar children. Her breasts are deterritorialized from Kangalicharan’s sexuality and reterritorialized as
“mammal projections” of capitalism with reference to both him and the Haldars (49).

Jashoda becomes a “capitalist axiomatic” of patriarchy (A Thousand Plateaus 458). According to Deleuze and Guattari, “capitalistic axiomatic” refers to the resurgence of “machinic enslavement,” where human beings themselves are constituent pieces under the control and direction of a higher unity, that is, the Machine (457). Capitalist axiomatic is the most formidable apparatus of domination for its power is beyond forms of sovereignty and legitimation. It is a semioticizing agency that subordinates the communications of flow of meaning to a fixed point and constant relations (Parr 17-18). This subordination is essential to the functioning of patriarchy. A close study of “Breast-Giver” reveals that the patriarchal axioms are in the form of “Lionstead” which is a reference to Durga, the mythological character of Jashoda also known as the Divine Mother whose heart brims with forgiveness and selfless love, or the “Mother Cow” revered in Hindu culture. These axioms establish the relation and connection between Jashoda and her victimization. They convince her to willingly become a “year-breeder” (“Breast-Giver” 54). She remains trapped in the notions of motherhood which allow life to be “sucked” out of her body in order to rear those around her (58). As she develops cancer of the breast, the pain oozing from the malformed organ seems akin to the pain at being devoured by a “hundred mouths” (67). Even while she is alive, her cancerous body starts emanating a “putrefying” smell that brings “an ebb in the enthusiasm of Kangalicharan and other visitors” (71). Jashoda’s relatives “painlessly” reject her during her illness because she does not measure up to their image of “mother.” In their
view, mother is a healthy, homely and strong personality. The shrivelled, comatose woman with “stinking” flesh of her breasts is as good as dead to them. Thus, despite having reared fifty children, Jashoda dies alone. Her breasts become an inscription of violence for she is exploited, revered and rejected with reference to them. However, her victimization and painful demise is disregarded because she is “God manifest” (75). Like her mythical namesake, Jashoda too is the suckler – the milk-mother – of the entire world. This signifies her ‘applied divinity.’ She is a mortal who is consciously “masquerading” on earth as the divine mother (75). But since God is dead and forsaken by humanity, Jashoda too is forced to meet a similar fate. An analysis of “Breast-Giver” thus reveals the way in which patriarchal ideology in alliance with capitalism traps the human body into a system of dominations endlessly repeated throughout history.

7.2 “Draupadi”

The narrative “Draupadi” is a tribalized revision of the episode of Dushasana’s forcible and public stripping of Draupadi who is one of the most celebrated characters in Mahabharata and is also referred to as “Panchali”15. It focusses on a tribal insurgent named Draupadi Mejhen (pronounced Dopdi) who, along with her husband Dulna, is on the list of most wanted criminals in West Bengal. The couple are said to be skilled in the art of disguise and have got away with the murders of numerous wealthy landlords. They claim their bounty which is mainly the prime source of water, the wells and tube-wells that have been under control of and used by those of the upper class and

15Draupadi is frequently referred to by her demonym Panchali for she was born to the king Drupada of Panchala.
castes. They have also had the audacity to identify themselves as soldiers and have attacked several police stations and struck terror in the hearts of police officers. The couple cleverly manages to evade the law several times but Dulna is one day gunned down by policemen. After her husband’s death in the police encounter, Dopdi begins to operate alone to help the fugitives. These fugitives have murdered the corrupt property-owners and landlords and are hiding in the Jharkhani forest. She knowingly misleads the cops who are on her trail so that the fugitives’ campsite remains a secret. She is finally caught and put in police custody where she is brutally raped and tortured several times by police in their attempts to extract information from her. She is then summoned to Senanayak’s office. Senanayak is the officer who has been assigned to catch Dopdi. He prides himself on his sharp mind, aesthetic inclinations and strategical skills.

The guard assigned to escort Dopdi to Senanayak’s office, orders her to wash and clothe herself but she pays no heed to him and tears up her clothes, thereby scaring him enough to call for help. A baffled Senanayak makes an appearance to find a naked Dopdi, with her battered body and mangled breasts on display walking with her head held high, daring him to look at the consequence of his orders. She laughs at his angered expression and says that there is nothing more he can do to hurt and humiliate her. Dopdi tells Senanayak that he issuing orders for her to be stripped, raped and tortured was a typical exercise of phallic power. But he is not man enough to force her to clothe herself again. The story ends on a powerful note as a naked Dopdi, with her courage and stubborn refusal to cover her naked body, renders several
guards and the arrogant officer helpless, scared and unsure of the course of action they should take to subdue an unarmed woman.

Devi concentrates also on the character of Senanayak along with Dopdi. Senanayak is an “elderly Bengali specialist in combat and extreme-Left politics” (*Breast Stories* 21). According to Spivak, he is also a “pluralist aesthete”\(^\text{16}\). He represents the First World scholar in search of the Third World to analyze and decipher its coded complexities; instead, he ends up mislaying the reality of the Third World (1). Senanayak relies on the “Army handbook” to instruct his subordinates in combat. In his view, the most “despicable and repulsive” mode of fighting is guerilla warfare which is carried out through the use of primitive weapons like scythe and machete. Dulna and Dopdi excel in the use of these very weapons. Senanayak considers “annihilation” to be the only solution for putting an end to the violence wrought by tribal. However, the intellectual in Senanayak respects his opponent. He is an avid reader of theory so as to understand the working of the mind of the tribal in revolt. His readings of anti-fascist theories have taught him that “in order to destroy the enemy, become one” (22). Moreover, he believes that his intellectualism is going to aid him in successfully tackling the challenge. He has written and published an article about information storage in brain cells. And with reference to that article, he believes that Dopdi is nothing more than a “field hand” who carries important information (33). In his view, the appropriate method in such situations is apprehension of the suspect and her consequent destruction. Senanayak thus is a firm follower of scientism. In an interview,

