CHAPTER TWO

Endurance

Friedman's thrust in *The Horizontal Society* that people living in the society are led to believe that they have freedom of choice and there are no constraints in their freedom, and that choice is in fact an illusion engenders a space for representations of the unconventional counterthrusts of subjectivity. This is significant because there is no single way to absolutely reflect the stages, levels and dimensions of subjectivity as it gets continually recast into the cultural, affective and corporeal frames of a given society, time and individual. So here endurance becomes a recast of subjectivity in that it represents certain levels, stages and dimensions in 'Dhouli,' 'Sanichari' and 'Fairytale of Rajbhasa'. The ensuing analysis of the three stories embodies and foregrounds the endurance that signifies the passive and active resistances of the three protagonists in the stories. Their subjectivity becomes a subverted tool to uphold Friedman's paradigm of illusive freedom.

Decolonization has not reached the poor. That is why these things happen. Women are just merchandise, commodities. In the border districts of West Bengal there are women from Bangladesh being sold in the name of marriage in the bridegroom's house. For the flesh trade all you have to invest is two saris, a bit of food, some trinkets, and a bit of money for the parents. Poverty, poverty, poverty. What we need is mass-based public opinion formation, pressure on the Government, vigilance. But what can we expect of the system,
when the burning of the Rajput woman becomes a great national issue? When a woman is raped the entire judiciary system is against the woman. The general consensus is: only women of loose character get raped for India parades that India holds women in great honour. Even women of the left parties in Calcutta have brought that argument in cases of rape.

Mahasweta Devi (Sen 45-46)

Mahasweta Devi rejects the concept 'nationhood'. Her stories are the critic of India, which has evolved after the independence. According to her, India, in which we dwell is India of the mainstream, where people like the tribals, dalits, the bonded labourers, the underclass, women, landless peasants has no place of their own. 'Her stories make significant intervention into the very idea of 'India' as it has evolved after independence. Her stories not only deconstruct India as a political, ethnographic and geographical entity, but also, in the process, shift focus from the 'Nation' to possible alternative 'nations' having distinct socio-economic-cultural specificities of existence of their own' (Gupta 83). Most of Mahasweta's stories focus on the communities within the nation-state that stand excluded from the socio-political-economic configurations of national. Pushing them to the conditions of faceless anonymity, the mainstream nation either refuses to recognize their existence or attaches derogatory associations with them. In story after story, Mahasweta recounts the tales of atrocities being perpetrated on the denotified; nomadic tribals, and women by the dominant forces.

The Indian mainstream system plays a very important role in the exploitation of the women who do not belong to the privileged class in the stories of Mahasweta
Devi. In the story “Douloti the Bountiful”, Douloti, a daughter of a bonded labour is sold into prostitution, and at the end she dies of venereal disease on the day of our independence reminding the readers that the independence of our nation is a myth for the underclass. Likewise in “Breast Giver”, Jashoda, due to poverty is forced to breast feed almost every children of the rich Holders of the village. She gets infected by breast cancer and is left to die alone on the bed of the government hospital. Mahasweta writes these kinds of stories so that the underclass and the underprivileged people get their deserved place in letters and in action. Her stories are reminders to the mainstream society who has pushed these people to the periphery and outcast them.

It is indeed true that, in the name of employment, in the name of marriage, young women are dragged to the cities and are left to rot. Most of them are sold and are forced into the flesh business. The bourgeois never bother to look at the root of the problems. The bourgeois maintain a shameless ignorance of the less blessed ones, and lead a life of luxury amongst the society which is very much part of this evil.

Mahasweta Devi has championed the cause of recognising these evils. She, with her dedication made a tremendous effort to minimize the exploitation of the subaltern women and the tribals. She is aware of the fact that the tribals and the women are most vulnerable and prone to exploitation, so she is always by their side and is working very hard for their upliftment. Her writings are strong representation of the society. She had been with the people to document their experiences. In her own words, she says, ‘I believe in documentation. After reading my work, the reader should be able to face the truth of facts, and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India’ (Devi, Bitter Soil, vii). Mahasweta Devi does not write to please the readers, or
to entertain them. She writes to unmask the truth and bring it forth in front of the readers to make them feel, what she herself feels. She further adds:

My experience keeps me perpetually angry and makes me ruthlessly unforgiving towards the exploiters, or the exploiting system. That the mainstream remains totally oblivious of the tribal situation furthers that burning anger.....

