Chapter III: Gender Oppression in Mahasweta Devi’s Works

At the outset, one could examine the general discourse on gender oppression tracing it through the discourse on sex and gender. While sex is considered as a biological creation, gender is in general a social or cultural creation. Particularly, gender oppression in the female can be explained as a form of oppression in which a woman is identified with performing gender roles exclusively assigned to her, i.e., ‘take care of children, feed and clean them and perform the chores’. These roles assigned by gender demand that a woman ‘must respond to the personal needs’ of all those who are around her. ‘The rituals of authority are not available to a woman’ whereby ‘womanhood is an ascribed status’ given to her (Michael Zimbalist Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, W.C. and Society: A Theoretical Overview 27-8). Hence despite assigning gender roles to the woman, the woman is not free to exercise her rights. Real power and control lie in the hands of males. A woman who tries to break free from her duties and speak for her rights is subject to abuse, humiliation and violence.

The origin of gender oppression can be traced to property ownership when gender roles were assigned to the male and female. According to Frederick Engels, the increase in wealth in various forms naturally gave higher status to the males who were the earning members
of the family and are believed to be physically stronger than females. This also provided them a stimulus to overthrow the traditional, existing order of matrilineal inheritance and establish a patrilineal social order. In this manner, men seized control over the household while women were disparaged to become slaves to male lust and mere biological instruments to produce children. With the realization of the productive capacity of land, men gradually began to establish their authority and ownership over land, labor and women, thereby gaining a natural right over women and children who became their natural property. The women’s role denigrated to that of satisfying male sexual desire and also that of a progenitor. A woman’s disobedience could result in her banishment from the family or even culminating in her comodification (Rani and Katyayani 123). With the growth of patriarchy, a woman’s radical alienation from society occurred confining her to the household domestic environment and compelling her subordination to the male. Men were also at an advantage to take complete authority over women who were naturally confined to the environs of the household and also their role as mothers and nurturers. Therefore, mute acceptance of this undervalued state was the only option left (The Second Sex 608).

Such gender oppression was sanctioned even by leading intellectuals, including Freud and Einstein. Sigmund Freud not only limits female life to sexual reproduction, but also negates their
professional role, when he states that women live at a low cultural level in comparison to men. Thus it becomes pertinent to understand that the causes and factors leading to gender oppression are mainly due to patriarchy and patriarchy imposed restrictions on women. However, in the case of low class women, the oppression was two-pronged one due to patriarchy and another due to poverty, illiteracy, lack of awareness etc. Besides these the patrilineal society empowered the male as the decision-maker and bread winner of the family and also endowing them the right to education and ownership of property. These factors pushed women into the background and led to their oppression and subjugation.

When one views the root of gender oppression, one finds it in religious ideas and beliefs. Women branded as witches in Elizabethan and Jacobean writings have already been traced to the Elizabethan theological beliefs by feminists. Similarly, female oppression in India can be traced back to religious beliefs, including Manusmriti and many other religious texts, customs, and legends. If one takes a polemical stance, one finds that women have always been given a lower position as compared to men. Every religion has discriminated in some way against women, putting them down and designating them as being inferior to men. The Buddhists have not given equal position to male and female monks and endless rules are concocted for women in the Buddhist scripture, Vinaya. Buddhism hence becomes a patriarchal power
structure that views women as lustful temptresses immersed in sensuality and not in dharma. A famous passage from “The Tale of King Udayana of Valsa” in the *Collection of Jewels* states the attitude of the monks towards nuns and women in general:

Women can be the cause of great suffering.

If desire is destroyed, there will be everlasting happiness.

The dead snake and dog are detestable,

But women are even more detestable than they are (Sarkar 2).

Buddha himself said, “The female’s defects … greed, hate, and delusion and other defilements – are greater than the male’s … You (women) should have such an intention …” (Gross 63).

The orthodox fanatic Christians burnt women alive at the stake for ‘crimes’ like speaking back to a priest, stealing, prostitution, masturbation, adultery and giving birth to a child out of wedlock. One such character in Christian mythology is Joan of Arc who was killed for protesting against the orthodoxy in religion. Women were forcefully married and had to surrender completely to their husbands.

It is believed that Islam also gives men a superior position as compared to women. While a husband enjoys polygamy, the wife is allowed to marry once. A husband has the right to punish his wife if she disobeys him. According to the Muslim philosopher Al Ghazzali, a
woman’s role should be confined to her home; she must wear old clothes, must not go out often or communicate with the neighbours. She should not be well informed or question her husband at any point and must be ready to satisfy him at any moment. Men also have an upper hand with respect to separation. A woman who is raped is charged of adultery and forced to marry the culprit to save her family from humiliation. A woman is supposed to cover herself completely and not speak to any man besides her husband and relatives. These are the forms of oppression inflicted on Muslim women.

According to the Hindu scriptures, women’s first duty is towards the husband. It is shocking to find the inscriptions in the Vedas and Puranas which degrade women to the level of slaves and regard women to be the subordinate of men. Women are regarded to be foolish, greedy, unsteady, dishonest, deceitful, wicked and filled with lust. Women are born to serve men and bear their children. An astonishing custom prevalent in the earlier times was the division of women into two categories, namely the upper caste and the lower caste. Treatment towards women was based according to their caste. While in the former case, women had to be covered from head to toe, the low caste women could not cover their upper part of the body. This practice was forced by the Brahmins on them. To distinguish or demarcate a woman’s caste in this demonic form of apartheid inflicts enormous psychological damage.
Even to this day, lower caste women must submit to rape by higher caste men and suffer oppression.

A reading of Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* reveal gender oppression in the earlier times. Draupadi’s humiliation by Duryodhana and Dushashana in the assembly of men and Raavan’s oppression and humiliation of Sita are apt examples of gender oppression.