\(^{16}\)In her foreword, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak describes Senanayak as a pluralist aesthete for he turns to theory in order to gain specialist knowledge of his targets and deconstruct their thought process.
René Girard states that scientism is the new form of destruction. According to him, man is the only species that can destroy himself. He considers all intellectuals to be castrators of meaning and sciences that study the secrets of the human body as a form of “human sacrifice” (“Intellectuals as Castrators of meaning”). Girard states that science has become infected with the avant-garde quality of postmodernism’s denial of reality. This nihilism, he argues, leads to the discrediting of morality. Avant-gardism has thus extended into the scientific realm that concentrates on the origin of man and the way he functions in the world. In other words, man threatens his own existence with violence through scientism.

As a theoretician, Senanayak sympathizes with the cause of Dopdi’s rebellion and plans to write a book about the tribal harvest workers. Yet he orders her capture. He is aware of the horror of the treatment meted out to captured individuals during police interrogation but he orders the capture to be carried out anyway. Senanayak represents the First World intellectuals who desire to be ‘experts’ in the Third World. They proclaim to appreciate its ‘freedom’ even in difference, simultaneously, willing to transform it into the First World. On the other hand, Dopdi is Devi’s attempt to show the differences between the knowledgeable First World scholars and the mute-through-language-incomprehensibility of Third World subalterns. Dopdi loses her position as a subject in the course of the story but manages to recover it at the climax. This makes her as dissimilar from Draupadi – her popular namesake from ancient history – as it can get. Draupadi, in the ancient Hindu epic Mahabharata, is the example of a woman who is married off to several men. This legitimization of Draupadi’s pluralized wedding is an instance of
the glorification of patriarchy. However, Mahasweta Devi’s Dopdi is a pluralized member of rebellion against the repressive establishment but she has a single husband. Devi questions this “singularity” assigned to the royal Draupadi with reference to her husbands in her characterization of the tribal and activist Dopdi who has a monogamous marriage but later endures the torture of multiple rape. But Dopdi – unlike her counterpart Draupadi bound to the patriarchal ideology in the epic – manages to disentangle herself from the chains of patriarchal shame, humiliation and victimization. Dopdi does not seek any benign Krishna to come and clothe her, and save her honour. Instead she wages war upon her tormentors by refusing to cover her naked body.

Slavoj Žižek’s concept of “the negation of negation” is implied in the situation of Dopdi’s ferocious stance against Senanayak and his subordinates. He says that the negative power endangering an individual’s identity is, in fact, a positive condition of it (The Sublime 176). For Senanayak, Dopdi is the embodiment of negativity. She is nothing more than a “brute” who, in Senanayak’s view, can’t be “dispatched” by the “approved” method. On the other hand, Senanayak believes that he has the “proper perspective” about the “credentials” that entail surviving with honour in the world. And a life of honour, for him, involves “apprehension and elimination” of the tribal rebels. Senanayak basically considers himself to be a positive force that possesses the power to destroy the enemy and deliver the present world’s “legacy” into the youth’s hands (“Draupadi” 23-24). But he fails to understand that the very identity of his position of power is structured through a negative relationship to the mutilated figure of Dopdi. The “lesson of blood” that he wants the youth to remember is, in fact, impossible to imbibe without reference to the defiled
body of Dopdi (24). Hence the negativity as represented by Dopdi has a positive function in spite of Senanayak’s intentions. In other words, Senanayak’s power is a “reaction-formation” to the traumatic and antagonistic kernel symbolized by Dopdi (*The Sublime* 176). At the end of the story, Senanayak is forced to confront his powerlessness in the presence of a naked Dopdi. It is an easy task for Senanayak to have Dopdi’s body forcibly disrobed, raped and mutilated. However, he does not possess the power to cover the marks of violence inflicted upon Dopdi.

Dopdi, with her war-cry and her rejection of the choice of saving her modesty offered to her by Senanayak, becomes the figure that spells doom for patriarchy. She turns her mangled breasts into an instrument of violence with which she disarms and subdues her opponent. Her body becomes a site of rebellion against the patriarchal violence that would destroy her utterly.

*Draupadi* is one of Devi’s most powerful tales for it urges the marginalized to disassociate from the norms for respectability and modesty mapped out by the patriarchal caretakers, for it is the only way to weaken the enemy and gain freedom from the clutches of patriarchy. Here Senanayak is an intellectual revolutionary who claims that he prefers using theory, instead of brute force, to deconstruct and comprehend the ways of the subaltern. On the other hand, Dopdi is a revolutionary who is essentially the product of violence that is directed at her but who manages to symbolically topple her opponents. She manages to disentangle herself from the chains of dominion that have made their way through history.
7.3 “Behind the Bodice”

The last story of the Mahasweta Devi’s Breast series entitled “Behind the Bodice” describes the tragedy that unfolds after ace-photographer Upin Puri captures albeit thoughtlessly the breasts of a migrant labourer named Gangor while she is nursing her child. The exposure of her breasts makes her the object of disgust in her own community as well as a sexual object in the eyes of the police. Upin is an “itinerant ace-photographer” (141). He is an urbane man who relies on the violence occurring in backward and rural areas of Bihar and Orissa to earn his livelihood. His photography is of an investigative nature as he explores and represents the misfortunes experienced by people, such as drought, famine, pesticide-infested water etc. Upin sells his pictures abroad on huge prices to leading newspapers and magazines like National Press and Lens Magazine (143). His representations of violence undergone by the Third World are readily received and appreciated by the West. Upin has “matrimony of arrangement” to a woman named Shital who is a famous Himalaya-climber (154).

