Chapter III

The Subalterns and Black Humour: A Discourse of Class
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The chapter has accounted for the subalterns, in Mahasweta Devi, that are confronted with despondency in their daily existence. The element of black humour coincides with it. To explore both the aspects, the following titles by Mahasweta Devi are selected herein: Breast Stories, The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh, Bait, Dewana, Khoimala and the Holy Banyan Tree, Mother of Dusk and Dawn, and Rudali.

The chapter has gleaned the situations that baffle one so, that it is difficult for one to find whether misery or fun is an appropriate option to undertake or feel, given the circumstances. Mahasweta Devi presents such psychological circumstances involving her personae that she has her readers seriously thinking and meditating over the subaltern ambience. The element of black humour by M. Devi is canvassed in the chapter with the help of the works noted above. Before examining these texts, it would be worth its while to throw some light on ‘black humour’.

Basically, jokes, wisecrack, parody, irony, banter, caricature, sarcasm, paradox (Web 12-06-1013), etc. are the sources of humour. Moreover, they are used as per the norms prescribed and the tone of language practically used for a purpose. The Wikipedia defines black humour as:
[...] black humor, which, in its most basic definition, is humor that makes light of otherwise solemn subject matter, or gallows humor. The definition of black humor is problematic; it has been argued that it corresponds to the earlier concept of gallows humor. (Web 12.06.2013)

The term was coined by André Breton, the founder of Surrealism, ‘to designate a sub-genre of comedy and satire in which laughter arises from cynicism and skepticism, often relying on topics such as death’ (12.06.2013). It is equally interesting to note the definition of gallows humour for further clarification and convenience—

Gallows humour is humour in the face of or about very unpleasant, serious, or painful circumstances. Any humour that treats serious matters, such as death, war, disease, crime, etc., in a light, silly, or satirical fashion is considered gallows humour. Gallows humour has been described as a witticism in the face of— and in response to— a hopeless situation. It arises from stressful, traumatic, or life-threatening situations, often in circumstances such that death is perceived as impending and unavoidable. Gallows humour is typically made by or about the victim of such a situation, but not the perpetrator of it. (12.06.2013)
Considering the foregoing definitions, it is easy to conclude that Mahasweta Devi’s works definitely convey the idea of black humour or gallows humour for that matter as claims N K Singh (2001).

*Breast Stories* is a collection of three stories by Mahasweta Devi, inclusive of the titles, *Draupadi, Breast-giver* and *Behind the Bodice* respectively. The first one is a story about a tribal naxalite, the second about a Brahmin wet-nurse and the last about an untouchable woman. The stories have been rendered by Gayatri Spivak in English. The translator has written an introduction as well as her foreword to the collection along with a full-length critique on *Breast-giver*. The foreword is ambivalent an experience for the reader. Referring to the opening story, the translator has a cultural connotation to make:

*Draupadi is the name of the central character. She is introduced to the reader between two uniforms and between two versions of her name. Dopdi and Draupadi. It is either that as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name Draupadi, or the tribalized form Dopdi, is the proper name of the ancient Draupadi.... The Mahabharata and Ramayana are the cultural credentials of the so-called Aryan civilization of India. The tribes pre-date the Aryan invasion. They have no right to heroic Sanskrit names.* (Spivak 10)

Although Spivak says later that neither the interdiction nor the significance of the name must be taken too seriously, one factor comes as prominent that
Spivak openly admits that the Sanskrit phenomenon is not an indigenous entity as far as one sees the Indian context. Moreover, Spivak fails to attend to politics behind use of the word, *Harijan*. She, like so many others, takes it appropriate to call the untouchables so since the address is a respectable one, to her. Spivak should have taken a note of what Keer (2005) has expressed about the term in the biography of Dr Ambedkar. Keer also adds that the slaves of Gujarat are called by the name of harijan. It adds to the argument what Omprakash Valmiki (2007) has stated in his autobiography: that he was initially so satisfied with the term and later on completely disillusioned, hence staunchly opposed to it, to be called so.

*Breast Stories* is the title unusual to sight. The leitmotif of the title does not seem to be clear as to why the writer has chosen such a caption. But the other side of the truth can give an impression that it is a product of Mahasweta’s anger and of reality she has experienced in certain cases. *Draupadi* is a story of a naxalite woman. The story has gained wide recognition since the time Spivak introduced it at international academic daises. It is actually a sequel to the story of *Bashai Tudu*— where *Bashai Tudu* ends, Draupadi begins there. Mahasweta has written many activist essays that offer one vision into realizing the nature of exploitation inflicted upon the tribals and untouchables by the money-lenders, feudalists, local politicians and the police. Mahasweta Devi has quite lucidly presented the case of economic, social, cultural, physical and political exploitation of the
tribals and untouchables. Once they enter the bonded situation, there is none in the world that can come to their rescue. Draupadi seems to be an outcome of such a circumstance. She is 27, the wife of Dulna Majhi, both being the main culprits in the 1971 *Operation Bakuli*. The couple escapes feigning dead from the place where Surja Sau is killed cruelly. The police are after them consistently. Draupadi is taken for ‘the most notorious female’. Rupees 100/- is the award declared for her capture alive or dead. She and her husband are sought after most for the crime of killing Surja Sahu and his son. They go underground for a long time and are named on the barrel of the police gun for killing the grain brokers, landlords, moneylenders, law officers and bureaucrats. This indicates that there is a severe problem of the most fundamental needs of human life.

Senanayak, a Punjabi Sikh and the inspector, is recalled to the police station around Jharkhani. While the Santal couple is on the run, the soldiers go camouflage with an army informant, Dukhiram Gharari who sees Dulna about the place of water and has him killed. Dulna cries ‘Ma-ho’ which is understood as a code of tribal communication and the experts are invited to decipher the code and it is interpreted as ‘a cry of battle’. Before Dukhiram goes to collect his reward, he gets a knife in his neck, is killed. As Dulna is shot dead, all the onus of carrying the revolution forward naturally comes to Dopdi. She collects some rice and knots it into her waistcloth and walks slowly. As she walks, ‘she picks out and kills the lice in her hair’. She is
quite sure that once caught, she would be encountered. Dopdi assumes an alias Upi Mejhen. She is proud of her forefathers that stood guard over their women’s blood in black armour. Now her mission has been to wipe out the exploiters. Senanayak is a man, seasoned with experience, who simply knows the principle of finishing the criminals with no excuse, his motto being *if you want to destroy the enemy, become one.*

Finally Dopdi is apprehended at 6.53pm. When the dinner hour of Senanayak approaches, he asks his men to ‘make her’…and ‘Do the needful’ (35). The convict is tied to four posts and is gang-raped for a very long time. Mahasweta Devi puts forth a vicious account of the aftermath of the event as:

_Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says ‘water’ she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her?_ (Breast Stories 35)

About seven people rape Draupadi all through the night and ‘her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn’ (35). Mahasweta Devi, of course, seems to present the dark reality that takes place about the segregated segments of society at the police station. This move of her deserves all the gravity of attention yet the kind of presentation using a language that writes body rather than writing on the body also seems _gratuitous_ or even sadistic, should the term suit the context. The above description by her certainly
insinuates, one may think, sadism or one is unable at least to feel if this is the only way of presenting reality. When offered a white piece of cloth, Draupadi declines it and stands naked before Senanayak with her ‘Thigh and pubic hair matted with blood. Two breasts two mounds’ (36). The people, on the various academic lecterns, intensely criticize and mock at the language used by Dalit writers. Could the very ones take such a move against Mahasweta? It would be a wonder should the question appear irrelevant. Finally, Mahasweta concludes: ‘Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid’ (37). Why does Mahasweta use the body organs to display action? is a question that propels the reader into deep cogitation. Apparently there seems to be no clue to get at it. In fact, the words of the writer seem to make her personae more undignified and schizophrenic. This could open new vistas of construction. In addition, one has to also admit that Mahasweta Devi deserves accolade for having mustered up the courage to fiercely attack the evil system.

The story represents the following preponderant example of black humour. When set free after rape, Draupadi, downright naked, gives way to a spontaneous loud laughter and wipes with palm the blood dripping from her ravaged lips and countercharges at the police personnel:

What’s the use of cloths? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?
She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak’s white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, there isn’t a man here I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, kounter me—come on, kounter me—? (37)

Breast-giver is the second story of the collection in which Jashoda acts the central protagonist. The protagonist is a Brahmin who bears many children and suckles even more than can the human capacity do. Gayatri Spivak (2004) has analysed the story in four ways: for Author, Teacher, Subaltern, and Historian. Besides, she has added some elite approaches to her scholarly discussions on the story. Moreover, some of her approaches come out, apparently at least, as purely Euro-centric, an outsider’s view. For instance, the way Spivak interprets the protagonist from the vantage point of Marxism exactly leads to baffle the Indian reader. The story is basically an account of the pathos a mother suffers against the challenge of survival. Therefore, it is more related to the affects and less to the economic values like surplus.