Gender oppression is an issue widely dealt by feminists. However even before the advent of feminism, gender oppression becomes a relevant subject of discussion in the Indian Renaissance writings. Many Indian social reformers like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati, Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Debendranath Tagore, Manmohan Ghosh and Arobindo Ghosh highlighted exploitation and discrimination of women and exposed the ignorance of the people due to superstitions, blind customs and social practices. Infanticide, feticide, physical abuse, early marriage, illiteracy, unequal marital rights, divorce, rape, molestation, dowry deaths, inheritance, polygamy, widowhood and restrictions on widow remarriage and Sati- these are the most heinous crimes against women which took place irrespective of caste, creed, time, or place. These reformers during their times, revealed the true face of society and the real position of women and emphasized on the intrinsic need for women’s education in order to build a cultured
society. They worked devotedly to do away with such evil practices, which were meant to deprive women of their right to education as well as their freedom of individual thought and expression. Women were tied up with family bondages, much before they could understand its meaning and forcefully thrown into the funeral pyre of their husbands, since they were considered a burden after their husband’s death.

However not all women passively accepted the idea of patriarchy and the reduced role assigned to them by patriarchal society. According to feminists, activities like child birth and the pain which accompanies it, feeding children, cleaning the linen along with the regular household routines hardly give them the opportunity or the space to perform activities of their choice. These reproductive and household activities bind them in two ways i.e., inability to participate in physical activities outside the house in which men take part; secondly the inability to break free from domestic circumstances to prove their capability and talent. Nancy Crodorow, the well-known feminist writer makes a careful study of the treatment of women in society and finds that a woman is always seen as a representative of her family and her domestic duties involve continuous concern about children and attunement to adult masculine needs. Further it is also believed that the domestic activities involve a ‘repetitive and routine continuity’ ("The Sexual Sociology of Adult Life” 158-9). As a result of the women’s domestic commitment, they
have been treated as secondary citizens and given a second place in society while men rank higher than them.


An examination of contemporary women’s writings in India reveals their authentic representation of women’s plight in the country. These women are mostly western educated, middle-class women who express their discontent of upper caste and class traditional Hindu patriarchs who trap women in repressive institutions of religion and culture. Often in the Indian society, excessive value is attached to traditional roles and responsibilities. A woman’s choices are made for her because it is assumed and she is conditioned into believing that she
cannot make her own decisions. She is conditioned into accepting and internalizing norms like social etiquettes taught from a very young age - the propriety of her behaviour etcetera. It is these traditional, stereotypical notions and beliefs against which many women writers and feminists vehemently protested.

Other than contemporary women’s writings, one also finds a host of Indian writers both male and female who deal with gender oppression. Ashapurna Devi’s story *Izzat* represents the limitations of an educated woman whose wish to provide shelter to a young helpless girl is opposed by the husband and it exposes the silent complicity of women to oppressive patriarchy. In Amrita Pritam’s *Kanjak*, Daropati succumbs to the superstitious notions of purity and virginity when she realizes that her niece has lost her virginity before her marriage.

Again, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee’s three love stories namely *Rajlakshmi*, *Abhaya* and *Kamalata*, are all accounts of young women who are regarded by the society as fallen women. In Sarat Chandra’s novel *Pallisamaj (Village Society)* (1916), no solution is sought towards the miserable condition and plight of widows. A similar theme is highlighted by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in *Krishnakanta’s Will* (1878) where a widow gives up her life, the ultimate punishment endured by her for having fallen in love with another man. Issues like widow- remarriage and female infanticide have been touched upon by
these reformers to highlight that women in those days had no right to have emotional attachment or a voice of their own in any matters. They had to follow without questioning, the norms of society laid down by men. Phakirmohan Senapathy’s *Rebati* written more than a hundred years ago, dwells on the difficulties of a young girl in quest for education. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s novel *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864) is mainly about the travails and the sufferings of women, and of the intrigues, greed and cruelty that was part and parcel of everyday life. It speaks about the restrictions laid down by Matangini’s husband and her inability to break free from this relationship.

Ashapurna Debi exposes women’s gender oppression in her trilogy *Subarnalata* (1966). *Pratham Pratishruti*, the first part of the book deals with the futile struggle of a mother to protect her daughter Subarnalata from early marriage and equip her with education and freedom. The second part is about an open-minded girl Subarnalata who gets married at the tender age of nine in a suffocating orthodox family and struggles to establish her identity. This trilogy highlights social issues like child-marriage, domestication of women and deprivation of their social, educational and financial rights. Rabindranath Tagore provides space to the problems of women through many of his works; Tagore’s novel *Binodini* (1902) dramatizes a young widow’s struggle for self-actualization and selfhood in a social system that denies all scope
for such attempts. In his story named *Yogayog* (1929), Tagore’s protagonist Kumudini is seen to be trapped by domestic chores, family honour and status, pregnancy and domestic duty. Her life and actions are thus, confined within the household. His short stories *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)* (1916) and *Gora* (1924) share the same theme, raising controversial questions regarding the personal freedom and identity of Indian women. The story *Strir Patra (The Letter from the Wife)* is also about the hypocrisy of a typical patriarchal family and ill-treatment shown towards the women in the family. His unpublished but self-dictated story called *The Story of a Mussalmani* relates the plight of a young orphaned girl forced to marry against her wishes.

Raja Rao’s novels express a keen awareness of women’s exploitation in his short stories *Javani* and *Akkayya*. While the former story relates a woeful tale of a low caste Ganju widow, her ill-treatment and negligence by her kith and kin, the latter exposes the hollowness of superstitious customs. Kamala Markandaya’s early novels entitled *Nectar in a Seive* (1954) and *Some Inner Fury* (1955) represent traditional images of self sacrificing and self effacing women. Dina Mehta’s short story entitled *Absolution* portrays Sita as a traditional wife in conflict between traditional values of so called virtue against her husband Rama’s infidelity. The submissive wife swallows the humiliation of her husband’s betrayal because of her cherished values,
education and humble background which is thoroughly exploited by her husband.