In Violence and the Sacred, Girard observes that marriage can be attributed to “social convention rather than to any real need” (286). Marriage, in his view, becomes an arbitrary system of representation and may not be the spontaneous development of a real situation. The point of commonality between Upin and Shital is that they both thrive in a violent environment. However, despite the similarity they are not able to spend even a full month in each other’s company. They communicate with each other via their friend Ujan who is paid for his mediating efforts. Shital’s visits to their marital home are mostly viewed by Upin as being “problematic.” This problem, according
to Upin, emerges from the dichotomy in Shital’s personality. He believes that his wife is, in fact, supposed to be two people. There is a “violent and aggressive” Shital who attacks the Himalayas again and again (141). On the other hand, there is a “calm and soft” Shital who likes to spend time in a remote house near a dead-end road with silence all around. According to Upin, the temperament of Shital suggests that she has no place in the present. He says that Shital would have been at home in 2094 – somewhere in the far-away future. A suitable time for the “symbolic identification” of Shital’s existence has not yet arrived (Tarrying with the Negative 57). However, Upin fails to grasp the dichotomy in his own personality. Ujan admires Upin for being an “Esperanto man” who adjusts himself according to the drastic situations he confronts in the places he travels to (“Behid the Bodice” 142). In his study of the Kantian and Hegelian philosophy Žižek states that the feminine universe is the “universe of boundless dispersion and divisibility” and can never be rounded off into a universal whole. On the other hand, the masculine universe involves the “universal network of causes and effects” founded in an exception which enables him to assume fully his symbolic mandate (Tarrying with the Negative 58). In other words, man is able to find his identity in the symbolic but woman is condemned to “hysterical splitting” and to wearing masks (57). One can argue that it is for this reason that the split in Shital’s temperament is mocked by Upin. But a similar split in Upin’s personality is admired by Ujan.

The tragedy unfolds in Upin’s life during 1993. His photographic effort to represent the pathetic conditions of the nation is, however, not given

17In Žižek’s view, “symbolic identification” involves an individual’s attempt to assume a “symbolic mandate,” to proclaim or promulgate oneself as subject mainly to avoid the threat of expulsion from the community (74).
much attention by the public. In fact, the public places it under the category of “non-issues” (“Behind the Bodice” 138). These non-issues include crop-failure, deaths due to natural calamities, terrorist attacks, caste-related deaths, rape, murder, custodial torture, etc. However, the public is in an uproar over a Hindi film song *Chholi ke Pichhe* translated into English as “Behind the Bodice.” The song has become a serious issue for the media, the censor board, feminists and various organizations. They are engrossed in uncovering the mystery of the thing that lies behind the bodice. Politicians as well as intellectuals claim that it was this vulgar song that distracted the entire nation and allowed the Middle Eastern terrorists to blow up parts of Bombay and Calcutta. Intellectuals believe that the song represents cultural invasion. For them, behind the bodice lies the Middle East that vainly tries to conceal its violence. They state that behind the bodice is the “elixir of our times” (140). It means that it is preferred that all violence remains concealed behind a socially-defined normalcy. Upin too attempts to highlight the mystery that lies under cover but manages to unleash violence all around him.

He makes a trip to Jharoa where he encounters a rural woman named Gangor. She has migrated to Jharoa along with her entire clan to escape the conditions of semi-famine in her village. Upin is intrigued by Gangor’s “statuesque” and natural semi-covered breasts (145). They are a complete contrast to his wife Shital’s silicone-enhanced, artificial breasts. He clicks several photographs of Gangor’s breasts and sends them for publication to a popular newspaper. The message underlining a picture of Gangor’s breasts is “The halfnaked amplebreasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped. Save them! Save the breast!” These pictures somehow make their way to
Jharaa and come to the attention of the local police. The police nabs Gangor, puts her in lock-up and gang-rapes her. The representation of Gangor’s naked breasts by Upin thus becomes the cause of her victimization. Heidegger states that the “world becomes a picture is one and the same process whereby, in the midst of beings, man becomes subject” (*Off the Beaten Track* 69). This subject may either represent a dominant *self* or the subjection of the *other* to violence of the gaze. Stuart Hall says that within the dominant tradition of the female nude, patriarchy power relations are symbolized by the binary relation in which men assume the active role of the looking subject while women are passive objects to be looked at. According to him, the image of a naked female must be understood not so much as a representation of sexual desire. But as a form of sexual objectification which articulates masculine hegemony and dominance over the apparatus of representation itself (Hall 286). The breasts of Gangor too become the target of the patriarchal gaze of the policemen. Here Gangor’s half-covered breasts completely overtake her identity.