For I believed in anger, in justified violence, and so peel the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the Government, to expose its naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation; and place this India, a hydra-headed monster before a people’s court, the people being the oppressed millions. (ibid. ix-x)

The documentation of the experiences of the female protagonists by Mahasweta Devi is indeed unique. Most of her protagonists go through immense pain and poverty, which further leads to their exploitation. The present chapter records the fate of the tribal women Dhouli, Sanichari and Josmina taken from the stories “Dhouli”, “Sanichari” and “Fairytales of Rajbhasa”. All the stories analysed in this chapter are taken from the book Outcast first published in 2002. The stories are translated from original Bengali by Sharmistha Dutta Gupta. Exploitation of women is the major theme in all the stories. Existence of women is always at stake while exploring these stories.

“Dhouli” is set in a very small village called Taharr, where like many villages all over India, caste system is still practiced and are dominated by the Brahmins. In
this set up of Taharr, Misras were the Deotas or the Brahmins who control the village. The village was mainly constituted of other lower castes like dusad, ganju, dhobi etc.

Dhouli is the name of the protagonist. She belonged to lower caste, an untouchable dusadin (belonging from dusad community). She was also a young widow. She was forced to live with her mother after the death of her husband as her elder brother in law was eyeing on her to exploit her sexually.

The story opens showing Dhouli waiting at the bus stand in front of Parasnath’s shop. We come to know from the conversation between Parasnath and his wife that it has become customary for Dhouli to wait at the bus stand. It has been going on for nearly four months. Readers further come to know that the youngest son of the Misra’s, Misrilal impregnated and left her to wait. She waits at the bus stand in the hope that he will turn up someday.

Dhouli was appointed to graze the goats and sweep the orchards of Misra. Dhouli remembers how the affair with Misrilal started. One day ‘as she was bathing in the waterfall while grazing the goats in the forest, Misrilal tossed a leafy twig at her. He didn’t laugh or make obscene comments. He simply said, ‘I’m madly in love with you. Why won’t you even look at me?’ (6). Dhouli was afraid and pleaded Misrilal not to say such things. It was Misrilal who pursued Dhouli relentlessly. Dhouli tried to avoid him in every way possible, knowing what it can lead to:

How scared Dhouli felt, how scared! Misrilal was fair skinned, he had curly hair. Innocent and good looking. At a glance you could make out that he was
Deota. And what was Dhouli? A dusad’s daughter. A widow. An unfortunate woman. (6)

Dhouli knew her social status. Being a dusad woman, i.e. belonging from a very lower class and again being a widow, she was not even supposed to look at a Brahmin, let alone fall in love. She has been socially trained to maintain a distance from the high-castes lest this might pollute them and invite misfortunes in her life. So she knew it will be catastrophic for her and her mother, if she allows Misrilal’s approach. But then again she ponders:

Why had a son of the family on whom they had to depend for their meagre daily bowl of maroa said such things to Dhouli? She knew it was because of her tremulous eyes, her slender waist, her blossoming breasts....

After becoming a widow, a randi, you were not supposed to look in a mirror. Not suppose to look at yourself. Not suppose to wear shellac bangles, a dot of sindoor on your forehead, anklets of cheap metal. She was attractive. But a pretty face was no use to a randi. She couldn’t marry again, could she? Never again the other girls call her to sing wedding songs like sasural chale Sita maiya or paint rangoli patterns of birds and flowers on the walls of a bride’s home. Yet the younger son of that brahman family had just told her he was her slave. She felt scared, uneasy. (7)

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1 The word *randi* is both used as abuse as well as to refer widowhood.
Dhouli was of just nineteen years of age. But she was aware of the customs and the limitations put on her by the society. She was mature, strong and fearless. As she was a young girl, she had her own desires too, but she learnt to come to terms with the societal norms. She was mature enough to understand that she could not dare to break the norms of the society, and falling in love will lead Dhouli to face dire consequences.

Once when Dhouli was coming home from melā at Jhujhar, Misrilal caught hold of her. Misrilal was determined in his approach towards Dhouli:

‘I love you.’

‘No deota. Don’t call it a love. You’re a brahman..................’

‘It’s you I... dusadin, don’t you understand what love means?’

‘No, deota. Dusads and ganjus like us bear your children, it’s not unusual, but...’

‘I can’t think of anything but you.’

‘Please don’t play with a poor woman like me, sarkar.’

‘Play?’

‘Yes deota. You’ll play your games and push off, but what will happen to me? Look what happened to Jhalo? And Sanichari! No, sarkar!’