Mahesh Dattani, the Indian English playwright boldly stages the discrimination of the girl child in his play *Tara* (1990) and the issue of child sexual abuse in his play *Thirty Days of September*. Gender discrimination leading to oppression is the dominant theme in Gita Hariharan’s *Thousand Faces of Night* that shows three Brahmin women (mother, daughter and ayah) within a claustrophobic world of Brahminical gender oppression. The daughter’s brief foray into the non-Brahmin world through an unsatisfactory love affair leads to her sorrows and culminates in her decision to return home. The causes that lead to the breakdown of her marriage with a British visitor are the following: stereotypical role expected to be performed by a woman; her dislocation and maladjustment in the new role.

While various aspects of gender oppression are portrayed by different writers, Mahasweta Devi also portrays most of these forms of oppression in her works. Out of her vivid study of the condition of the underprivileged Indian women, she weaves together various familial, social, cultural, religious and political issues which cause oppression of women in the country.

Mahasweta Devi views female gender oppression as existing at different levels. Although the pattern of oppression varies according to a
woman’s caste and status, a woman also suffers because she is a voiceless female, never involved in the patriarchal decision making process. She becomes a mere decorative piece, a play toy of her husband like Ibsen’s Nora in *The Doll’s House*. Just like Nora, Sujata Chatterji, the mother of the protagonist in *Mother of 1084* also becomes a pawn in the hands of her family members who mock her and make use of her when they are in need.

A reading of Mahasweta Devi’s works reveal that gender oppression takes place at two levels namely familial and social/cultural levels. Within the familial and socio-cultural environs, female oppression takes place in various ways. Apart from the usual patterns, oppression occurs in the following ways too- confining women within the house, neglecting them, torturing them mentally and emotionally, excluding them from important events, and alienating them from making decisions in family matters. Following the blind religious beliefs that affect the freedom of women, depriving the girl child of education, disallowing her to inherit the family property, giving her in marriage at too early an age, abusing her physically and sexually; forcing women into prostitution and exploiting them financially are also other forms of oppression. At the social/cultural level, women face suppression through the following: restriction on women’s participation in activities outside the household, offering of a girl as bride price and restriction on widow
remarriage, forced marriage of the tribal women for property, cultural stereotyping of the female and violence on women in the name of honour killing and gang rape. Such oppression takes place among women of lower class/caste as well as upper privileged class/caste. Most of the forms of oppression highlighted above, figure prominently in Mahasweta Devi’s works.

Women’s writings in India very often reveal the family as the source of women’s oppression. Mahasweta Devi in the above sense is truly a woman writer revealing female oppression in the family. Oppression begins with assigning specific roles to the female as seen in the short plays of Devi namely *Mother of 1084*, *Water* and short story *Breast Giver* which are basically concerned with women’s personal, familial, and affective ties. On the one hand, women are assigned duties within home. On the other hand men are assigned duties outside home and have more liberty as compared to women. Phulmani’s words to her husband reflect the essential familial duties: “Time for the chores women are born to carry out. Time to beg or borrow a little rice, cook it for you” (*Water* 110). In her conversation with the school teacher, Jiten once again highlights women’s consciousness of the gender difference between working class males and females: “Our bodies are made for hard work. We need daughters- in- law, we need grandchildren, we need
a house full of people. And it’s only then that there are all those working hands” (118-9).

The above example need not mislead one to believe that Mahasweta Devi does not highlight the gendered difference in the upper class environment. In Mother of 1084, Sujata is a victim of mental suffering due to the loss of her beloved son Brati and also physical suffering due to her appendix pain. Despite her unhappiness within the family, Sujata is unable to break free from her familial duties and responsibilities. One can trace this in the conversation between Sujata and her daughter Tuli:

TULI: I just don’t see why you have to put it off. Removing the appendix is no operation at all. There’s no risk in it.

SUJATA: (slowly, as she stirs the juice with a spoon). Not always. I’m anaemic, with a bad heart. The doctor doesn’t feel sure.

TULI: When will you have it?

SUJATA: Let’s get through your wedding.

TULI: That’ll be in April.

SUJATA: Let’s see.

TULI: The jewellery from the vault?

SUJATA: I’ll bring that (Mother of 1084 7-8).
Despite her illness she is expected to carry out the household chores during her daughter’s engagement. Similarly, Jashoda’s conversation with her husband shows a woman’s limitation and confinement within the four walls of the household:

‘Who sat and cooked?’ [says Jashoda’s husband Kangalicharan]

‘The man brings, the woman cooks and serves. My lot is inside out. Then you ate my food, now you’ll give me food. Fair’s fair’ [says Jashoda to her husband] (Breast Giver 58).

Mahasweta Devi’s literary texts decode the innumerable familial roles assigned to the woman—caretaker, mother, host and so on. These roles demand women of both privileged and underprivileged class/caste to perform a series of familial duties like looking after the family, pregnancy and giving birth despite their reluctance, child rearing, cooking and keeping the household clean. There is no escape from these roles since they are very often linked to the archetypal roles of mythical women characters and it is these roles that seem to elevate the ordinary women to the status of Sita or Savitri.

She offers a deeper insight into the gender stereotyping of women’s roles when she makes a link between gender stereotyping and Indian cultural role in such a gender stereotyping. She reflects a woman’s position, role and the manner in which she is tied down to her family. The following lines from Mahasweta Devi’s story Breast Giver
reflect this inevitable connotation of a woman’s familial position to her mythical counterparts:

Jashoda is fully an Indian woman, whose unreasonable, unreasoning, and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness, have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati- Savitri- Sita through Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani (47).

Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani are female film characters who represent the archetypal consciousness of the woman as a wife, mother and daughter-in-law of the Sati, Savitri, and Sita images. Cultural stereotyping occurs not only in films but also in religious beliefs as pointed by Mahasweta Devi in a description of Jashoda’s mother love-

Her mother- love wells up for Kangali as much as for the children. She wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest. Sages did not write of this motherly feeling of Jashoda’s for her husband. They explained female and male as Nature and the Human Principle (Breast Giver 47).