Moreover, Gangor’s “mammal projections” highlight the reality of the mystery that is behind the bodice (145). According to the contractor who hires Gangor’s clan, behind the bodice lies pure evil in the form of the Gangor’s breasts. He says that Gangor has made “everyone sin against God” (152). The pictures of Gangor’s bare breasts entice the police. They stalk her and she is said to be teasing them by constantly evading their path. They kidnap and gang-rape her. Instead of backing down, Gangor chooses to file a police complaint against the offenders. Now Gangor’s entire clan stays away from her lest she unleash her evil upon them. After learning about the violent fate of Gangor, Upin takes it upon himself to go and save her. He finds out
that she has started to earn her living through prostitution. It is the only alternative left for Gangor as her kith and kin have abandoned her. When the two come face-to-face, Gangor names Upin as one of those who violated her. In her view, Upin too took advantage of her by clicking photographs of her half-bare chest to earn money. He is as good as the contractor who sells her to other men for money. Gangor takes off her bodice and reveals the evidence of the violation of her body. Behind the small piece of cloth lie the bitten, torn and shriveled remains of her once “statuesque breasts.” The two wounds that have taken the place of Gangor’s breasts are hallmark of the violence wrought upon her. The site of Gangor’s mutilated breasts is a shock for Upin. The horrific vision drives home the reality of the Nothingness that he has tried to ignore all this time. He realizes that his plea to people to ‘save the breasts’ is utterly futile. For those who are assigned to protect society are, in fact, the perpetrators of violence. In a state of shock, Upin steps on the railway tracks of Jharoa and is crushed under the wheels of a train.

In “Behind the Bodice,” Mahasweta Devi conceptualizes the mangled breasts of Gangor as a metaphor of the violence, especially custodial, that has become an everyday occurrence in our democratic India. In his essay “Critique of violence,” Walter Benjamin highlights the law-preserving violence that is conservative, protective and “threatening,” designed to preserve or reinforce a pre-existing legal order (242). But the legal order too is infested with patriarchy. The violence of the police exposes the measures that ensure domination of the other in the phallocentric society. The raw and bitten breasts of Gangor signify that it is criminal to ask the question about the breasts that lie behind the piece of cloth, for these breasts provide an image of the harsh
reality about the lives of the subaltern. The rape of the aboriginal Gangor by
the police signifies the rape, torture, humiliation, manipulation and
exploitation carried out by the institutions and protectors of law. Yet her
victimization remains a “non-issue” in a postcolonial nation where the
government has denotified the subaltern, failed to provide them the right to be
heard, to settle somewhere permanently, and to be protected under the law
(138).

7.4 “The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur”

As the title of the story suggests, it takes place in an impoverished village
called Mohanpur. It is a place where “poverty is complete” and its residents
are primarily “fishers and Tiar-Kaot outcastes” (“The Fairy Tale of
Mohanpur” 74). Here the protagonist is an old woman named Andi. Her
already miserable life takes a turn for the worse when her eyesight begins to
fail. However, her advanced age does not hinder her dream-weaving
capabilities. She belongs to those extremely poor families for whom even the
basic necessities are a luxury. She realizes that the acquisition of luxuries like
ample “food to eat, cloth to wear, oil for hair, ricks of paddy straw,” plenty of
water and good health is something that can only happen in fairy tales (75).
Hence, when Andi’s vision begins to dim and she is recommended to get her
eyesight checked by a doctor, she gets very excited. She dreams of having a
hospital bed to herself and eating delicious meals prepared in the hospital
kitchen. Andi’s experience of poverty, in fact, blinds her to the stark reality of
her victimization.
The village of Mohanpur represents the marginalized rural section of India. The corrupt administrative system is aware of the rural community’s deplorable existence but chooses to ignore it. Any form of help provided to the villagers is generally substandard. In the story, the government provides Mohanpur with only one doctor who is overworked and underpaid, forced to intake undercooked food and asked to reside in a dilapidated house. In fact, the doctor feels that his accommodation is worse than “a fishing boat sunk under fourteen feet of water” (78). He is provided with insufficient supply of medicines, disinfectants, bandages and wads of cotton. Hospital beds are inadequate. Each bed is often occupied by more than one patient while several patients are forced to sit on the floor. Moreover, the doctor has limited knowledge of the various ailments that strike the patients. He prescribes the same treatment for different ailments like malaria, cholera, worms, blood dysentery, tuberculosis, typhoid, pneumonia, anemia, diabetes, etc. On the other hand, trained medical staff refuses to come and practice medicine at Mohanpur. They would not work and live where there are no “brick buildings and safe residences” (79).

In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Slavoj Žižek states that the rich want to live in “pristine nature” (4). It becomes evident in their attempts to minimize security risks of every kind. These attempts entail the creation of a separate universe and pretending that the lower class surrounding world does not exist (5). Similarly, the fully-qualified medical doctors, nurses, cooks and other officials direct refusal to visit Mohanpur is strengthened by their utter indifference to the existence and the plight of its poor inhabitants. As a result, both the “compounder” and the peon working at the hospital lend a hand in
“examining” the patients (Devi 80). Also, the doctor is horror-stricken at the thought of being assigned a community health worker by the government. Such a concession by the government would lead to an increase in the number of patients who will ultimately be harmed by the deplorable state of the hospital.

It is evident that poverty-ridden villages like Mohanpur are at the bottom of the government’s list of concerns. Moreover, any amount of help provided by the government to the poor is automatically exploited by greedy ruling capitalists. Hedo Naskar is one such avaricious landowner with political clout. He represents Žižek’s description of a capitalist as “barbarism with a human face” (48). The entire community of Mohanpur works under Naskar’s employment on minimum wages. In Mohanpur, in fact, Naskar is the “government” (“The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur” 84). He is the “base bourgeois” who ruthlessly and openly exploits state power as a way of protecting his economic interests (First as Tragedy 49). He has bought almost all the land that falls within and around his village. Here workers are appointed with the task of ploughing the field but denied the right to profit from the selling of the crop. Hedo Naskar also pilfers the paraffin, wheat and medicines sent as an aid to the village people. But if someone points towards his dishonest actions, he feigns innocence and bemoans the injustices wrought by the government.