There is a Brahmin couple having had about five offspring. The two of the offspring are still sucklings. Jashoda’s husband, Kangalicharan, finds a lasting solace in her breasts. Every night he massages them and goes to bed. He works at a sweetmeat shop where he stirs vat and after finishing his work every day he steals some samosas and feeds his children on them. There is a Haldar family, a prestigious one, a well-to-do of course. In the
family, the youngest son behaves whimsically. Mahasweta calls him an incubus of Baghdad. Once the boy is filled with lust, therefore, attacks the lady cook. The cook, having stolen rice, fish and turnip greens listlessly responds to him and the boy is repentant. The figure of the cook does not receive any sense of respect: ‘She was sufficiently proud that her body had attracted the boy’ (39). Fearing punishment, the boy implicates the cook under the charge of thieving his mother’s ring and gets the cook fired from the work. On an afternoon, Kangalicharan returns home and on the way is run over on feet and shins by a car driven by the very spoilt son of Mr Haldar. Mr haldar is so angry for the reason that his son has attempted to kill a Brahmin. He respects the Brahmins so much so that he touches the feet of Kangali, the person of his son’s age, and puts a pinch of dust of his feet on his own tongue. What he says about the Brahmin is interesting:

There is no East or West for a brahman. If there’s a sacred thread around his neck you have to give him respect even when he’s taking a shit. (44)

Mahasweta Devi has incorporated some superstitious elements in the story. She always refers to the Lionseated, the Goddess. Haldar-babu promises Kangali that he would give him a shop set up in his own yard, a matter of reparation for the sin his son has committed but all of a sudden he has a heart failure and dies therefore. Consequently, all the responsibility of running the house falls on the shoulders of Jashoda. She is an Indian
woman who does not blame her husband for the misfortune incurred. She is
determined to function as a professional, or more accurately a commercial,
mother. Since the control of Haldar-babu’s house comes into the hands of
his wife, she thinks that she should plan a breast-giver in the form of
Jashoda for her sons may produce trouble when their wives look
unattractive after suckling their own babies for a long time. Jashoda is
pleased with the job. She breastfeeds near about twenty children. For a
while all the problems of family sustenance are overcome. Kangali looks
after cooking at home and Jashoda becomes an image above the ‘mother
cow’. Soon she becomes an object of great reverence and devotion
everywhere in the town. This shows a common acquiescence to
exploitation of women. Mahasweta represents Jashoda a pathetic character
on the one hand and a cruel husband in Kangali on the other. Jashoda is so
happy in the beginning to perform her duties as wet-nurse and says for that
reason:

[…]A woman breeds, so here medicine, there blood-peshur, here
doctor’s visits. Showoffs! Look at me! I’ve become a year-breeder! So
is my body failing? Makes your skin crawl? I hear they are drying
their milk with injishuns. Never heard of such things! (53)

Actually, what Jashoda says is just a piece of dramatic irony as one
undergoes in Macbeth (2010). After eight years of playing wet-nurse,
Jashoda loses her mistress and consequently also loses her bread and access
to the Haldar house. The eldest daughter-in-law of the house asks Jashoda to seek her husband who has set himself up in the Shiva temple. Even her husband rejects her. Mahasweta rightly hits at the crippling yet selfish-in-excess husband. Jashoda lies in the courtyard of the Lionseated’s temple for four days but no deity arrives to her help.

Eventually, Jashoda goes back to the Haldar house and asks the landlady to have mercy upon her. It is agreed that she would serve the house as a cook and since a Brahmin, she is a bit sympathized with. Soon it is discovered that Jashoda has caught the painful breast cancer. In the beginning she is not ready to go to hospital but is forcefully admitted into one later. Her husband is repentant over his act for a while but leaves the hospital ever and soon afterwards Jashoda leaves the world. She is finally cremated not by any of her kith and kin but by an untouchable.

The story paints a picture of excessive suffering of a helpless woman, merciless community, some hyperbolic elements, over-idealization of the Brahmins and a cruel husband. Although born among the social elite, Jashoda’s suffering is no less than that of a woman from downtrodden community. She is a subaltern on the economic ground. The story reveals the fact that a subaltern belongs to all castes and classes. Considering exploitation of Jashoda, Spivak’s ‘discourse of jouissance’ looks ridiculous.

**Behind the Bodice** is the last of the stories that does not carry the sense of seriousness as do the first two. The theme of the story is based on
the song of a Bollywood movie, *Khalnayak*. The story opens with a thought-provoking statement of the writer herself—

‘WHAT IS THERE’ was the national problem that year. When it became a *national issue*, the other fuck-ups of that time— e.g. crop failure-earthquake, everywhere clashes between so-called terrorists and state power and therefore killings, the beheading of a young man and woman in Haryana for the crime of marrying out of caste, the unreasonable demands of Medha Patkar and others around the Narmada dam, hundreds of rape-murder-lockup torture etc. *non-issues* which by natural law approached but failed to reach highlighting in the newspapers— all this remained *non-issues*. Much more important than this was *choli ke piche*— behind the bodice.

(134-5)

The quote above brings out the irony of the Indian media that could never realize the importance and gravity of the real issues of concern. The useless things always make the big news in India. Mahasweta also turns her attention to the so-called scholars communicating in the non-Indian languages on the national-level daises and become the decision makers.

Upin is an ace-photographer who, along with his friend, Ujan and wife, Shital Mallya goes to the places, Jharoa and Seopura in between which dwells a migrant labourer, Gangor. His pictures appear in the national press. Mahasweta Devi talks of a woman who is:
A high-breasted rural woman [that] sits slack wither breast shoved into an infant’s mouth. The breast is covered with the end of her cloth. The same girl is walking with many girls carrying water on her head. Breasts overflowing like full pitchers. (140)

A photograph of the woman is caught and she demands some money from him which shocks the man. At times one sees that Mahasweta makes an excess of the descriptions such as that of the breasts. The above lines could easily prove the point. Why she makes a woman more naked is a non-descript thing. It is also especially noticeable that her character from the tribal or untouchable class remains ‘dirty’, ‘filthy’, ‘full of lice’ ‘denuded of morals’, etc. This is not to take Mahasweta into a negative frame of mind but discuss what exactly lies there in her works. Sometimes the tribal characters find a respectable representation but it is a hard case with the untouchables. Gangor is such a character that looks dirty and filthy. Her husband is a dweller of jail that collects money from her at night. Gangor’s photograph invites a disaster in her life.

After some days Gangor is found absent. The caretaker of the house in which Upin, Ujan and Shital live tells Upin that the women like Gangor have been shameless country girls that move from place to place to kill. Gangor is too much harassed by the police and drinks the country-brewed wine. When Upin goes seeking after Gangor, there are people dying of adulterated water yet the rest enjoy playing the song, Choli ke piche. When
Gangor is discovered at the end, she is found a prostitute. The photography of Upin has been instrumental for the spoiled life of Gangor, a victim of gang rape.

The themes of prostitution, rape, immorality, etc. have been prevalent with Mahasweta Devi. The subaltern women always play the victims for her. This is possibly the reality resultant of her experiences about them. When one compares Draupadi and Gangor with Jashoda, one finds that all the three women are subject to illimitable exploitation yet Jashoda enjoys a very high-level moral position, a position of a pure woman whereas Draupadi and Gangor lose every moral. They are the subjects of all clumsiness, symbolizing moral debauchery and figures of hatred and repulsion. Jashoda is a winner in the end while Draupadi and Gangor the permanent losers, having lost everything. The breast stories necessitate the reader to be reflective over the life conditions of an India that still remains to be explored.

**The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh** is a work of short fiction by Mahasweta Devi. It is the most pathetic story of a woman called Lachhima who undergoes the worst kind of physical and psychological exploitation. There is no limit to her harassment, first at the hands of Medininarayan, a Rajjput and later on of his son Ganesh. The work brings out the uttermost bitter facts of life of the untouchable women. The story starts with the time 40 years ago. Medininarayan is a man who becomes father of a son for the
first time. He has three wives and a concubine. Medininarayan is in his fifties yet has kept a very young girl, Lachhima, the granddaughter of Gulab, a washer woman. The child is born so unusual, with a tooth, that its mother passes away terrified looking at it. Basically, Badki and Majhli, the other two wives of Medini having three daughters between them, do not welcome the incident. Chhotki, the mother of the new baby has already had two daughters, Saraju and sita borne to Medini. Gulal works as the midwife at his home.

Medini has a condescending attitude to think of others as simply being animals:

**People! I’m the only human being around. The rest are all animals.**

**Thoo! They spread it around that the curse of Mahabirji was upon me, I’d never have a son, my line would end. Why did they say that?**

**Because there was trouble with Bhisun Ahia. They made mischief.**

(The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh 2-3)

He is so much concerned about rearing of the child. Gulab wants to accept the duty for Medini believes that his first two wives would kill it out of jealousy. There should be the prayer ceremony for the child. Therefore, Sarsatiya, the Brahmin is invited to perform the rite. He advises Medini that the child be named after Tritirthnarayan (the Narayan of the three pilgrimages). The Brahmin makes a heavy weather of the event so as to
fool Medini and the people telling that the child is a deity only. The house, he says, is *Gaya* and *Varanasi* at once:

Medini Singh’s house is henceforth a holy place. This is Gaya. This is Varanasi. You people didn’t even realize who has been born here! It makes my heart sore. People are irreligious in kaliyug, but that even in these village parts no one’s seen the truth […] That’s sad. […] This child will be remembered for his achievement. He will raise aloft the honour of the gods and Brahmans, the name of the family will shine even more brilliantly. Knobs of flesh on the ears? Long big toe? All signs of a divine being. Whoever cares for and serves this child will prosper. He who wishes him ill will be cursed. (5)

The child has a clump of moles between the cheek and ear and the big toes unnaturally elongated. This gives way to the Brahmin for speculation that the child is but ‘Ganesh Maharaj.’

Soon the news spreads across the vicinity and the people take Medini’s house that of a deity and divinity. Mahasweta Devi makes a fun of how the people are made gullible. Thus Tritirtha is nicknamed as Ganesh. And, for that reason, everything related to Ganesh gains a social acceptance. The five daughters play a sign of rage for Medini. He works as the most confident bodyguard to the zamindar (feudal) of Nawagarh. As a reward of the services he has paid to the feudal, Medini gets ten bighas of fertile land. He also runs the business of money-lending at Barha (his
village) and elsewhere. Mahasweta Devi humorously describes him as a man who ‘could eat a whole goat and run ten miles.’ He is wealthy and powerful sharing ill-luck with wives. That the first two wives of his bore him daughters, Medini marries for a third time to beget a son.

The feudal for whom Medini works has acquired the title of ‘Raja’, the king. Even the king is so much impressed by the news at Medini’s house. Even his wife wants the same miracle at hers at the very Brahmin’s hands. However, the shrewd Brahmin fools her saying that it is impossible with her to happen since she has already had two sons. The queen visits the house, bows to the child, offers him the golden coin and recedes thereafter.