Devi’s reading of Jashoda’s gender oppression exemplifies the above view.
Mahasweta Devi’s reading of gender oppression is revolutionary because she traces the roots of gender oppression to familial and cultural stereotyping of women’s roles on the one hand, and on the other hand, she tries to delineate cultural stereotyping of the lower class women from the upper class women. For example gender stereotyping leading to gender oppression is seen as the worst form of oppression in the woman who is illiterate, uneducated and unaware. In *Breast Giver*, Mahasweta Devi says—

> It was as if she were Kangalicharan’s wife from birth, the mother of twenty children, living or dead, counted on her fingers. Jashoda doesn’t remember at all when there was no child in her womb, when she didn’t feel faint in the morning, when Kangali’s body didn’t drill her body like a geologist in the darkness lit only by an oil-lamp. She never had the time to calculate if she could or could not bear motherhood (39).

Such a reading is revolutionary also because it tears down female roles created by religion and culture through a gendered reading of the women’s situation in the family. In Mahasweta Devi’s reading, particularly of the lower class illiterate women one finds that such a woman is unaware of her gender oppression which is mistaken for her willing submission and devotion to her family. Jashoda is one such
character who appeals to her husband thus—“You are husband, you are guru. If I forget and say no, correct me. Where after all is the pain? Didn’t Mistress-Mother breed thirteen? Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit?” (52).

Mahasweta Devi discusses the notion of Kathleen Gough’s male dominance and the bindings of a woman according to which the role that women began to assume within the family unit was one of the main causes of their removal from public life. Despite the extracting role of house-keeping played by women, it is looked upon as ‘unpaid production’ and incurs no reward or salary. Indira Rajaraman discusses the harsh realities of Indian women’s condition within the society, like dowry demands, violence of women within the family, indifference to women within the family and her exploitation. Such forms of oppression occur among women of upper class and also among the underprivileged working class.

Among the underprivileged working class women, oppression takes place mainly because of their poverty. These marginalized women are subject to exploitation as they find no means of survival. Devi examines these women who have been segregated by society and thus, forcefully given an inferior position in the social strata. In the introduction to her essay “Imaginary Maps”, Devi discusses how gender oppression in the working class is the most adverse. She explains
‘…Parents cannot give their daughters food and clothing. The basic reason is poverty…As long as 80% of the Indian population lives below poverty line, Dalit women will keep suffering’. She also adds ‘Decolonization has not reached the poor. This is why these things happen. Women are just merchandise commodities’ (Quoted by Gabrielle Collu, “Adivasis and the myth of Independence” xx).

Oppression like indifference to women in the upper class as discussed by Indira Rajaraman is also found in Mahasweta Devi’s works. *Mother of 1084* is an example to describe the above statement. Mental and emotional torment is another common symptom of oppression, as it appears in the hollow marital relationship between Sujata and her husband and her disturbed mental condition and dissatisfaction created by her family members, when they accuse her of having influenced her son into bad ways. This situation is similar to the condition of the Indian poetess, Kamala Das who feels betrayed and deceived by her husband in being used as a commodity without having any right of expression and independence. Their problem ‘lay buried, unspoken for many years’.

Similar mental torture as seen in Sujata finds expression in Pratibha Ray’s story *Munshi* which brings out a woman’s suffering in her strained relationship with her husband and brothers after she is torn
away from her son, bringing about her demise. One cannot forget Amma, the distressed woman in *Kamasutra* and Sita in Anita Desai’s *Where Shall we go this Summer* who are subject to their husband’s cruel patriarchal authority as well as their family’s insular and unimaginative behaviour resulting in their aching void, mental and emotional torture as women, wives and mothers.

In Mahasweta Devi’s play *Aajir*, the mistress’ mental turmoil evolves from her longing to attain motherhood but gets dampened when her husband seeks happiness in the company of the prostitute Punnashashi. Her inner agony and withdrawal from life can be equated to the condition of Nanda Kaul in Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* who retreats to carignano on discovering her husband’s extra marital relationship. The mistress’ misery is evident in the statement made to her husband: “You’re a clever fox…you tell me you’ve given my father a share of cropland you tell me you’ll give me a son, you have a sap for everybody and then you go to Punnashashi’s house and dance without a stitch on your back!” (*Aajir* 43-4).

As pointed earlier by Indira Rajaraman, a woman’s role within the family is a repressed one and hence women’s oppression takes the route of confinement and restriction to public life. This is seen in the Mistresses’ helplessness in reaching out to Paatan, the bonded slave (*aajir*). Gender oppression takes a unique turn where the Mistress is
oppressed by her husband, Maatang who demands from his bonded slave to keep an eye on his wife so that she is confined within the household. The woman in the house is therefore no less than a slave. The Mistress’ conversation with her husband hint at women’s sufferings and confinement within the domestic environment of the house:

THE MISTRESS (in piercing bitterness): Who’s dreaming of marrying? That aajir?

MAATANG: Who else?

THE MISTRESS: Don’t you have his doom in your chest? The bond of slavery?

MAATANG (suddenly alert): What do you have to do with the chest? (Suspicious) Do you tinker with it?

THE MISTRESS (yawning): What d’ you think you’ll do if I tinker with your chest? Beat me up? I’m not your Punnashashi, you can’t beat me!

MAATANG (seriously shocked): Shame on you, wife! The Mother at the cremation ground asked you to bear a clean mind throughout April, and then you’ll have a son. And you had to utter the name of a whore!

THE MISTRESS: You don’t feel like eating unless you’ve visited that whore!

MAATANG: What’s that to you? (Aajir 38-9).
Women continue to be the ‘second sex’ or the ‘female other’ of man, whose significance within the family emerges only in her role as progenitor of the male heir. The master, despite his ill-treatment of his Mistress pampers her only when the astrologer predicts that she would bear sons. This is evident in Maatang’s appeal to his Mistress:

MAATANG: Sorry. The astrologer said you’ll bear my son. Not one. Four. There in the courtyard I’ll raise the labour room for you. I’ve stored enough palm leaves already. Giri the midwife will deliver the child, and I’ll give her a ring for her nose. I’ll bring eunuch dancers from Purulia to dance for you (Aajir 38-9).