Naskar has numerous clashes with Mohanpur’s illiterate proletariat party worker Gobindo who fights incessantly for the rights of poor people of Mohanpur. He religiously observes celibacy and is determined to serve to the cause of his communist political party for his entire life. Gobindo is, to some extent, a Gandhian figure. Gobindo has watched his ancestors exist within the
gruelling conditions of poverty aggravated by the capitalists of society. He is angered that the villagers hold their need for paraffin and other basic necessities above their right for education. He tries to convince them to send their children to school to gain education and become aware about their constitutional rights. Gobindo, like every other opposing agent of capitalism, tries to convince citizens against capitalism but inevitably loses. As a result, he is angered whenever he watches Hedo Naskar controlling and exploiting the farmers, workers, and other residents of Mohanpur. Hedo Naskar too despises Gobindo for his attempts at social service. He feels that Gobindo’s biggest failure is his inability to assume an indifferent attitude to the violence in society. In fact, Naskar believes in ruling through indifference and “cynical demoralization” (First as Tragedy 49). He is impervious to criticism for he is aware that no one expects him to remain true to his word. Moreover, Naskar feels that only specific volunteers must deal with unsavoury social aspects. He cites an example to Gobindo about the presence of specific volunteers for burning corpses and putting out fires during the British rule. In fact, he tells Gobindo that one of his aunts drowned at a pilgrimage because there were no volunteers appointed to save her, and the people around her declined to wade in the water (Devi 91). Naskar believes that apathy to violence has been the way of life and such it should remain. Gobindo feels that an individual must move forward and help others according to the extent of their knowledge. But the concept of helping others is, in Hedo Naskar’s view, as “bitter as neem” (92). The arrogant, greedy, callous, hypocritical and fraudulent shades that are apparent in the character of Naskar show him to be the main agent of socio-economic and political violence in any nation. Villagers are able to survive
only after begging for work at Hedo Naskar’s house. Andi’s eldest daughter-in-law is burdened with the responsibility of her entire family and has to do a huge amount of work to get a handful of rice from the Naskar household. He forces the farmers and labourers to work under wretched conditions with the imminent threat of snake-bites and diseases. He also overworks and underpays the employed workers. Hedo Naskar realizes that his position of power shall remain secure as long as the rural people remain uneducated about their rights. Hence he contrives to keep the government officials, social workers, teacher, doctors, etc. away from the common folk of Mohanpur.

The extreme victimization of illiterate and underprivileged people of Mohanpur arises from socio-economic inequalities. And it is brought to the fore by Devi through her delineation of old Andi. Like most women of Mohanpur, an uneducated Andi is forced to rely on old-fashioned methods as the treatment for her failing vision. Her sons avoid taking her to the hospital and prescribe her snail-broth. This does not cure her medical problem and leads to her meeting with frequent accidents. For instance, she goes to catch fish, falls into the pond and carries a snake home to cook for food. Andi is finally taken to the doctor who does not have any knowledge of ophthalmology and prescribes her multi-vitamin tablets and eye-drops. Incorrect diagnosis of her eye problem by the doctor along with lack of its proper treatment forces Andi to consult a fraudulent peddler despite her family’s outright rejection of the idea. The appliance of the fake medicine melts her eye and thereby damages her eye-sight.

After training in Calcutta as a health care worker, however, Gobindo takes charge of the situation and decides to help Andi. He inquires about the
doctor working in the city but is told that it is impossible for the extremely busy medicine practitioner to go out of his way to attend to one poor patient in Mohanpur. Nevertheless, Gobindo manages to persuade the city doctor to come to Mohanpur to perform an eye-operation on Andi. On the day of the doctor’s arrival, however, Gobindo learns that the practitioner is having a leisurely time at Hedo Naskar’s pond catching fish. Gobindo goes to Hedo Naskar’s house to persuade the doctor into coming for Andi’s operation. But the doctor attempts to get out of the situation by making an excuse about the lack of surgical equipment. It is only after a lot of threats and bullying on Gobindo’s part that the visiting doctor prepares to operate on Andi. Old Andi is, however, unaware about the reality of the situation and is busy counting her blessings over getting the chance to relax on a comfortable hospital bed. She is filled with joy at the thought of eating the delicious hospital meal. It seems to Andi that every single aspect of her fairy tale is finally coming true.

Analysis of “The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur” highlights the activist or propagandist note present in Devi’s works. Here she focusses on the violence meted out to the subaltern. The narrative shows that the ideology of national liberation for the subaltern is both a tragedy and a farce. The establishment of constitutional rights in Independent India has not brought about any change in the marginal status of the lower caste people. They are still forced to live in abject poverty and cope with capitalist exploitation. Any form of protest or struggle for their rights is futile. Moreover, the results of their attempts are generally unsatisfactory. The plight of Andi lays bare the depth of misery evident in the existence of the lower class and caste women in India. As a subaltern female, Andi is doubly marginalized. In the face of poverty, Andi’s
sons do not give precedence to their mother’s worsening vision. With so many
problems in their lives, they are angered by the added pressure of taking their
mother to a hospital. It is an outsider who comes forward to help Andi.
Moreover, the medical treatment she receives is incompetent. However,
Andi’s life-long experience of economic depredation blinds her to the
farcicality of the entire situation. The miserable existence of the poor villagers
of Mohanpur shows that India may have achieved independence from the
British rule. But the nation has not been able to decolonize the violence
associated with the imperial regime: absence of rights, socio-economic
exploitation, and apathetic existence.