On a day, when Medini is back home, he finds the door blocked from inside and hence senses something ominous having happened. He learns that his two wives have attempted to cast a spell to kill the child. Gulab tells him that she has pissed on the thread from the boy’s clothes so as to prevent the ill. She also points to the doll made up of the flour. Here Mahasweta Devi hits at the superstition of black magic. The matter is put to the head of the village, Barkandaj Singh and the wives are sent to their father’s house. Badki’s younger brother and Majhia’s younger uncle rush in to Medini to settle the matter with him. Moreover, Medini does not entertain the case of either. The uncle, alive to temper of Medini, does not press on him and offers him a temptation of marrying his daughter to
Medini, the fourth wife, calling her obedient, and quiet. Medini disapproves of it saying that the God does not desire a happy marital life for him.

Medini visits his master and requests him to set him free of his duties so as to save his only divine son from all the ills. His heart gets heavy saying so, so does the king’s. The king is particularly unhappy with the thought of missing on a man to have trampled the huts of his subjects, panicked them and chased the tribals away to the forest at his orders. The daughters, all the five, are married off through Barkandai Singh and without any malicious gossip about them, while Gulab and Lachhima keep as dependent in the house. Medini does not visit his daughters’ homes. That way he is a cruel father. Saraju is the daughter kept at receiving end by her mother-in-law. She is desperate to find an affectionate person. Medini opens a school at home for the safety of his son. There are other children that join the school. A Brahmin teacher is appointed to educate the son. The teacher is offered shelter, boarding-and-lodging and he performs the rites there. He is Mishir who also functions an advisor to Medini; he also cooks for the father and son both.

Medini goes past his sixty but eats two seers of meat, a bowl of ghee and twenty rotis to keep his sensual excitement up and high. Lachhima sleeps with him. Lachhima, as a character, takes a distorted image to a greater deal. When Medini says that he would relieve Lachhima after 8-10 years of his son’s getting married, and his daughter-in-law’s reaching
puberty. Lachhima, with all her submission, requests him to free her now so that she could marry Mohar Karan, a man who looks after her farm and is her 10 years senior:

If you’re getting rid of me anyway, let me go now, Malik. Let me have someone to lean on. Or else where will I go? When I’m forty? I’ve served you all these years, shall I serve Chhota Malik for eight more years? You could keep a maid, no? (24)

Listening to this Medini turns mad and kicks out at Lachhima so heavily that it tears off Lachhima’s earring with the blood oozing and dripping out with it. He says that she must be utterly grateful to him for his allowing her into his bed. She does not deserve to make such an appeal—

Take the lower castes to bed, and they forget their place. Who are you talking about? They’re my dharampatnis, my wedded wives. You’ve eaten my salt and now you’re biting the hand that fed you? Haven’t I written off land in your name? (25)

To this Lachhima agrees submissively as does Bakha of Mulk Raj Anand to the upper-caste people’s cruel and inhumane opinions. She says: ‘Forget it Malik. I made a mistake. Forgive me’. Hers is a case of a victim of droit de seigneur.

The example above not only shows a no-win stance of a subaltern but the rotten mentality of the people from privileged socio-economic background. Besides, it also denotes the fact that the subaltern characters
do not find a space for self-respect and resistance as they do in Dalit literature. In this case, the stories like *The Refugee* by Dolas (1994), *Poisoned Bread* by Bandhumadhav (1994) and *Hindu* by Limbale (2010) deserve a special mention. And the artists like Bagul design their characters such a way that the possibility of exploitation almost comes to an end. It finally brings about change in disposition of the readers.

Medini’s son also loves watching blood sport of the cleavage of the pigs. The Brahmin teacher also instigates Medini against Lachhima that she might hurt his boy out of anger corollary of her vengeance. The Brahmin’s words convince Medini. He plans the marriage of his son. To save him of disgrace, Lachhima asks him to leave her for a while lest people call him names for having kept an untouchable woman. This pleases him so much that he calls her very sensible.

On the wedding day of Ganesh, Lachhima has temporary leave. She tells Medini that she wants to go to Gaibinath temple to offer a prayer for Ganesh’s safety. He is overwhelmed to listen to this. Lachhima invites Mohor on the way. They both visit the temple and on the way back, she tells him that she would never be free from the clutches of Medini. Therefore, Mohor should find a match for him in Dhanpatiya that would make him a good wife. She tells him that she is a caged bird ever. As a matter of gift she hands him over Rs. 20/- to buy two goats and make profit. Mohor is too much pained to listen to this. He asks her to run away with
him but she rejects the idea for she thinks that Medini would mete out his cruelty and kill him and also finish off her grandmother. Bigulal also warns him, with assumption of a defeatist mentality, of the repercussions:

Way out? Are you mad, Mohor? It’s not even three months since Medini Singh got the news that the adivasi subjects of Nawagarh are buying things for money, paying for things with crops. One word from him and the farmer sipahis his brothers-in-caste, burnt the adivasi basti. No Mohor, these people are terrible. Don’t do a thing like that. (48)

Lachhima takes herself Medini’s kept woman, Ganesh’s nurse and her grandmother’s mortgaged property. There is another servant, strongly built up named Haroa who sympathizes with her. Everyone declines Medini’s cruelty towards Lachhima yet everyone is part of a dumb show. All the people, especially the subaltern ones play the submissive. It is difficult to gather the purpose of Mahasweta Devi behind producing such a dumb show. The surrender and subjection of the subaltern to cruelty of the establishment seem to be a passive image of the subaltern.

The Rajputs of Barha village own the nine tenths of the land, thus becoming the mainstream of the village. The Bhangis, Hajams, Dhobis and Dusads form the subaltern group of the village. Mori is an untouchable, the mistress of Barkandaj, and wife of Bigulal. The Bhangis of the village are represented as the spreaders of the scandals. In fact nobody stops them
from the spread of scandals because the village wholly depends upon them for sanitation. Their description by the author follows:

The Bhangis drank, turned into mud and colour-smeared demons, mode themselves up like freaks, took out processions, composed songs. They composed songs about new laws, about murders and fights, about the oppression of the police and the scandals of the maliks. (57)

Mohor wants to get married after Lachhima’s impossibility is discovered. He wants to borrow money from Lachhima but his would-be father-in-law prevents him from doing so. When Medini Singh learns that Mohor has bought a goat and is to be married off soon, he traps him. There is a pot borrowed by Mohor from Gulal of which Medini makes a sound ground to implicate Mohor. He has Mohar under arrest under the claim of having purloined the pot from his house, the pot belonging to Gulal herself. The marital ties stand cancelled therefore and Dhanpatiya—after blaming Lachhima for the ruin—is married to Kamta, a seasoned, so Mahasweta narrates, cattle thief.

Soon there is the festival of Holi. All the village collects together to play with colours and simultaneously the Bhangis spread rumours of scandals involving Medini Singh. All the Rajputs laugh at him whereas Medini for having been blasphemed there for Lachhima, wants to hit at the spreaders of scandals. Barkandai has peals of laughters produced out of
himself that he dies of a coronary attack while Medini undergoes ‘cerebral thrombosis.’ This is supposed to be an end of two great ‘evil gods’ of Barha. Consequently Nathu becomes the head of the village as Gajomoti, the deserving candidate in terms of age, is denied the job for his ‘sin of eating and drinking with the Muslims’. This reminds one of The Indian Ghetto: The Centre of Untouchability by Dr Ambedkar (2010). The mental disability of Medini also ends the first phase of Lachhima’s life.

Medini gets bedridden. The people visiting him deliberately arouse a sense of suspicion about Lachhima and Gulal thinking that they would steal away a lot from the house. Medini’s uncle-in-law and brother-in-law suggest to him that he invite his wives to his care. But Medini does not agree to this. He says that the wives would poison him. When Nathu Singh touches the account books, Medini gets more paralyzed. His speech turns incomprehensible and body inert. However, Lachhima plays a crucial role, that of awakening Ganesh to his manliness and senses. She begs to Nathu initially to look after accounts but later asks Ganesh to take them over. Lachhima is so compassionate that she, despite her life having already been wrecked by Medini, looks after Medini for six years. She also makes Medini realize that he has ruined her life. The nursing offered by Lachhima and Haroa has been so very effective that it enlivens Medini to an extent. His speech grows clearer and he feels physically at ease. Mishir says to him that Lachhima has served him like ‘Savitri’ having made a man of Ganesh.
too. Since Medini is an eyewitness to this, he readily admits it. Mishir also says that the duties offered by Gulal and Lachhima are matchless that no other woman could have done. Lachhima’s span of Medini’s service counts at sixteen-eighteen years. She is 48 when leaving his house.

Before leaving, Lachhima strongly insists on Ganesh that he check out each and every object of the house lest the people question her honesty. Medini wants her to demand whatever she wants but Lachhima has lost all her desires hence does not accept a single rupee or any valuable from the house despite a strong insistence from Medini and Ganesh’s end. Afterwards she is threatened to be abducted and troubled so much by the son of Nathu, Ramrup; Ganesh does not wish to get it happened. He is transformed into a hulk of a man. Medini passes away. Ganesh works as per the advice of Mishir. He begs him to correct him ever. Lachhima requests Ganesh, who instructs the maids of his home not to gossip about Gulal and Lachhima for they brought about prosperity therein, to let Haroa marry her. Ganesh asks for the Brahmin’s advice who says that the marriage should happen.

Ganesh also wants to evict the Bhangis that spread scandals of the landlords i.e. the Raiputs. His particular objection is that they should not defame the Rajputs. Nathu tempts him that if the scandals are stopped to be gossiped about, he would make him the head of the village. When the
people around say that the latrines would remain unclean after the eviction, Ganesh does not bother about it even in the least.

Ganesh arranges an untimely Kali festival. The station master, police inspector, doctor of civil hospital, timber contractor and BDO attend the festival. This means that the latter work in the interest of Ganesh. The group discusses that it is all useless to have rural development:

> What's the point of sinking so many wells, digging so many canals, building so many roads—I just haven’t a clue. Look Chowdhariji, the more backward a place, the more simple its folk— they remain obedient, they fear the police. Progress spoils them. It annoys the maliks, and in turn we face problems. Development is not suitable for rural India. (78)

The inspector emphasizes that the Bhangis and other untouchables be kept the slaves ever; they should be deprived of all the amenities and facilities of life and terrorized. And it is best suited to rural India. The author brings forth the passivity and wretched mentality of the bureaucrats towards development and the people, the subalterns, that have been suffering neglect for centuries together.