The Bengali writer reveals how women despite her capabilities, practical wisdom and inner strength still cannot fight the patriarch because of her femininity, particularly when the woman is unable to bear a son. In the novel The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh, the landlords’ wives are inflicted to mental and physical torture particularly when they are unable to give birth to a male heir.

Child marriage is yet another form of gender oppression which Mahasweta Devi widely discusses in her works. The novel, The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh deals with the theme of child marriage as seen in the early marriage of Ganesha’s daughters. Like Anita Desai’s Voices in the City and Gita Chattopadhyay’s poem Birth Mahasweta Devi also reveals
the effects of the patriarchal symbol of captivity and subjugation imposed on under-aged girls. Gita Chattopadhyay’s images of confinement like “on the forehead he smeared a red mark” and “the hands he bound with bangles of shell” symbolize the female child’s oppression within the family and could be related to Mahasweta Devi’s ideas on child marriage.

Mahasweta Devi considers also deals with witch-hunting as the worst form of gender oppression that can be traced to superstitions on witch-burning and women’s banishment from society once they are branded as witches. The grounds for charges against women as witches arise from women’s outspoken attitude and spirit of rebellion. Such women were hunted down and murdered in the most gruesome manner. Acid or hot oil was thrown on them or their genitals were mutilated; they were paraded naked through the town, stoned to death and sometimes were left alone alive to be eaten by wild dogs. Bayen reflects such a situation. For instance, the following conversation between Malingar and his ex-wife, Chandidasi who is believed to have an ‘evil eye’ and regarded as a witch reflects the solitary life led by a witch, the superstitions and the manner in which she is treated by society:

BAYEN: (she stands with her back to them) Tie knots in your hair and in what you’re wearing. (Malingar ties knots
in his hair and his dhoti.) Spit on the head of the child. Tell me when you’ve done it.

MALINGAR: (spits on Bhagirath’s head) I have now.

(Bhagirath raises eyes to steal a glance at the Bayen, but Malingar checks him in time) Drop your eyes Bhagirath.

BAYEN: (turns around in yearning disbelief) Bhagirath?
My Bhagirath? Bhagirath?

MALINGAR: (ferocious in his fear) Stop it you bitch! Turn your face away.

(The Bayen dutifully turns away) You want to kill me? Is that why you’re here? Eh?

Then why did you have to become a Bayen? Go away, go away, at once. Otherwise I’ll strike you. (He picks up clods from the ground and hurls them viciously at the Bayen)

BAYEN: Please, dear, don’t hit me, dear. (Raises the pitcher to her head, and starts moving) (Bayen 76-7).

This textual conversation given above is an evidence of the misery of a woman who becomes a victim of jealousy of the villagers and penalized with banishment from society as a witch, including separation from her husband and child. Mahasweta Devi’s discussion of women branded as a witch leads us to understand that the author touches upon a very topical issue of gender oppression. Even today, such gender
oppression exists. One such event is about Birubala Rabha, a woman of the Goalpara- Meghalaya border area. She became a victim of the witchcraft persecution but fortunately escaped death.

In an interview given to *Manipur Update* on 3rd December, 2012, Birubala Rabha says “It is not the superstition that always drives some powerful people in a village to declare a woman or a man witch but the main reason behind the practice of witch hunting is some powerful person’s greedy desire for the land owned by an economically weaker person,” adding, “A person is declared a witch so that you can throw him or her out of the village and grab the person’s land, or to settle scores.” Out of the three causes of witch-hunting namely superstitious beliefs, jealousy and greed- Mahasweta Devi’s works present the first two, while the third case is baseless, since the downtrodden women possess no property and cease to be targets of upper class greed. Mahasweta Devi’s character Chandidasi is branded as a witch because of blind religious beliefs and jealousy. Chandidasi refuses to dig graves and bury dead children the moment she understands that she is pregnant. However her husband pressurizes her to continue her job as a grave-digger. The superstitious belief that the grave-digger has an ‘evil eye’ on the village children coupled with the jealousy that a lower caste couple are financially sound and live as a happy family lead to Chandidasi branded as a witch and outcasted from the village.
The separation of the bayen through ostracism from her family is a punishment endowed on her due to which she is distanced from her child. Her husband’s second marriage adds to her woes. Suppression of women also occurs when a man maintains deliberate distance from his wife so as to control childbirth and cause mental suffering to women.

Widowhood can be paralleled to female witch-hunting since both are forms of female ostracization instigated by false religious beliefs, customs, greed and jealousy. Devi’s protagonist, Dhouli is not permitted to look at her own reflection in the mirror or to wear shellac bangles, a dot of sindoor on your forehead, and anklets of cheap metal and she is also not allowed to attend weddings and other auspicious occasions (“Dhouli” 7). She is forbidden to remarry, and compelled to wear plain and dull clothes, have plain, simple food and move around bare foot.

Ecomonic exploitation is one of the prime forms of gender oppression represented in Mahasweta Devi’s works where women are denied economic and legal powers and the right to property ownership. The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh represents one such form of economic exploitation in Lachhima. Lacchima, the temporary caretaker of family property of her master Medininarayan Singh gets no reward or encouragement for her loyalty. Economic exploitation is echoed in Dhouli a story in which Dhouli is forced to earn a living for her free stay at her in- laws’ place.
Gender oppression is also at its extreme in causing female humiliation and insult to personal dignity through physical violence. In the year 1993, the U.N. General Assembly made a declaration for the elimination of violence against women and defined the term gender violence: ‘Any act of violence that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life is termed as gender based violence. It occurs at three levels namely within the home or family, in the community and at the state level.’

The seeds of gender violence are often sown in the misogynistic attitudes hidden in social mores. The sociologist Allan G. Johnson expresses the attitude of society towards females in his statement on misogyny. He argues that misogyny is a central part of sexist prejudice and ideology and, as such, is an important basis for the oppression of females in male-dominated societies. Misogyny is manifested in many ways, from jokes to pornography to violence to the self-contempt women may be taught to feel toward their own bodies.