7.5 “Five Women”

“Five Women” focusses on the relationship of widowed Uttara with the five
subaltern women from Kurujangal appointed to serve her. Uttara is soon to
bear the child of her late husband Abhimanyu. The five women named
Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vatista, and Vipasha too are widows. Their dead
husbands were the unarmed foot soldiers hired to take the blows and arrows
meant for the chariot-mounted warriors during the war of Kurukshetra. The
royal housewives believe that the five rural women will be suitable
companions for Uttara because “they are from a totally different world” (5). In
their view, the five women do not have any idea about the extent of violence
witnessed and undergone by the royal families; hence they will succeed in
keeping the misery and gloom away from their beloved daughter-in-law. The
royal wives and widows are indeed the victims of violence. They are ignored
and forced to suffer at the hands of their male counterpart’s need for power in
the name of justice. In other words, their feelings are irrelevant in the male’s fight for his dharma. Their perspective does not have any place within the male subjectivity.

Slavoj Žižek states that the class-driven societies do not experience the hierarchy of social groups within the same nation. The dominant class constructs a separate universe, and within its “ideological imaginary…the lower class surrounding [their] world does not exist” (*First as Tragedy* 5). The ideological imaginary thus becomes both the consequence and the manifestation of the dominant subjectivity. It is created as a reaction to the intrusion of the subaltern. In other words, the “ideological imaginary” is a space where subaltern consciousness has no meaning. And this deliberate obliteration of the subaltern’s psyche becomes an act of power for the dominant subjectivity. Suffice it to say the “ideological imaginary” is a violent construct based on the concepts of power and repression. It is manifestation of the violence caused by social constructs of caste and class. Both men and women take an active part in its construction. Similarly, the complacent behaviour of women belonging to the Rajavitra towards the suffering of five rural people shows them to be ensconced in the violence of the ideological imaginary. The royal women are thus both victims and perpetrators of violence.

Apart from the shock of her husband’s death, Uttara is also terrified of all the religious rituals related to widowhood (“The Five Women”13). She fears the lackluster life ahead of her which is to be filled with unending fasts, prayers, and performance of daily rituals as expected from every upper-caste widow. According to the sages, the cardinal rule for a widow is that her life
must be must be “stripped of luxury and leisure” (3). They should remain clad in white cloth and be like “silent shadows” while they go about performing the daily rituals required of them (7). They should also maintain limited contact with her children. The life of all the widows of Pandavas and Kauravas is, in fact, a series of “endless fasts, pujas and offerings of cows to the Brahmins” (7). In other words, their royal status seems to be more of a curse once death touches anyone close to them. The situation is a form of violence that has been overlooked for centuries due to woman’s mute acceptance of her victimization. One of the reasons that patriarchy exists in society is because of woman’s unchallenging compliance to the rules that are laid down before her. Here the royal woman is expected to conform to the dictates of caste, class, and religion. She is taught to view her suffering as her dharma for it ensures both hers and her dead husband’s position in “divyalok” (10). The promise about finding the “hubbub of joy in heaven” is, in fact, a ploy meant to justify the heinous acts of violence committed by human beings against each other. Religious discourse thus manipulates individuals with promises of spiritual transcendence, salvation, and redemption.

In “Five Women,” however, the subaltern women are shown to be assertive. Their perspectives as well as their way of living are rooted in reality, and are in sharp contrast with the holier-than-thou attitude practiced by the royal women. For instance, the five lower caste women refuse to label the battle of Kurukshetra as “the holy war” (3). They candidly inform the residents of the palace that the entire conflict and the consequent destruction is not struggle to maintain righteousness. On the other hand, it is a war driven by petty feelings of jealousy and a thirst for power. Both groups of women, at
variance by caste and class, are victims of violence. But while the common women become victims of the atrocities meted out by the wealthy section of society, the upper-class women get subjugated because of their own obeisance to the harsh set of laws created specifically for them. Here the five ‘common’ women are unique in a palace full of grieving royals, for they are strong, independent and practical in the face of adversity. The five women belong to the family of farmers where all men have died protecting their monarchs in the war. The royal widows and their dasis are patronizing in recruiting them. They believe that staying in the palace would provide these women a huge respite from their pitiful existence. They are condescending enough to allow the lower caste women to speak in their own language (9). Uttara is astonished that during the absence of a male in a commoner’s household, it is woman who takes charge and becomes the care-giver and protector of the family. She is shocked at the thought of native women learning to use weaponry as a safeguard for their family. When her five companions disclose their intention of getting married and starting a new family, the queens consider it to be sacrilege for it would go against the tenants of “dharmayuddha”\(^\text{18}\) (23). The five common women, however, believe that it is sacrilege to sacrifice their happiness on account of some man-made customs. They believe in following the lessons taught by Nature, where the experience of violence, death, and destruction provides a strong reason for an individual to pursue her life with zest. The royal women, on the other hand, preach them about the falsity of their beliefs. Uttara’s mother-in-law Subhadra is, in fact, outraged at the residing commoners challenging of the ritual of widows dressed in white.