Ganesh has a cruel plan to implicate Mangalal, a scavenger that disposes off the dead animals. Ganesh wants to get rid of his old dry cow, therefore, sends it to the scavenger settlement. The low dies of thirst. Mangalal skins the carcass and disposes it into the carcass pit/carrion pit.
Ganesh has him under arrest on the false charge of poisoning the cow. The scavengers from the settlement beg Ganesh to relieve Mangalal but he bargains with the people and warns against scandal mongering. Finally the culprit is set free.

Ganesh is unhappy with his wife, Putli when it comes to his sensual gratification. He kicks her off every day for not proffering him sexual satisfaction. He believes that it is because of his mothers’ not giving satisfaction to his father that his father had kept Lachhima. Mahasweta Devi narrates that for this reason every Rajput household has a paramour. The statement naturally fetches in a question: Do all the untouchable women not have their own honour?

All of a sudden, Pallavi Shah, the spoilt daughter— so addresses her Mahasweta Devi, of Tejlal Shah from Mumbai intrudes the narrative. Her mother lives at a patronized home. Pallavi enters the scavenger settlement and wants to set the scavengers free from the grasp of Ganesh and his brethren. Ganesh finds her a nubile urban doll and wants to satiate himself with her. He does not like her living at Mangalal’s and instead wants her to be at his own house. She abuses at him and wants the scavenger— number 43— to resist Ganesh and his cruelty but to no use. Soon she gets terrified and is reached out of the village. As a consequence, Ganesh sets the settlement ablaze. The SDO does not come to anybody’s or Pallavi’s rescue nor do the police either. Pallavi is given a hard scold for her staying and
eating with the scavengers. The scavengers are chased to forest where the Dusads keep. The latter support them asking them to leave out scavenging, for the Rajputs. Although the Rajputs are very much concerned about who would clean the toilets and drainages, Ganesh is not even for an iota.

Putli bears Ganesh a daughter. He is extremely disappointed. He wants to leave her and remarry but Mishir advises him to wait for the second issue. His wife tells him that she is incapable of looking after household duties; therefore, he should appoint Ganga for the job. However, Ganesh has Rukmani on his mind instead. Rukmani is a bastard daughter of Nathu. Ganga has been her mother and a former extra-marital woman of Nathu. Ganesh’s wife denies having Rukmani but to no avail. Nathu’s son has a lustful eye on Rukmani which is why even Nathu wants to send her to Ganesh, already knowing the consequence but he must do it for the sake of his daughter’s safety. He speaks to his wife:

You want peace and happiness for your daughter, be quiet. He got rid of Lachhima because we insisted on it. And it’s true that as long as she was there, Goddess Lakshmi blessed Medini’s house, he prospered.

(85)

The untouchables appear in the text as the most debauched in character and thinking, and with submissive mentality. Ganesh initially neglects Rukmani, the fiancée of Kamu Ahir. Moreover, sensually
dissatisfied he ravishes her mercilessly. Mahasweta Devi describes the event as:

Ah! What pleasure! The turmoil in his blood began to subside.

‘No….na…na malik.’ Rukmani’s words turned into sobs, then moans.

Then silence. Sound of stifled sobs. Ganesh turned up the lamp.

Rukmani’s eyes were wide with terror. He was excited, aroused.

Rukmani was exhausted with weeping. Satisfaction followed by sleep.


Ganesh continuously effects forceful coitus with her. As a result, Rukmani is impregnated. She loses faith in life and is doubtful if her fiancé would accept her. She wants to run away but does not. Even Ganga, her mother, supports her. However, when the medicine for abortion fails, Rukmani, after long physical suffering—commits suicide by hanging herself. Ganesh is unmoved by the incident. Nathu is worried because Bigulal leads the funerary procession and collects money from each household. He plans to take the matter to the police but knows that it is all useless as they too wear the same hat. The two hundred scavengers beat up the drum and blow the trumpets to finish the last rites.

The suicide of Rukmani brings about a stir among the untouchables of the village rousing them for rebellion. Ganga, dead maimed at heart, also attempts suicide. However, Lachhima saves her. The people around spurn
Lachhima for having brought up Ganesh; they spit out looking her face up. But Lachhima says that she did not do so out of her choice. She has been helpless all through her life. When the people are convinced, Lachhima and Haroa drag out two sacks of Maroa (lesser food grain) to feed themselves. Nathu asks Mori, his father’s former courtesan, to find a new girl at his sixty after having ravished three others. Mori, however, shows that she is no more interested in entertaining him or his orders any more.

The Rajputs, one can see, are the people indulging in lechery most of the time. This shows that although they belong to the unproductive class, as Kancha Iliaih (2009 17-19) firmly points out, they invariably dominate the productive one to which the Lachhimas belong.

‘Low caste! Scum of earth! Naked beggars’ (124) etc are the terms emitting out of the mouth of privileged characters to abuse at the untouchables. This also suggests how the untouchables make the eyesore to others. The SDO, a new appointment in the region, takes up strong measures against Ganesh and his people. Even his own people go against Ganesh save his father-in-law. Since the latrines are left unclean, no officer stays in Barha. The governmental measures are especially at work thanks to Pallavi shah since her father turns a Union Minister of Finance. Mishir also does not find much respect of the yesteryear among the Rajputs and wants to leave out residence of Ganesh. In fact, Mishir’s character has been presented sympathetically. The reason is not understandable or may be
since there is or has been widespread respect showered upon the Brahmins, Mahasweta Devi does so. When leaving, Mishir is requested a lot by Ganesh to not leave. He turns in an appealing as well as repentant tone to say that the Brahmin should forgive him for his mistakes whatsoever. The Brahmin finds Ganesh at his feet. Everyone, beginning with Ganesh, calls him ‘deota’. And the rest of the Rajputs blame Ganesh a lot for missing on Mishir.

The untouchables want permit to enter the forest and collect firewood. Abhay Mahato talks to the SDO for this and the latter permits the untouchables. There are Mohan and his son Ranka Dusad who rebel against the Rajputs as they live in the forest yet they are not fully rebellious as the fear of the former always haunts them. Ganesh plans to kill Abhay and sets fire to the forest. The plan is leaked by Haroa. He also wants to teach the SDO a lesson who is initially presented as if wholly committed but later listless, an enigma to understand. The SDO gives Ganesh dressing down and Ganesh wants to kill Haroa tracing in him the culprit. He steadfastly believes that no SDO can cause him any harm for he, as a scoundrel, would ‘pay Congress money and be scot-free’.

Ganesh runs after Haroa. His wife informs Haroa that Ganesh is at large therefore Haroa should save himself. Haroa leaves off breaking off the tiles in roof. Ganesh hits at his wife and chases Haroa to his house. Lachhima comes across but to no advantage. Haroa injures Ganesh in his
left shoulder with a sickle but has himself hit with a bullet from Ganesh’s gun in the lower belly. He bleeds. All the people come around and want to hasten him to a hospital but the injured says that it would be useless. Ganesh reveals that Haroa was a criminal having murdered his former master with Medini having sheltered and made him into an eternal slave. This affects none though. Ganesh leaves the place for the forest. He sets the forest ablaze so as to implicate the Dusads and the scavengers. He is discovered by the people and chased out. Ganesh enters Lachhima’s hut and asks for shelter with all the people around armed. Those that are asleep are awakened. He begs Lachhima to save him but she calls out to the people and informs them that the crime master is hiding in her hut and that they should get him. She joins the people with the door open. This is again a mysterious end to the text.

Mahasweta Devi uses Gandhi Mission as a symbol of rescuing the untouchables. It is absolutely surprising that she does not take any trouble to find out if Ambedkarism has been useful anyway so far as protection and regeneration of the untouchables are concerned. The world is alive to it that Ambedkar’s contribution towards betterment of the untouchables is unique, par excellence. But Mahasweta Devi’s pen does not calculate it.

Bait is a collection of stories translated from Bengali into English by a cultural historian, Sumanta Banerjee. It is inclusive of four short stories by Mahasweta Devi; suffice it to say that the translator has painstakingly
brought about almost exact translation that gives lucid intelligibility of the fundamental ideas of the writer. There are many words that carry the sense of linguistic nativness (dialect) or what could be taken for Indianness. The title absolutely suits the temperament of every story. Banerjee has given a full-length account of the ambience, of which the stories are part and, which goes parallel to his own times as well:

During the War, Calcutta became the headquarters of the South East Asia Command which brought in its trail hundreds of American and British soldiers. This opened up an avenue for a new generation of underworld operators. The devastating famine of 1943 that hit Bengal during the War... forced starving families from the countryside to come to Calcutta. Their women became victims of underworld operators who supplied them to the British and American soldiers.

(Bait ix)

*Bait*, like most of Mahasweta Devi’s works, takes up the theme of tribal suffering inflicted on under various pretexts like Anti-naxalite operation, economic indebtedness, etc. by the local established social and administrative systems. The stories amazingly find their backdrop in the urban location.