Michael Flood states that misogyny, though most common in men, exists in and is practiced by women against other women or even themselves. It functions as an ideology or belief system that has accompanied patriarchal or male-dominated societies for thousands of
years and continues to place women in subordinate positions with limited access to power and decision making.

The 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women made by the United Nations General Assembly states that, violence could be perpetrated by assailants of either gender, family members and even the “State” itself. The eminent sociologist and politician, Gloria Steinem makes a statement in one of her interviews about the origin of violence against women rooted in society. She says that it begins from a deep sense of teaching men to dominate and take control through which his masculinity is defined. It is this power endowed on men from generations that result in physical violence against women whenever questions are raised about them against the use of power by men.

It is in this context that Mahasweta Devi’s female characters can be discussed in the context of being victims of physical violence. The author shows how women of royal families as well as those belonging to the oppressed section are churned in the wheel of violence. While women in the former case are yoked under decorum, in the latter, the oppressed are vibrant but not very conscious about being victimized. Their oppression occurs through compliance and willful desire to conform to the feminine ideal. The marginalized women on the other hand, are victims through force, for their families have to carry out their
lives at the beck and call of the kings. Examples of both situations are discussed in the next few lines.

A testament to such physical exploitation is found in Lachima being sexually exploited by her master Medininarayan till her middle age. Similar is the situation with Ganga and Mori in Barkanda’s house who serve him as mistresses. These working class women are mortgaged to the men of feudal class for their enjoyment who become their slaves and get trapped in the circle of oppression and gender violence. Ananthamurthy’s Samskara also discloses similar condition of low-caste women like Chandri, Belli and Padmavati who become objects of lust and physical fulfillment for the upper caste men. Physical violence inflicted on women echoes in the play Mother of 1084 in Nandini’s interrogation by Saroj Pal. Accused of writing posters, collecting arms, manufacturing ‘pipe guns’ with other naxalites Samiran, Bijit, Partha and Sanchayan and working against the government, she is inflicted with inhuman torture:

SAROJ PAL (a charming smile). But you didn’t go to Digha. You went out with the boys. There was no other girl in the group. …What was your relationship with Brati Chatterji? Was he a friend? (Bends close to her, lights a cigarette, presses the lighted cigarette to Nandini’s cheek. She screams) (24-5).
Another unique form of gender oppression discussed by Mahasweta Devi is ‘gifting’ low class women as bride price to the son in law by the upper classes. These low class women came into the son in law’s house with the bride, as a gift for the son in law and used as bonded labourers and objects of lust by the men in the household. Devi’s novel, *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* depicts such a form of oppression. In *The Glory of Sri Shi Ganesh*, Rukmani’s physical oppression occurs in being gifted as bride-price to Ganesha and she endures what Beauvoir termed as ‘forced motherhood’, when she is sexually exploited and becomes pregnant (“Radical Feminism and the Battle of the Sexes”, 96). The landlord Gajamoti Singh’s shameless act of rape of the social worker only encourages more such sickening acts of violence on women of all society, especially those belonging to the lower sections.

The division of women into the ‘pure’ and the ‘fallen’ stands in stark contrast to the men’s thought of prostitution as a natural necessity to satisfy the biological nature of their sexuality. Their enforcement of sexual excess on women’s bodies making them an object of men’s lust could be termed, in Judith Walkowitz’s words as ‘Sex Slavery’ (*Sex, Class and Hetero-Relations* 21) with women reduced to the status of slaves. Punnashashi, Moti and Parbatia’s decision to opt for prostitution for survival are looked down by society which is ironically responsible
for their adverse condition. Dhouli’s choice of prostitution also arises
out of necessity to support her poor family.

Sexual exploitation is also found in *Rudali* where the author
highlights the situation of rudalis being subject to seduction and rape and
thrown into the whores’ quarter. Such exploitation occurs with women
finding no other means of survival before they turn to prostitution, are
forced to submit to the harsh conditions due to dire poverty. An example
of this situation can be seen in Sanichari’s daughter- in- law Parbatia, who is compelled to opt for prostitution as a means to survive. A similar
theme is crystallised by the author in her short story entitled *Douloti the
Beautiful* where the hypocrisy of the upper castes is brought to light. The
physical disability of Douloti’s father, Ganori Nagesia gives the high
caste Paramananda Misra the opportunity to take her as a ‘kamiya’
(bonded labour) to his place and dump her in the sex market when she is
barely thirteen. Her inability to escape occurs partly due to her ethical
responsibility and love for her father till she develops fever and red
swelling all over her private parts and dies having been denied
treatment.

Control and oppression on women also occurs in the form of wife
beating, a common phenomenon traced in both the upper and lower
classes. Oppression of this kind is highlighted in U. R. Ananthamurthy’s
*Samskara* where Putta, the Malera Brahmin speaks of frequently beating
his wife for her request to visit her mother. Ill treatment of women is evident in Naranappa’s relations with his wife and his illicit relationship with Chandri which exposes the double standards of the educated class. Mahasweta Devi’s short story *He Said, Pani* brings out this theme with the ill-treatment of Anandi’s daughter-in-law by her husband resulting from unhappy marriage.