\(^{18}\text{Dharmayuddha} \) is a Sanskrit term used to refer to the battle of Kurukshetra that was declared by Pandavas as the righteous war.
clothes, meekly resigning themselves to violence. Subhadra tries to educate the rural women about the role which every widow must learn to play in her lifetime, by voluntarily foregoing her right to happiness (17). She cites the example of Pandavas mother Kunti, hailing her as the epitome of devoutness and loyalty as she has carried out her dharma even at the most turbulent times. But the five women refuse to pay heed to the preaching by royal women. In their view, losing their husbands should not entail loss of their right to exist. Nature has blessed women with the power to create life. It is sacrilege to “deny the demands of life in order to exist as mere shadowy ghosts, shrouded in silence” (After Kurukshetra 23). Their perspective shows the biological function of women in a positive light. As long as there is life, that life demands fulfillment (22). And it is up to the woman to ascertain what she views as “fulfillment.” Devi’s “Five Women” thus shows patriarchy manifest in the form of bio-power which “regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it – every individual embraces and reactivates this power of his or her own accord. Its primary task is to administer life” (Empire 24). The violence of bio-power is always interpreted as a preventive measure. In this story, bio-power operates through religion. Women of Rajavittra, influenced by religious ideology, attempt to control and direct the lives of widows by denouncing their desire to remarry and procreate. The royal women believe that a widow’s attempt to “create life,” shall destroy the possibility of her deceased husband’s soul to transcend to heaven. In other words, the existence of woman is tied to the subjectivity of man even in the event of his death. The dharma of the royal women thus commands them to subvert their subjectivity to uphold the semblance of phallic power.
7.6 “Kunti and the Nishadin”

Kunti is one of the most revered characters of Hindu mythology whose virtues of intelligence, devotedness and kindness, and her teachings about concepts like selflessness, spirituality, truthfulness, etc. are extolled by the followers of Hinduism. Devi has presented the character of Kunti in a different light. In fact, Devi’s delineation of Kunti highlights the role of “high cast and class women in subjugating their lower caste and class counterparts” (Mahanta 30). An old, haggard, and world-weary Kunti has retreated into the forest with the blind king Dhritarashtra, and his voluntarily blind wife Gandhari to await their death. After relieving her duties as a queen, Kunti is has turned introspective in her old age. Now she bemoans aloud that she has never been able to discover her true self among the many roles that were thrust upon her from young age. She envies Gandhari who, by willingly accepting blindness, has done her rightful duty of conforming to the path followed by her husband. In retrospect, Gandhari’s self-imposed blindness is a way to absolve herself from all the wrong-doings around her. Gandhari’s deliberate sensory deprivation is indeed her silent consent of the destruction wrought by her sons and nephews. Kunti feels that Gandhari rage towards Krishna is due to her “pure,” “innocent,” and truthful nature (After Kurukshetra 29). Gandhari is, however, an individual who turns a blind eye to her own as well as others destruction because for she lacks the courage to challenge violence. Such an individual prefers to suffer silently and be a mute spectator to acts of violence. Gandhari can also be labelled a nihilist. Her self-imposed blindness is a nihilistic act. Her conscious acceptance of the blindfold reinforces her conscience’s negation of the violence around her.
Kunti yearns to “purge” and “cleanse” her soul before her demise (28). But there is no one present in the forest to listen to her confession, except a group of nishads. Nishads are the subaltern, the ‘uncivilized’ tribe that resides away from the urban places. Initially, Kunti ignores the proximity of the nishads, an easy task for she has been performing it since her youth. But her need to confess wins over her aversion to interact with the tribal people. Moreover, she concedes that it will be beneficial for her because these low-caste people won’t understand the language of a royal. The nishads are, in Kunti’s view, as dumb and unresponsive as the nearby trees, birds, animals, and the scenery in front of her (27). Yet under the silent scrutiny of a few nishadins, Kunti gives vent to her feelings of guilt over never acknowledging her first-born son, Karna. In her view, she has committed a heinous sin in giving up the right to raise her son. Years later she commands him to join the Pandavas as she wants her legitimate sons to win the war. When Karna dies in the battle she can not even mourn for him, for it might hurt her pristine image. Kunti also feels burdened with the truth about the birth of her five elder sons, namely Yuddhishtra, Bhima and Arjuna, Nakula and Sahdeva. None of them has been sired by a Pandu. During her confession, Kunti notices the pitying gaze of an elderly nishadin and flees from the place.

The next day, however, Kunti notices the tribal community fleeing the forest. She is approached by the elderly nishadin from the previous day. A feeling of fear assails her due the “dark-skinned lady standing so close to her” (35). Kunti is extremely astonished when the nishadin raises questions about her confession in the language spoken by the Rajavitra. The elderly nishadin criticizes Kunti over her deceit in making an incomplete confession. Kunti is,
in fact, yet to reveal her greatest sin. The tribal woman brings to Kunti’s notice her cruel act of sacrifice of a nishadin and her five sons to foil Duryodhna’s plan. The pious and upstanding queen of Rajavittra is, in fact, the instigator of violent deaths of six people. Her violent transgression is made worse by the absence of any sense of guilt or even the recollection of her crime. Friedrich Nietzsche defines forgetfulness as a “force or the active capability to repress…[without it] there would be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hoping, no pride, no present” (On the Genealogy of Morals 42). For Kunti, however, the subaltern is not a repressed entity rather it does not exist. The violated subaltern is, in fact, insignificant to her psyche.

Kunti – despite her ideals, conscience, and introspection – turns out to be the most misled individual among the three royals in the forest. Between the blind-at-birth Dhritarashtra, and the voluntarily blind Gandhari, Kunti proves to be the most blind. She constantly preaches about ethics even though most of her decisions are motivated by selfish reasons. Kunti inability to remember or regret her culpability in the murder of the six nishads points to the inherent prejudice of upper caste and class. For them, the subalterns are not marginalized; they simply do no exist as a human entity.