**Fisherman** is the story located in Raypukur, a town. Jagat is the protagonist while Abhay, his son plays the next-to-protagonist character.
The protagonist is a simpleton middle-aged man with the simplest attitude of life. He is the very fisherman whose job is to take out dead bodies of the youngsters. His wife, Bhamini looks after the poultry coop and son educates at a technical school. The family has a nice going so far. However, the in-charge officer of the police station acts the killjoy towards the family. He is jealous of Abhay for his own son is useless. Abhay is associated with some secret activity of which there is no exact clue. However, Banerjee claims that it is a naxalite rebellion against the establishment —

Here again, Mahasweta makes no mention of the Naxalites. But to any Bengali reader familiar with the decade of the 1970s, it would be obvious from her subtle suggestive notes that the bodies dumped into the tank by the police were of those young boys suspected of political affiliation to the Naxalite movement, ‘more dangerous than the tigers of the forest, more dangerous than the snakes in their holes’. (xiv)

The police-in-charge forcefully asks Jagat to make Abhay act as purveyor of the news of the naxalites. But when he learns that Abhay is not ready to do the job, he threatens Jagat:

I’m telling you Jagat, there’s much suffering in store for you. Much suffering. And all you’ll do is pull corpses out of the water and sell eggs in the market. (10)
Abhay, the only issue yet a stranger to his parents on emotional and intellectual grounds, ultimately falls victim to the exploitative system. Thus Jagat and Bhamini are bereft which is but marginalization of the both in terms of emotions. Jagat is already a social subaltern who performs menial duties. The killing of his son who is flawless and polite at manners is further marginalizing of his. He always fears the living than the corpses that form a source of his mental peace. He is much too concerned about ruthlessness of the world:

It helps to be on the outskirts. Even if there is a murder, no one makes a noise. No parents come to the police station or the morgue in search of their sons. What amazes Jagat is that no one even weeps aloud in grief these days. (3)

Jagat is left ecstatic when he finds the body of the police-in-charge, the killer of his son, in the same tank with Abhay’s handkerchief round the neck of the dead.

Knife is a story about gang warfare in the urban locality of West Bengal. The masses have been marginalized in the story by the politicians sharing illegal connexion with the underworld dons. Hameed, Germany, a civil contractor, a palmist, Malati, Akhil-babu, Rajat, pedestrians, rickshaw-pullers, etc. fill in the scenario of the story. Germany leads a gang of his associates, Sachcha, Baba, Bota and Paolan. The five rule the roost. There
are women raped, people murdered, money extorted, bombs exploded. Such is the chaos and harassment of citizens. Moreover, the question naturally arises as by whose dint the gangsters must be manipulating the people. The answer comes: the politicians and the police system. Here, a realistic element has been claimed—

The 1950-60 period saw the flowering of the politician-underworld nexus in West Bengal in its full bloom. A new class of gangsters, known as mustaans, appeared on the streets of Calcutta and its suburbs. The leaders of the ruling Congress party picked them up as muscle-men to beat up activists of Opposition parties and to threaten their followers at election time. (xi-ii)

Germany and his men make unpleasant sight to the public. They keep people under tremendous consistent threat:

Organized a protest against bulu philms being shown in town? Get bombed. Beaten up Ryanda for raping your sister? Eat bullets. (20)

There is a parallel gang to them. But it is not as strong and not supported by the politician-police circle. The story is a bit episodic. Mahasweta Devi introduces an astrologer to look after the affairs of a contractor who is patronized by a politician and whose construction work goes many renovations a year. Suddenly the patron passes away which leaves his kith and kin on his side and on his wife’s economically helpless.
This frightens the contractor psychologically. The astrologer takes full advantage of the situation to his family’s welfare. The episode uncovers the severe corruption of the public works department and religious fooling.

The rest of the story deals with the war between the gangs and a constructive protest of citizens. Malati is a prostitute who sells off hooch along with a person called Pakhi. Though a prostitute, Malati is humane, kind and generous to realize feelings of other female victims. She has been humiliated, physically exploited time and again. She shares some dialogues with the police officer through whom she presents more concern about plight of the town and women. She offers a sense of great sympathy for a 12-year girl, Phulbanu who has been raped and murdered by Germany.

Mahasweta Devi uses the words freedom, struggle and revolution ironically:

They believe in ‘freedom’, in ‘struggle’. Let the black marketers do what they want. They must be given the ‘freedom’ to carry on with business as usual. (16)

The quote exposes hypocrisy of the existing political order. The clout of the gangsters is but the gift of the order. The political rivalry involves hiring of the gangsters, thugs and smugglers. Mahasweta Devi does not spare the then political strategies of the central government:
Not one but if 400 ‘20-point programmes’ are run by only five people, how can there be any hope of peace in the life of the public? The 500th birth anniversary of the divine ‘P’em-er Thakur’ and still no peace prevails in this district! (20)

It is an acerbic attack on the Emergency announced by Indira Gandhi during 1975. The press, local leaders unite together and finally compel the police officer to take action against the gangsters. During their common meeting a peanut vendor and two rickshaw-pullers are exploded. This implies, again, that the marginals are the oft-victimized group. Finally, Hameed, an expert of knife art, kills Germany whom Malati labels a coward. The story centres on the peripheral status of the rickshaw-pullers, prostitutes and the masses oppressed by the politicians.

**Body** is a narrative of a tribal young girl. She is Ketaki working as a whore. There is a politician that is represented as a philanthropist on the one hand and a libertine on the other. Ketaki is a tribal girl, socially marginalized. Her parents robbed and were hanged for murders. She is unattractive facially but inviting physically. The so-called philanthropist owns over fifteen spacious flats enriched with luxurious facilities, the flats being meant for a separate girl each. He sexually exploits Ketaki and has a procurer in the name of Mr M to his credit. After use of Ketaki, the politician, named Nripati, meaning the emperor—hands her over to his
cohorts. She is a captive to M, and powerless. She burgles and M likes her for her courage:

And her courage. And her unshakeable loyalty. And the other thing that attracted M was her seeming disregard of all ethics and morality.

(41)

The girl develops a fascination for Anupam whom she, while at a tuition class, took for her love. But it all ends in her frustration. In a bar, the girl tries to pickpocket a Professor, of course unlike David Lurie of Disgrace (1999), whose presence there surprises her. There are calls for police. She is slapped, the blood trickling down her chin. Ketaki dumps in her lover and jumps down the building she lives in. Body is so a tragedy. The story fails in producing a rebellious character in Ketaki. She is left helpless like Kashi of Livelihood by Shirvale (1994). Compared to Mahasweta’s Draupadi, Ketaki is a totally submissive, non-resistant character.

Killer is the last of the stories of the collection. It is a slightly long short story which carries the theme of killing contract. There are hit men that launch a quest for domination. Akhil is the chief character of the story who is aka Sona. He is 26 yet the creases on his face, greying hair, etc. make him look as if of 40. He is a professional killer having 31 young
murders to his criminal credit. There are some 30 more on his waiting list. He continues in his killing pursuit but for the sake of money. Akhil has never failed in his life at defeating his opponent save once. Sajad Mandal functions his nemesis, a great insult on his part haunting his memory and downing his confidence level. Sajad and Anupam Mitra are his staunch opponents. The word *professional* is given an interesting connotation by Mahasweta:

*Professional?* The word makes him angry, sad too. Killing is a recognized profession. You kill, because you have to. You are not to involve any personal emotions. (48)

In due course of time, Akhil loses his hold on the profession that goes under belt of Sajad and Anupam-da. On the one hand, the dons kill and they make a pompous show of worshipping Shyama-Ma, i. e., Kali posing themselves her disciples on the other; they spend thousands of rupees for that. Akhil wants to escape the town for Coochbehar but, on the run, he finds men of Anupam-da following him closely. There is an interesting case of a plan of his murder by Anupam Mitra who asks his confidant, Surajit, to write—

*Write: yesterday evening the police discovered the body of anti-social Akhil alias Sona in the abandoned warehouse of ‘_____’ factory. The body bore marks of knife wounds. The youth... Sir!*
Yes?

I saw Sona today. Sitting in the shop, drinking tea. So what? It’s afternoon now. The body is ‘discovered’ in the evening. Reported in tomorrow’s papers. Where’s the problem? (Bait, 77)

The answer is that the wretched poor economic conditions made them so and the politicians used them as their trumps. The dons are products of the political chicanery. There are some prostitutes, Basanti, Rami, etc. that suffer a lot psychologically. For instance, Rami expresses her tragedy:

Just about 15 and I was a widow. Never knew what husband meant. How could I? When I married, the other one’d two kids already. They got me for their odd jobs, run around all day with rice-and-water, shabu-and-sugar, warm-oil-and-garlic. (65)

Akhil, despite a strong will—could not marry her and is finally killed, the doom he deserves.

Basically, most of the youngsters are involved in the criminal activities. This indicates that there has been a great problem of unemployment across the state and penury adds insult to injury. Mahasweta Devi gives a heart-rending account of the prostitutes yet does not offer a solution to their problems, or so to say, does not pave the concrete way of resistance with a few exceptions.
Mahasweta Devi champions the cause of the marginals, subalterns and the marginalized to some extent in the given stories.

**Dewana Khoimala and the Holy Banyan Tree** begins with the discordant market place at Baruipur where there are different types of people. For instance, there is Ascharya Fakir, the Brahmins, Kagji, the paper merchant, farmers, weavers, blacksmiths, potters, fishermen, cobblers, grocers, etc. filling the scene. Damu Peyada is a henchman of a zamindar. Sanatan Dighri is a typical character that is suitable for Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (2003) for his faith has been that all the achievements of life after all meet with nothingness finally.

Ascharya Fakir reads his ‘punthis’, i.e. the ancient manuscripts to which people listen gravely. There are rumours about gypsy women from Magrakhal that lure away the pretty women. There is also Golapi, the mistress of Sadhu Shaw that haunts the place of market where Aschcharya Fakir reads his manuscripts. Ascharya was once infatuated by a beauty for which he sacrificed his family, a pain he constantly feels. Once it is all dark. The clouds gather thick in the sky. There are showers of rain and in such weather Khoimala, a Brahmin girl is sent by her mother to the market to bring some rice. The girl is fatherless and her mother is a poor widow. She is with Golak, a boatman’s son, low in caste status. They both sit before Ascharya and listen to the story of Dewana. Golapi is upset with Khoimala yet gets adjusted. She is not a whore out of choice but because of
child widowhood and poverty, so says Mahasweta Devi. The story shares some traits of child psychology that are already available in David Copperfield by Dickens (2004).