Oppression of the most humiliating form is found in the low class Naxalite tribal woman Dopdi’s violent sexual torture and gang-rape in police custody. Unlike the historic episode of Mahabharata where Draupadi’s honour and chastity could not be stripped to shame with Lord Krishna rising to her rescue, Mahasweta Devi’s Dopdi Mehjen (“Draupadi”) surpasses shame although she is an oppressed representative of the present day social system. Devi brings in legends and mythical figures onto contemporary setting with the sole objective to capturing the continuities between past and present day happenings of gender oppression. She highlights the position and status of women of the earlier times as well as those of the present times. The name Dopdi reminds one of the mythical princess Draupadi and at the same time the contemporary low caste tribal woman, Dopdi. The name Dopdi also reveals the continued presence of the gender oppression of the past. Oppression in the form of rape also appears in Mahasweta Devi’s “Behind the Bodice” (*Breast Stories*). In the introduction to *Breast
Stories, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak states that “Behind the Bodice” is a rape of the people. Gangor’s repeated gang-rape in Jharoa and Seopura in the police lock up is the rape of her motherhood and innocence where an innocent labour-woman is transformed into a conscious woman filled with bitter experience. Her physical and mental exploitation takes place with her beautiful breasts turning into ‘two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat’ which arises out of Upin’s fascination for photography and in his open display of Gangor’s breasts through his pictures. Her utter poverty, bitter experience and seclusion from her husband, child as well as public life force her to turn to prostitution for survival.

Mahasweta Devi’s narrative of female rape and physical exploitation rams home the point that the injustice meted to women like Gangor cannot be looked upon as individual suffering but rather the suffering of many low caste women. This is also the point that Germaine Greer makes when she highlights that women, despite being dedicated mothers and wives are still victims of rape and physical violence which she considers as the highest form of oppression (The Female Eunuch 20). This probably makes socialist-feminists state that female liberation and freedom is possible only when rape and physical exploitation comes to an end.

Humiliation and degradation of women also takes place in other ways. The illicit relationship maintained by men outside their marriage,
the sexual threat inflicted on women in different situations, the economic dependence of women on her husband and his family and forceful confinement of women within the four-walls through marriage are some of the ways in which women are treated and equated to slaves (Margaret Jackson, *Sex, Class and Hetero-Relations 4*).

Pallavi’s decision to educate the people of Bagha village in the novel *The Glory of Shri Shri Ganesh* is threatened with sexual harassment from Ganesha. A woman’s struggle to survive preserving her honour and dignity is highlighted in Devi’s short story “The Hunt” taken from *Imaginary Maps* in the ‘eighteen year old tall, flat featured, light copper skin’ girl Mary Oraon who is looked upon as an object of lust by the men around her. The contractor Tehsildar Singh’s constant advance towards the tribal girl is a clear indication of the exploitation and humiliation of the low class women in society.

Oppression is not contained exclusively among the working class women of supposedly lower lineage. Women of upper class and caste are also subjected to continuous violence in the feudal, patriarchal family structure. Picture of such instances can be cited from Devi’s novel *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*. Here, one notices Medini Singh’s dislike and cruelty towards his two wives due to their failure to produce a male heir and are eventually sent away from the house on the pretext
that they may kill their step son Ganesha. This was believed to be the right of the husband in the feudal system.

Ganesha’s second wife Puthili is also subjected to regular torture. This tradition of wife-beating was also portrayed by the young dynamic writer, Arundhati Roy in the relationship between Ammu’s parents, Pappachi and Mammachi. The husband’s envy and physical violence inflicted on her, roots from Mammachi’s popularity as a violinist and success in pickle making business. In Devi’s story too, Puthili’s sympathy and pity for Rukmani arises from this treatment. A woman’s opinion and suggestion is often ignored. This is clearly evident with Nathu Singh rejecting his wife’s proposal to send Rukmani to Ganesha’s house. Her premonition about Ganesha keeping her permanently as a slave and mistress in the house comes true. These were the feudal-patriarchal culture of female oppression prevalent in the society.

In order to eliminate women from all walks of society which include right to education, property ownership from parents and in-laws and a woman’s role as a guardian and senior member in the family, men have constantly made use of a series of political and cunning schemes. This politics of discriminating women are seen to occur in many forms like physical abuse, deprivation from family property, female infanticide, prevention of widow remarriage, banishing a woman from the household, accusing her of being an evil force, sati system as well as
child marriage. Such politics of gender differentiation in the form of female infanticide helped the Brahmins and Rajputs maintain control over population by reducing the number of women. Politics in the form of early marriage of the girl-child was also prevalent in the society which form a part of Devi’s works. This discrimination is prevalent even today and has also taken the form of female foeticide helping the family members to get rid of the daughters, deprive them of property ownership and education. This theme has been a subject of serious study for the Indian social reformers, the subject depicted in the same novel. The ignorance of the girl child is evident in the author’s suppression of their names throughout the story. The five daughters of Medini’s wives are deprived of all pleasures of childhood, an example of which is evident in the statement made by Barkandaj Singh to Medini: ‘just get the girls married to the first boys you find’ (14). While girls were viewed as secondary members in the family, Roy’s female character, Ammu is confined at home with domestic training and neglected by parents since arrangement of dowry was not possible for her marriage.

Such a form of male dominance in a patriarchal society has been discussed by Kathleen Gough in her essay entitled “The Origin of the Family” (Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence-Adrienne Rich-C. Stimpson and E. S. Persan Ed. Women, Sex, Sexuality). According to Gough, male dominance and control can take place when
women are denied their own sexuality by means of various forms of
deprivation and punishment in the form of mental as well as physical
torture. Division of labour on the basis of sex and gender is another form
of discrimination that occurs in society. According to this division, a
woman’s duties are strictly confined within the household while men
enjoy the privilege of education and working outside the house. A
woman is never appreciated if she works outside the house, earns a
living and supports her family. These man-made customs are strategies
to suppress women and give them a lower rank in the social strata.

In the modern day scenario, gender oppression and violence on
women has constantly been a serious issue of discussion and writing as
this form of violence is still prevalent in society. To cite an example, a
group of women activists namely Urvashi Butalia, Uma Chakravarti,
Xonzoi Barbora, Pratiksha Baxi and Ashley Tellis comes up with a
collective attempt in their common letter to the editor of *Economic and
Political Weekly* dated 15th December, 2007. The letter reads thus: “We
are outraged and deeply upset at the grotesque sexualized assault on the
adivasi woman who was stripped and viciously beaten at a protest
demonstration by adivasi and tea tribe communities seeking scheduled
tribe status and other political rights by ‘local’ youths in Gauhati on
November 24, 2007, the latest in a series of attacks on the bodies of the
poor and the disenfranchised, especially women.” They are of the
opinion that despite many attempts by women’s group to flag the issues of sexual violence still existing in our society, there is still a legal silence around the question of sexual violence and impunity.