7.7 “Souvali”

“Souvali” focusses on the differences between the center and margins of society (Mahanta 33). It is a poignant tale about a dasi named Souvali who is forced to be a sexual companion to King Dhritarashtra while his wife Gandhari is with child. Hailing from one of the marginalized parts of the kingdom, Souvali bears Dhritarashtra a son who is named by the royals as
Yuyutsu. After being sexually exploited by the king, both she and her son are cruelly discarded by the entire Rajavittra. The son, whom her mother addresses as Souvalya, grows up confused and extremely unsure of his position in society and spends most of his time oscillating between trying to please his royal relatives and loathing the same royals who treated him and his mother so shabbily. In his preface to Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, Robert J. C. Young states that the colonial subject always exists in a confused state because he internalizes the ideology of inferiority within himself and believes to be less than fully human. He is caught up in the system of oppression and finds himself in “a condition of ontological ambivalence” (iii). Here the marginalized individual is both the organizer and the victim of “a system that has choked him and reduced him to silence” (*A Dying Colonialism* 32). Souvalya is a subaltern who ultimately albeit naively decides to return to the same oppressive environment that was the cause of his subjection and humiliation.

The story begins after Souvalya performs the cremation rites for his father who died in the forest fire along with Gandhari and Kunti. Souvalya comes to meet his mother, who lives at the margins of the town. He’s been hesitant to perform the last rites as he has never achieved a loving glance, approval or even a hint of acknowledgement from Dhritarashtra. The blind monarch allowed him to stay in the place and near his half-brothers as a servant whose purpose was to cater to their needs. However, the kingdom is scandalized when they find out that Souvalya has joined to aid the Pandavas in the battle instead of his half-brothers. It is only after death that he is publicly acknowledged as Dhritarashtra’s son because all his legitimate sons have died.
in the war. The bigotry of the rich is shown here as even in death they have the power to manipulate the marginalized. Souvalya is expected to forget all the wrongs done to him and do the bidding of the royals. Other subalterns expect Souvali to perform the rites of a widow. But she quickly reminds them she would never mourn for the man who perpetrated violence against her. Souvali does not understand the reason that propels dasis to observe the rites and rituals of widowhood at the demise of the rich men who victimized them (After Kurukshetra 48). In fact, such actions on the part of these dasis sanction the violence that is directed against them. Souvali feels fortunate about not being a servant in the palace for she would also have been forced to go through the rituals of mourning. She promises her companions that the funeral would not stop her from eating heartily and having a peaceful sleep as she gets to meet her son. Unlike the royal widows Souvali feels fortunate to be free from the misery that comes attached with riches and social prestige. However, Souvalya believes that he would finally gain social acceptance through his association with the vanquishers of the Kaurava lineage, the Pandavas. But Souvali knows in her heart that the Pandavas would never integrate a low-caste individual in their community. She considers Souvalya to be “foolish” for ignoring his identity as being one of the Janavittra (the lower caste) and following the norms and customs of royalty (49). She is saddened by the fact that her son has not learned from her own plight. In her view, living in order to serve the royal people is a more disastrous and violent experience than existing amongst “common folk” (49). The rules imposed by the upper class/caste necessitate the curtailment of freedom which in itself is the most extreme form of violence.
After Kurukshetra thus comprises stories of contrasts where women are targeted with violence but the outcome of their victimization is dissimilar from each other. The royal widows, as portrayed by Mahasweta Devi, are prepared to accept any kind of punishment meted out to them. It is their penance for being alive while their husbands have died. They agree to suffer through endless fasts and other harsh rituals to secure their dead spouse’s place in heaven where all pious souls are promised a joyous existence. This kind of patriarchal perspective has originated primarily through religious fanaticism. The phallocentric society ensures that the hegemonic relationship between the sexes is maintained even after the absence of the individual invested with power. Hence religion plays an important role in sustaining the dominant phallocentric subjectivity despite the absence of an existent self. Here women too are perpetrators of violence as they become the vanguards of patriarchy and ensure that every widow accepts violence without any form of resistance. An analysis of these three short stories throws light upon the “false consciousness” of the women who constitute or are associated with the royal clan (The Sublime Object 28). The upper class women misrecognize the social reality by deliberately distorting the real state of things. They keep on lamenting the fate that has befallen the widows but also keep reminding these victims to accept their fate. Kunti, Subhadra, Draupadi, and even their loyal servants believe that the human fate is interminably linked to the divine powers. Hence the widows must submit to the dictates of religion. If they surrender to God’s will, their souls would be transported to heaven on magnificent chariots. According to the royal women and their dasis, to have a joyous “after-life,” one must lead a life of suffering. A close study of After
Kurukshetra reveals caste, class, and religion to be the primary source of sadistic and masochistic tendencies accepted by naïve individuals in their quest for transcendence.

The marginalized tribes are, however, shown to be much more liberal and tolerant in their attitude towards women. In the aforementioned three stories, the natives and the rural people are continuously shown as being the targeted by the violence of the rich upper castes. They are treated as abject beings – discarded and forgotten. But they do not submit to the feeling of helplessness and misery that arises during their victimization and allow themselves as well as others to bounce back after being violated. The motives of these common people are not fuelled and driven by power but by the perspective of living their life to its fullest. Hence Devi cleverly makes a shift in the general perspective about the subaltern women. She represents them as decisive and assertive women whose belief system does not allow them to accept and adhere to the ideology of violence, death, and destruction. The tribal community views the restriction on the widow’s right to remarry and raise a family as a crime against Nature. They are open-minded and do not fall in the trap of battle for domination between the sexes. Mahasweta Devi indulges in feminist propaganda in her narration of Kunti’s and her search for the true self in “Kunti and the Nishadin.” “Souvali” too has a slant of social activism to it. Hence Devi has successfully mobilized the past, and allowed the subaltern to articulate their experiences of violence.