When it is dark, Khoimala and Golak stand under a banyan tree. She wants to catch fish but the fishing is ‘not for a Brahman girl, no matter how destitute, orphaned and utterly poor she may be’. Golak is better off on economic ground as compared to Khoimala. When home, Khoimala is surprised to see her house be bright with a lamp shining. There appears a Gurubaba, former father of Khoimala’s mother and sage-like one now, who proposes to Khoimala’s mother for Khoimala’s hand although she is just a child of six. The Gurubaba is so much upset when even slightly crossed for reality. He makes a pompous show of his being great. Mahasweta Devi makes irony of this sage a lot. The sage abuses in the name of women and says that he has no chicken heart within his ribs as having one is a trivial matter. He asserts that he was happy, and laughed, to see his daughter’s dead son burn:

No chicken heart within these ribs, hear me! Turned it all to stone before I took to saffron. Just the other day, my second daughter Tara. How I laughed as I watched her dead son burn. Do you think a man in my position sheds tears? At such trivial losses? (19)

Since strongly asked to provide sweetmeat and milk, the items never known to her daughter, Khoimala’s mother rushes here and there on a rainy night
to keep will of her former father and when out, every shop is closed. The shopkeepers are only used to open their shutters when the shutters get banged at heavily by the pallbearers, Khoimala’s mother, Nakurdas’ poor widow, finds none to her rescue. The times belong to the governorship of Lord Hasting. His men threaten the shopkeepers to provide them food, tobacco and splint, otherwise the shops are burnt and the owners roasted alive. They are offered everything they want. This illustrates the difference between two lives. Soon Khoimala’s mother is hit on the forehead with a lump of earth. She gets a bit unconscious. Finding that he has hit at a wrong person, Sanatan Dighri helps the widow to conscious.

Listening to the widow’s plight, Sanatan helps her throughout. He knows that the temple of his house may have the sweets and milk. Therefore, he enters the mansion he has already sacrificed for being an abdicator. Barujjey, the priest is extremely fearful of Sanatan as has been hit once with a clog for offering the God flowers without having a bath and not changing the already-used clothes. The priest is used to secret away the choicest food, sweets and fruits. He slightly dares ask Sanatan a question as to what the sweets and milk are needed for. Sanatan says:

*What’s that to you? You hog throughout the year, then shit all over the bamboo grove with your stomach upset most of the time. Turned the temple into a pigsty! And you dare question me?*
The priest trembles at this. When Sanatan asks the widow who the groom has been, she says that he is from the house of Ramram Chakraborty of Borat. Sanatan says that he is also a monster like Barujjey and Tushturam, the widow’s former father. The boy is not a Brahmin of course.

Sanatan has already decided to remain aloof from human miseries having hardened his heart. He is not unfeeling but does not wish to notice the world. He takes up the bowl to the widow’s house as if she were daughter-like to him. The widow develops a strong sense of dislike for the Guru for all the trouble he has caused and for his apathy and cruelty. She is so much worried about Khoimala’s future.

Ishwar Patni is the father of Golak. On a day it rains cats and dogs. The people in Boral, Bansdroni, Jagaddal, Baishnabghata and Garia find no end to their suffering. Nilmoni Ghoshal, a man very old and lustful, is the one Khoimala is married off to. Her mother suffers a lot on eatery and economic grounds. It is only Golak who visits the widow and brings in provisions for her. On the day of Ekadashi (the eleventh day of the lunar night) she gets fish to eat. The people believe, says Mahasweta Devi, that they are blessed to provide the fish to a brahman’s married daughter on the day of ‘Ekadashi.’

The job of Golak is to carry the people to and fro in the Ganga. Khoimala reaches her fifteen, looking young and beautiful. She is still a pauper— having little food to eat and no essential cosmetics like ‘sindoor’,
the red-saffron powder to fill in the parting of hair. Golak trades away in
his boat the objects like straw, planks, betel nuts, molasses, paan, tobacco,
clay vessels, etc. The people from his community are raring to make him
their son-in-law. The loaner, Adhar Das, to whom Golak’s father Ishwar is
a debtor, also treats Ishwar Patni gently on a purpose of making Golak his
son-in-law. Golak is, however, deeply in love with Khoimala but cannot
give an expression to his feelings for her. He visits the holy tree and speaks
out his heart to it most of the time:

_Thakurbot, I’ve believed in you since I’ve been a boy. Hung garlands
of champa from your branches during Rathayatra. Lain before you in
winter with strings of akondo blossoms. You’re god. Sanatan-Thakur
says holy men have sat in your shade and since then this Thakurdighi,
as pure as Ganga. As far as your shade stretches our Baishnabghata is
sacred, no less than kasha. All your doing, Thakurbot. Now please
make me forget Kaitari [Khoimala]._ (35)

On a night, Khoimala sees Joyhari, the priest of the last rites and the
very one having performed her marriage, talk to Bhuban, a woman selling
rice. Later on, Khoimala discovers both talking to her mother. She
eavesdrops on the conversation and is terrified at the thought of going back
Nilmon Ghoshal’s home, the man having married many a time. However,
‘her fate was the whim of other people; they were the ones who twisted it,
at will, into shapes of their own pleasing’ (46).
Golak very often visits the holy tree and is afraid of being a ‘dewana’ and of scandal mongering. Because the people around do not have time to look after the poor but have great enough when it comes to scandal mongering:

[…]Now I have to get a job that’ll take me far off. Otherwise I’m finished. Kaitari is a brahman’s daughter. No matter how poor, how wretched they may be, Brahmans are deadly as cobras. Entire generations of mine will be reeling under the curse! (36)

Even Khoimala has Golak for an obsession but the entrenchment of the caste system does not allow both to express themselves to each other. They meet in the dark yet are too distant from each other on romantic ground. Finally, Khoimala learns that Golak has gone mad. Actually Mahasweta Devi exercises extra sympathy for Khoimala and her mother. Ishwar hits at Bhuban in negative terms when looked after by Khoimala for rice. Khoimala has been escorted to Erachi, Nilmoni Ghoshal’s town. Her husband is on the verge of decay having caught tuberculosis. Sanatan does not like it at all and wants to kill Harjoy for the suffering he has wreaked for Khoimala. Ghoshal has married many women and piled property out of the dowries. He is also guilty of killing a wife of him with a single kick to her stomach.

Harjoy, after temptation for four rupees, has, with the help of Bhuban, ‘caused Khoimala the great misery’. Mahasweta Devi claims that Joyhari
was stupid …Aided and abetted by the greedy, heartless Bhuban’ (51). Mahasweta Devi always comments on Kolijug (the age of immorality and corruption, per Hindu mythology) and quotes Manu who said: ‘The winds from the city blow strong in these parts. These winds bring wealth into the hands of the undeserving….that priests would be powerless in Kolijug.’

Sanatan changes a lot, a transformation that gives him to reciting ‘Bhagwad Gita.’ All the people gather around him and take him for a sane one. The word ‘Gita’ occurs again and again in case of Sanatan. The character of Sanatan is an enigma to the reader. He is taken for a being inside which the god exists. Khoimala’s mother listens to his reading Gita and has a sight with reproof for Sanatan as why he has not saved her daughter.

Golapi also undergoes a total change. She leaves Sadhu Shaw and shelters Ascharya who goes blind and coughs blood. Golapi still looks after him. Mahasweta Devi calls her a fallen woman. It is only Golapi who knows what exactly has happened to Golak. She suggests to his mother to look for a witch doctor that can cure Golak. Golak is however afraid of the witch-doctors, exorcists and magicians thinking that they might make him spill the beans, and hence cause a scandal. A witch doctor checks Golap up and concludes that it is not the case of going mad but that of love. Ishwar Patni is so much worried about his son. He has four sons, Gagan being the eldest. Gagan has married Kusum, Golak’s proposed fiancée. He is
unhappy with his mother’s extreme concern for Golak. All the people throng into the house. There comes another doctor that finds the season of Sraban best for his treatment.

Khoimala has nursed her husband for four years but could not cure him. Nilmoni becomes bedridden. The so-called niece of him, once driven away, for possible poisoning him, turns up again with her brothers accompanying her. These have tormented Khoimala a lot and Nilmoni has been no less behind in adding up troubles on her. He has always taken her for his property and now fears that even Khoimala would poison him. His body stinks as does his breath and only Khoimala keeps past him. Nilmoni dies but before he does so he has called up two of his sons. They go away. The maid tells Khoimala that she is going to be a sati. Now Khoimala is not disturbed by the thought of being a sati but is taken possession of by the memories of Golak. The so-called niece and the maid of the house grab away the gold and valuables from the house and Khoimala is left to herself. She wants to live for Golak, therefore steps outside into the darkness of night. She hurries to the shore where she quite unexpectedly finds Golak setting off into his boat. She, for a while, thinks of his being a phantom but is convinced of his concrete presence. Khoimala is ecstatic to see Golak row her away. He says that he is taking her to a place beyond everyone. Khoimala is gladdened to hear him say this. Moreover, her joy sustains no longer as she finds herself taken to the ghat of her own village. Golak tells
her that he has learned about her being forced to be a sati from Harjoy that is why he has come to redeem her:

How did you come here?

To fetch you. Dada said an exorcist was coming, in the evening. I’m scared of them, I’ve sinned you see? Sinners of are afraid of exorcists. So I set off in my boat. Met joyhari in Raipur who said Nilmoni Ghoshal of Erachi was dying. May be dead already. Nakurdas’ daughter will be a widow. So I’ve come to take you away. Joyhari said that they’ll burn you alive, oh such agony! Better we go to your mother’s (67)

They both remember the story of Dewana told by Ascharya in their childhood. But the end of the story is not known to either. Khoimala realizes that Golak’s falling for her has turned him mad. She wants to live with him ever. She buries a ‘few thoughts, deep within the vaults of her heart’ (70).

Ishwar Patni, Gagan, an exorcist, Sanatan and others have been waiting for Golak to treat him at the hands of the exorcist. Golak feels that by loving a Brahmin girl, he has committed a sin. But when examining her eyes closely he realizes that he is rid of the sin. He rows the boat far and farther, Gagan pursues him and Golak asks him not to but it is no use. Finally, he leaves out the boat and dips into water. The story ends on a mysterious note. The story of ‘Dewana’ reminds one of The Zoo Story
(1985) as even there the story begins and ends with the characters themselves, so is also the case of *Tara* (2011) by Dattani.

The love story of Golak and Khoimala is a platonic affair. The story carries the subaltern characters that emerge from the teen group. It is quite unlike other ones because it explores the sorrow of the teenager subalterns.