From all the above discussions on gender oppression, one could conclude that Mahasweta Devi treats women’s issues with sympathy and concern. Although she keeps harping on the point that she is not a feminist writer and focus on the class rather than gender issues, yet her gendered view of women’s oppression could be perceived in the manner in which she attempts female empowerment by voicing women’s protest. She acknowledges that a woman tends to be more vulnerable to exploitation because of her body. Devi’s works deal with human rights violations through exposure to violation of the female body. Hence, scholars view Mahasweta Devi’s powerful tales of exploitation and struggle as extremely rich sites of feminist discourse. However Mahasweta Devi takes an affeminist stand when it comes to her commentary on gender oppression. In an interview with Samik Bandyopadhyay, the writer says-

For you it may be important that this story is written by a woman… another woman has adapted it into a play…But I think that a writer has written the story, a director has adapted it into a play. It is not very important to me whether it is done by a woman or not… I write as a writer, not as a
woman…When I write I never think of myself as a woman…These are stories of people’s struggle, their confrontation with the system…I look at the class, not at the gender problem. Take a story like Ganesh Mahima- it is about a woman. But I have written from the class point of view. In ‘Rudali’ you have a character like Dulan who knows how to use the system. In my stories men and women alike belong to different classes (Metamorphosis of Rudali 16-7).

At the same time, the researcher is of the view that Mahasweta Devi certainly does not ignore gender problem but rather the class gets prioritized in relation to gender. Her sympathetic concern for women comes to the fore in her conversation with Usha Ganguli, where Devi makes an earnest plea to her to treat the character of Parbatia in a sympathetic manner as someone who tries to survive amidst adversity and not as one who indulges in prostitution for pleasure. It is true that in novels like Rudali and The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh, and even in her short story Behind the Bodice, the author shows how women belonging to lower castes and classes as well as tribal women become victims of gender oppression because of their caste and poverty. Her idea of women as a gendered subaltern looms large in Rudali, “Douloti the Bountiful” and “The Hunt.” In Rudali, she portrays a low caste Ganju
woman as a victim and a potentially subversive agent in a phallocentric Brahmanical patriarchy. In “Douloti the Bountiful” and “The Hunt” she focuses on the sexual exploitation of the adivasi women who are used and abused because they are poor. Discarded by society due to their caste and deprived of food and shelter, these women are subject to exploitation and resort to various means of survival. The cultural imperialistic concept of Iris Young to view gender oppression as a form of cultural imperialism is an apt perspective to understand Devi’s idea of gender oppression since Devi shows women as victims of male control of their thoughts and attitudes in general. However low caste women in particular experience double oppression where the erosion of tribal matrilineal powers due to the intrusion from cultural imperialist powers has resulted in the double oppression of the lower caste.

It is the double oppression of women in the form of class/caste and gender which Mahasweta Devi’s writings are concerned with. It is the subaltern oppression, i.e, the oppression of the ‘organic intellectuals’ that Mahasweta Devi primely focuses on. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” asserts that the subaltern cannot speak. While Devi’s woman can talk, she cannot always speak in so far as the act of speaking requires a listener, which the female subaltern always lacks. According to Spivak, “when the subaltern ‘speaks’ in order to be heard and gets into the structure of responsible…
resistance, he or she is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual” (Spivak 20). But Mahasweta Devi’s women are powerful and strong individuals who are passive in the initial stage but retort aggressively against oppression later. Devi defends and protects them at every point be it a privileged woman or a female outcast. Characters like Dulan Ganju of *Rudali* act as Devi’s spokesperson. The skill and cunning with which these characters come up to fight oppression is, in reality the strategy employed by the author to show that her women are no separate, isolated individuals but stand at equal footing with men. In some cases, oppression may be faced by women purely because of their gender as seen in Sujata (in *Mother of 1084*) and Pallavi Singh (in *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*) but in most cases, the author fuses the triadic pattern of oppression-caste, class and gender where women suffer oppression because they are women, secondly because they are born into a lower caste or a tribal and thirdly because of their class.

Many writers are women. However all of them are not feminists. Most of them avoid their links with the feminist movement. Yet, there is much in their work that is of interest to feminists. Interestingly, Mahasweta Devi is one such writer. The researcher is therefore of the view that Mahasweta Devi is a feminist writer with arguments of feminist nature ingrained in her writings. She strives to free women from
the stereotyping they are subjected to in the dominant, conservative patriarchal world.

Mahasweta Devi’s concerns centre around socially oppressed women trapped in the strange complexities of class, caste, gender oppression and poverty. Her feminism revolves around the assertion of the woman as an individual in her own right. Several women characters portrayed by Mahasweta Devi belong to the oppressed sections of society who are forced to fight for their basic sustenance. Caught in the grim battle of class, caste and poverty, her women protagonists chart out their own paths of self-realization. Her portrayal is not limited to debunking patriarchy, but attempts a redefinition of woman’s role in the adverse situations. Her powerful and haunting tales of exploitation and struggle offer us a rich site for feminist discourse.

The Ramon Magsaysay Award profile of Mahasweta Devi assures the fact that Devi’s searing narratives stress the profound subordination of women in Indian society. It is this aspect that is the crux of discussion of the present chapter which plunges into the feminist aspect of the writer and her works. Mahasweta Devi takes up the role of a spokesperson for women who are victims of multiple oppressions and translates her perception of society through the lives of her female characters as they journey through the harshness of lives.
Does the subaltern free himself or herself from the class, caste and gender oppression that he or she is subjected to? For Mahasweta Devi’s works are not a mere record of oppression but are also mirrors of the subaltern’s resistance to the above forms of oppression. This will be the concern in the forthcoming chapter.