**In the Name of the Mother** is a collection of stories by Mahasweta Devi that consists of four titles, all about motherhood. Radha Chakravarty speaks about Mahasweta Devi’s concept of motherhood:

> In each of the stories, motherhood functions as a way of addressing larger issues pertaining to societal double standards with their their economic and political underpinnings. Each narrative indicts the collective stereotyping that penetrates the myth of divine motherhood, even as it recognizes the genuine mother-love. (In the Name of the Mother xi)

**Ma, from Dusk to Dawn,** also entitled as *Mother of Dusk and Dawn,* is a story about a tribal boy who is ‘an idiot boy, his brain remained undeveloped even at thirty’ (3). He is physically built up like a bull but ‘his body contains nothing other than the stomach’ (3). Mahasweta Devi says that his body is devoid of the essentials like lungs, heart, hibiscus petals, intestines, genitals. All it contains is but stomach, but hunger. Morally, he, called as Sadhan Kandori, is not corrupt though. His mother asks him to
call her Ma only between dusk and dawn; else it would invite a calamity. She is believed to have been possessed by some divine spirit.

The story carries superstitious elements to a greater degree. Jateshwari is the central character in the story. She is called Thakurani during the daytime and mother during night. She is everything for her son—the sun and moon in his sky. She endlessly suffers from fever, diarrhoea, bile, and cough. She must be treated failing which Sadhan would die of starvation. He does his best to admit her to a hospital but has to take her home seeing that she is terminally ill. There is a physician called Anandidaktar beaten up hard and expelled from his colony as his patient always ended up dead. However, he sets up his practice on the skirts of the town and earns a lot of money via butchery like abortion, etc. He owns his sins up to Jati only, thinking that she can offer solution to heal his guilty psyche. Mahasweta Devi has criticized this way the evil practices resorted to by the modern physicians to augment their wealth. Jati’s condition exasperates her son on and on:

The more the doctor insists, ‘The old woman will die right now’, the more Sadhan wails, Save Thakurani, sir! Without Thakurani my world is empty! Alas! When it’s dusk, Thakurani turns into Ma, I tell you! My hair’s turned to grey but Thakurani still loves me so! She goes hungry just to feed me, sir! (6)
Sadhan’s basic worry is never his mother’s being alive or dead but losing his daily rice. This is the corroboration of poverty of India that results into black humour. The author gets a castigating view of starvation—

*On the third day, the doctor diagnosed Jati’s condition. Jati’s disease is highly contagious. Even today, in the land of India, no cure is found for it. The name of this disease is starvation. Eating nothing, starving, feeding all the scraps to Sadhan, Jati Thakurani’s nerves had dried up.* (9)

Jati’s line belongs to the ‘greatest sinners’ tribe that once killed the king called Krishna’ (11). Quite often, Mahasweta Devi’s cultural connotations become incomprehensible to the readers.

As Jati passes away, there is the fix of her last rites. Sadhan, limitlessly grieved owing to the loss, is in no position to manage the expenses of the rites; he is just a beggar having already begged with his mother. Anadi-*daktar*, however, wilfully accepts the responsibility and manages the rice and an elephant as a return of debt he owed to Jati. The greedy priest demands a sum for performance of the funeral but finally agrees to what Anadi-*daktar* is prepared to pay. As soon as the observance is over, the Brahmin tries to carry the rice he has put side. Sadhan is more involved with rice than the Brahmin’s recitation. There is a brush between the two over possession of rice in which Sadhan turns winner. Finally what Mahasweta Devi narrates is poignant:
The smell of rice, such a lovely smell. The smell brings his mother close, once again. As long as Sadhan cooks rice, eats hot rice, his sanjshokaaler Ma will stay close, safe and secure.

Trying to remember his mother, Sadhan’s eyes fill with tears of regret as he recalls his rudeness with the priest. ‘Ma, you make your own way to heaven. Sadhan will cook rice now, eat it. Please forgive him.

(32)

Nothing could be darker than this when it comes to humanity. The story represents subaltern life in a worse form.

Rudali:
In the opinion of Katyal, feminism is an imported western concept. Mahasweta Devi ‘also shies away from being labelled “feminist”’ (2). Shanichari emerges as more empowered at the end. ‘In several ways, this work is anti-fiction’, says Katyal ‘as the author subverts or ignores the conventions of a story’ (3).

The story of Rudali opens at Tahad village in which the majority of the people have been Ganjus and Dushads. Sanichari is the central character that lives in desperate poverty. Her mother-in-law says that because born on Saturday, the inauspicious day of the weak, Sanichari is destined to suffer. However, Sanichari does not acknowledge that her suffering is solely due to being born so. She asks Somri, Budhua, Moongri and Bishri (born on Monday, Wednesday, Tuesday and Thursday respectively) if their life is left any happier. Rudali actually means ‘a hired woman to lament the dead’.
Sanichari’s mother-in-law passes away but Sanichari does not weep or cry for the deceased. The chief reason is that she is left with no spare time to do so and the additional one being that she has been exposed to incessant psychological torment by her mother-in-law. At the juncture of death, the husband and his brother have been in jail because of Ramavatar Singh, the malik-mahajan and chief villain of the story. The reason for the young dushad and ganju males’ being put behind the bars has been that they have caused some loss of wheat to Ramavatar Singh. The mother-in-law dies in great pain of dropsy, i.e. a condition characterized by an excess of watery fluid collecting in cavity or tissues of body. She lies in her own excrement with the last cry: ‘Food, give me food!’ (72). The very cry gives way to understand the story from the psychological point of view. The cry gives a concrete proof of the wretched condition of the dushads and ganjus. The village is full of unhappiness and suffering. Sanichari’s son, Budhua has been six at his grandmother’s death. Therefore, Sanichari has to go to Ramavatar’s house to split wood and maintain her household:

It the time [of her mother-in-laws death] her only son, Budhua was six. Leaving the little child at home, Sanichari labored hard for the sake of a little security in her household. She would go off to the Malik’s house where she would split wood, gather fodder for the cows and, in harvest season work alongside her husband in the fields. (73)
Once there has been Baisakhi mela, a grand fair, at Tohri. The people drink polluted milk and the adulteration of milk causes death to many among whom has been Sanichari’s husband. It adds to the extremity of Sanichari’s distress. The casualties are quickly burnt collectively as there is cholera with the dead having contracted it. Sanichari is again robbed of an opportunity to express her sorrow. She performs the last rites at the hands of a panda (the priest of lower rank) of the Shiva temple at Tohri. Moreover, Mohanlal, the priest of Tahad, given to Ramavtar’s house—objects to the rites causing a lot of to-do. He necessitates Sanichari to have the rites re-performed at his hands, a case similar to coronation of the Shivaji. Sanichari, as a consequence of this, has been forced into debt to Ramavtar. He pays her twenty rupees on a condition that she put her thumbprint on a paper and repay Rs.50/- through bonded labour serving his fields for five years. The incident gives a sound proof of how the religious practices implemented by the Brahmins have been cruel, the obligation of religion itself functioning a symbol of exploitation:

Not once throughout the story is religion shown as offering solace or succour. On the contrary, religion further impoverishes and enslaves, causing indebtedness through its web of demands and obligations. All one sees of religion is superstition and ritual. (10)

The above is not all. The third severe blow Sanichari receives is that of her son’s contracting tuberculosis. She has a consolation in Haroa, her
grandson but severe pain in Parbatia, her daughter-in-law. For the daughter-in-law does not support her on any ground and adds to her trouble. In fact, Mahasweta Devi has portrayed her as an idle woman. The diseases and suffering of the untouchables and the tribals are but the result of poverty. Therefore, the claims, in general, of Dr Ambedkar (Poverty is the greatest Sin.) and Mahatma Phule (No education, no intellect, no intellect no morals, no morals no action, action no money, no money the Sudras went baseless) prove authentic and more germane beyond doubt.

Budhua brings the yard of his house alive with planting a variety of vegetables, the ambition of his father: Okra, eggplant, radish, chillies and pumpkin. His wife has been presented a morbid character—lazy, hungry and luxury-loving. She wants to work in Lachman’s fields, i.e. of the son of Ramavatar but Budhua warns her against it. He says that he would knock her head off if were disobeyed. Because, he tells her, Lachman has a nice house for the women and then sends them to brothel. In its stead, Budhua wants his wife to sell the vegetables at the market. The tuberculosis of Budhua worsens. Sanichari administers him the medicine of the vaid, a local physician in Aurveda, but it does not work. She, therefore, visits the vaid’s house about a mile. But the vaid is not home from the market and when he is, he insults her in unworthy terms: ‘You lower castes have no patience, no ability to bear up’ (80). He does not care in the least to judge a mother’s affection for her son. When back home, Sanichari finds her son
dead and his wife gone off. The wife is never to return home. A sense of exhaustion and slumber takes her over. She is left alone with the six-month-old grandson of her. The child is breastfed by Dhatua’s wife, Dugal’s daughter-in-law, for a while. This keeps Haroa alive.

Dulan ganju is a contractor supplying labour. He asks Sanichari to join the work at rail-line which is not possible for her. Natua, Dulan’s son, sells her vegetables in the market. He daughter-in-law is supposed to have run away with a medicine man. There is a young woman, Moti, whom the malik wants to keep but her mother rejects it. This is the only instance Mahasweta Devi produces about the self-respect of the untouchables. However, the case sustains no longer as even Moti is presented as having run away with the rail-line contractor. Sanichari takes her grown-up grandson to Lachman Singh to find some work for survival of the two. Lachman surprisingly, instead of his farm, employs the boy at his shop in the market for two rupees a month and meals. But the boy does not work properly and runs away. Sanichari is left alone now. In search of her grandson, she comes across Bikhni, her childhood friend. Bikhni also suffers a family tragedy—husband having passed away and the son having turned a live-in son-in-law. She sells her two she-goats off and has twenty rupees with which she and Sanichari pass their days at Sanichari’s hut. Now as the money is finished, they badly want employment. Bikhni has some plan to beg at Daltonganj or Bokharo or Gomo but Dulan asks them
to play the Rudalis, the women hired to mourn a death, at the funeral of Bhairab Singh, a man killed by his own eldest son for the sake of property. Lachman wants to hush up the matter and have a grand funeral of the dead performed. Two hundred rupees is budgeted for the rudalis but only twenty rupees is released by the accounts-keeper for the good of his own. Lachman mourns the death a lot for the dead was a supreme exploiter who never let the untouchables have schooling at government schools nor allowed them to have a respectable stature:

Hai, Chacha! As long as you were alive, the lower castes never dared raise their heads. For fear of you, the sons of dushads and ganjus never dared attend government schools! Now, who will take care of all these things? (88)

The Rajputs, says Mahasweta Devi, are the people instrumental to have turned simple women into the whores. They used swords in the past to enslave the people and now they use their guns for the purpose. Mahasweta Devi’s obsession with the tribals continues herein too (94-5). Ramavatar is the greatest manipulator in the story. Anjum Katyal comments:

Ramavatar’s oppression is a constant presence. He embodies a system which dehumanizes brutalizes, invades the most private space of an individual, the emotions, so that even grief is distorted in the desperate struggle for survival. (5)
Dulan is a man who is called a crafty old rogue with sharp mind by Sanichari functions as an advisor to Sanichari and Bikhni. Looking to all her own miseries, Sanichari has lost faith in God. Even Dulan strengthens her denial of faith stating ‘there’s no bigger god than one’s belly. For the belly’s sake everything is permissible’ (90). Sanichari and Bikhni always seek Dulan’s advice. Sanichari is surprised to think that in the rich Rajput families, the son kills the mother and the mother vice versa as describes Dulan:

In rich families, the son kills the mother, the mother the son. Forget about who killed him. Amongst us, when someone dies, we all mourn. Amongst the rich, family members are too busy trying to find to keys to the safe. They forget all about tears...They need rudalis to wail over the corpse. (90-1)

Nobody there has any time to shed any tears and they are busy looking for the keys to the safe. And the rudalis and whores weep for the dead. Dulan asks Sanichari and Bikhni to act rudalis to sustain their lives. Mahasweta Devi narrates an interesting case of a Rajput, Gambhir Singh, to show how heartless the Rajputs have been. Gambhir Singh fathers a daughter from his courtesan. When the daughter is molested by Gambhir’s nephew, Gambhir says, ‘A whore’s daughter is a whore—practise your profession and support yourself’ (92). This exemplifies the apathy and antipathy of the advantaged people towards the subalterns.
‘Randi’ is a common word used by Mahasweta Devi to refer to the subaltern women. Bikhní is asked to visit the market, keep in touch with the prostitutes and keep an eye on the people on deathbed so that they can earn as much. So does she. Now Sanichari and Bikhní turn out the professional rudalis. Mahasweta Devi gives out the rates of weeping and wailing as: five rupees and one sikka for wailing and rolling on the ground; five rupees and two sikkas for rolling on the ground and beating one’s head, etc. There is almost a cutthroat competition between the Rajputs to celebrate their own funeral each. They turn it into an issue of prestige. This brings about ‘black humour.’ There is Nathuni Singh. His mother is on death bed and housed far away. His land and wealth is from his mother, the only child of Parakram Singh, the master of cruelty having left all his riches in the name of his daughter. Nathuni’s mother suffers from fever and coughing fresh blood. He is not interested in offering any kind of medical care or any type of herbal but ironically has stocked up sandal wood and sal wood for a ‘sensational’ funeral pyre. He also gets prepared to feed Brahmins purchasing loads of ghee, sugar, dal and flour. He wants to gift the Brahmins certain utensils. His plan is to spend thirty thousand rupees on her funeral.

Holding grand funeral becomes a matter of prestige for the Rajputs. Nathuni takes away the warm quilt from his mother replacing it with a thin covering so that in the cold season she dies quickly. He has three wives, the
middle one— having no son but a daughter— has been the beloved. The reason is that being the only heir to her father she is left with a lot of wealth. Therefore, she makes a lot of fun of Nathuni’s spending thirty thousand over the funeral and says that over her father’s funeral, may he not but should he die— she would spend no less than one Lac rupees:

*What’s thirty thousand rupees for a kriya ceremony— less than nothing. May my father live long— but when he dies, then I’ll show everyone how a kriya should be held! (100)*

This is a prominent instance of *black humour* that continues even further. The middle wife appoints Sanichari and Bikhani well in advance to play rudalis at her father’s funeral promising them fifty rupees plus rice each. She also wants them to appoint other hundred prostitutes for a hundred rupees plus rice each. Sanichari is shocked at listening to this, therefore says: ‘Huzoorain, your father’s not dead yet’ (102). She asks them to roll on the ground, beat their heads and they would receive additional amount for their breaking head. This she wants to do for everyone will talk about it. And in her own words: ‘I want my husband and co-wives to burn with jealousy’ (102). She is not even in the least ashamed of herself when telling that her father drank foreign liquor and kept many whores. The death is certainly to benefit the Brahmins ‘With the lion’s share of the profit going to [them]’ (103).
When Bikhni has been to the market, she brings the news of Sanichari’s daughter-in-law being a prostitute. This hurts Sanichari beyond limits. The only consolation for her is that Haroa is not there to see that his mother has turned a prostitute. She says that she would not have turned her out after Budhua’s death. The treatment Nathuni meted out to his own mother becomes a fashion, an example-to-follow among the Rajputs. Now Gambhir Singh has been separated from his own house which, even to his best of understanding, means that he is going to die. He wants his nephew to stun all the people spending at least one Lac rupees over his funeral; the people should, as a result, say that a great man has died—

‘This means I’m going to die.’ He [Gambhir Singh] gave instructions to arrange such a kriya for himself that it would leave everyone stunned. Everyone would realize that a great man had died. (108)

There is another case of black humour about Gambhir Singh expressed by Dulan to Sanichari:

Can’t you see how amusing it all is? One by one they’re dying, you’re going to wail, they are taking the pomp and splendour of the mourning so seriously, making it a matter of honour, they’re fighting over it. Take Gambhir Singh, for example, he could easily call in a doctor and get cured but he is not interested. He’s more attracted by all the hoo-haa of a fancy funeral. (114)
Bikhni is in receipt of an invitation of the daughter of her nephew-in-law. She wants to attend the marriage by the virtue of which she could see her son. Sanichari shows her to the bus and is alone again. Her life has been given to a hard and sad stance; she is the most tragic of all characters of the story. She soon learns that Bikhni has died of an asthmatic attack. This is the greatest blow Sanichari is dealt. The loss of Bikhni is every loss for Sanichari. She seems to have lost all the endurance of her. She grows fearful as never before:

Her husband had died, her son had died, her grandson had left, her daughter-in-law had run away—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 his fear. (114)

Gambhir Singh has been guilty of having had sexual intercourse with many a woman that is why suffers a fatal venereal disease but the irony has it that his suffering is given a U-turn: ‘When he was a boy, he once hit a pregnant cow with a stick and killed it. This is his only sin’ (112). This is an investigation emanating from a Brahmin’s corrupt mind. This clearly proves that the Brahmins emotionally blackmail the commoners beyond every extent for the good of their own. Religious corruption has been a dominant theme of ‘Rudali’. No matter whoever passes away, it is the
ganjus, dushads, dhobis and kols who have to pay otherwise the price of every funeral. This irony reoccurs in ‘Rudali’.

Sanichari loses her interest even in playing Rudali but Dugal convinces her that without that survival is not possible for her. He sends her to the market to summon the prostitutes to wail the death of Gambhir Singh. Initially she quails at going there lest she get exposed to her own daughter-in-law yet she musters up the courage. Dugal wants Sanichari and others to share at least some of Gambhir Singh’s money which is unclean of course with Gambhir having ruined over a hundred women:

The wealth of these malik-mahajans is unclean money. There’s no limit to it. Let a few whores from the bazaar come to their funerals. It’s the malik-mahajans who’ve turned them into whores, ruined them, then kicked them out, isn’t that so? (115)

Accordingly Sanichari visits the red light area and invites the prostitutes to the funeral sneaking a glance at her own daughter-in-law. She thinks that poverty and hunger have driven her daughter-in-law into the profession.

Finally, Sanichari instructs the rudalis to ‘make a great noise, a big fuss, something people will talk about’ (117). Gulbadan, the illegitimate daughter of Gambhir Singh, winks at his nephew that grins. All the rudalis join in the chorus.
The story has explored a different theme, i.e. that of the rudalis, from what one comes across in other works of Mahasweta Devi. The rest of the factors like poverty, diseases, deaths, and moral and religious corruption appear almost the same way in the text. The idea that the ultimate option with a woman is prostitution cannot be justified under any circumstance. Mahasweta Devi seems to fail at generating a sense of rebellion and self-respect among her female characters. One finds her as representing them with pessimistic mentality. When the dushads and ganjus are in the majority, why do they not dominate economic affairs of the village? This is the question that remains unanswered. Generally the majority rules the roost.

When all is said and done, Rudali is obviously a milestone work to Mahasweta Devi’s credit. The film entitled the same also shows an equal commitment of Kalpana Lazmi (2003). The issue of caste and class has been deftly handled by the author in all the works discussed above. A look into Surinder Jodhka’s book, Caste (2012) and specifically into Satyamev Jayate, a TV serial by Aamir Khan (2013) could for sure provide a broad view to understand thematic concerns of Mahasweta Devi in all the literary works selected for the preceding two chapters of the thesis. Her dedication towards the subalterns has made Mahasweta Devi popular transnationally.
Notes

1. Baburao Bagul’s *Jeva mi Jat Chorli Hoti* and *Maran Swast Hot Ahe* comprise the brave characters that successfully fight out injustice.

2. Shivaji, the king of Maratha Empire was asked by the orthodox Brahmin priest to arrange his coronation for a second time to kingship under the pretext that the first one was performed unscientifically.

3. Mahasweta Devi is popular even in Pakistan as the news published in *The Times of India* dated 24 March 2013 indicates.

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