‘And what if I don’t let you go?’
'What can I do? Nothing. Deotas like you always get what you want! Go ahead, take me, dishonour me.'

'No, no, Dhouli. Forgive, please forgive me.'

Misrilal left hastily. Dhouli was stunned. (9-10)

It was common indeed for the upper castes like Misras to sexually exploit anyone of their choice from the lower caste. It is accepted in the upper caste family like that of Misras to have their mistresses. Jhalo, a dusad woman of the village was the mistress of Kundan, the elder brother of Misrilal.

It was unusual of Misrilal not to force Dhouli, which left her stunned. Dhouli knew she could not have resisted him still Misrilal did not do anything, which puzzled her. She started to grow a soft corner for him. Once when she heard that Misrilal was ill, she became 'lovesick'. But again she was scared as the village women started talking about them. She knew if the deotas come to know about it, they will not spare her. Dhouli tried to convince her mother to leave Taharr and to go Bhalatore to work as coolies, to avoid these problems. But her mother did not agree. Misrilal recovered from his illness and his marriage was fixed. Hearing these ‘She was relieved. At the same time it hurt somewhere. And yet, a sense of triumph. She, Dhouli, a dusad girl, had driven a brahman’s son crazy’ (11).

After these developments, Dhouli was at ease. Once she was returning home after having her bath under the waterfall in the forest, wrapping the damp sari around her. That was the the time Misrilal showed up in front of her. He said:
‘I don’t want to get married, Dhouli. I want only you.’

In the forest bordering their village, the afternoons were primordial, languorous. Dhouli’s mind and body were caught off guard. Misrilal’s eyes were helpless and pleading, his voice aching with despair. Dhouli could no longer refuse him. (11)

Dhouli was carried away with the passion of love and desires. She would still fear though, thinking of her future. Misrilal was indeed in love with her. He was of young blood, full of dreams. He promised her that he will marry her at all cost. Misrilal made her believe that the law and the land are with them. The law supports their union, so they need not worry. Listening to those daring plans, Dhouli would draw herself in a magical, unreal world, where everything was perfect for her. Where she can again be happy and fulfil her dreams and desires. At that moment ‘Time could have stopped for them. But it did not. Dhouli realized she was pregnant’(12). Strangely enough, Misrilal was happy about it, and he planned to elope with her to Patna, where they can restart their lives. But fate has stored something else for Dhouli.

When Hanuman Misra, father of Misrilal came to Taharr, Misrilal could not say anything in front of his father. As the Misras came to know about their relationship, it irked them. Hanuman Misra and Kundan was furious and threatened Misrilal to leave Taharr for few days so that they can settle the problem. They wanted to restore their honour!

Misrilal in desperation told her mother
‘Ma, Dhouli is carrying my child.’

‘So what? The men of our family have planted their seed in so many dusad and ganju girls. You’re a hot-blooded young man. Even Jhalo has three sons of Kundan.

‘What will she do?’

‘She has sinned. She’ll suffer for it. They’ll both starve to death, mother and daughter.’

‘How is she to blame, Ma?’

‘It’s always the fault of the woman. For not considering a brahman’s honour, she’s even more to blame.’ (13)

It is quite ironical that Misrilal’s mother being a woman herself retorts ‘It’s always the fault of the woman.’ Misrilal’s mother was a privileged Brahmin woman but while saying these, she is actually surmising the fact that every women including her is always at fault. Though she belonged to a privileged class, she too did not possess her own voice. It is the voice of the patriarchy to which she has been groomed.

Misrilal was unable to confront his father and his brother. He could not keep the promise to marry Dhouli and gave up to the pressure of the family. But before going he tried to arrange for Dhouli and her mother by asking her mother, as they won’t be getting the odd jobs after this particular incident.

Dhouli was left in despair. She could not protest. How could she?
Their village society held Dhouli solely responsible. Her kinsfolk rejected her because she had fallen in love. She had kept aloof from the men of her community. That was all right. If Misrilal had used force, they would not have spurned her. There were several illegitimate Misra children growing up in the dusad-ganju-dhobi quarters. But Dhouli had been willing. An unforgivable offence. (14)

Yes, indeed love is the greatest crime committed by randi Dhouli. In this land it is not natural to fall in love for a widow. But it is natural for the Misras to forcibly sexually exploit them. But when they forcibly exploit them, Misras often looked after the mothers and their illegitimate children by giving them work, money or food, and the villagers too treated them well. But Dhouli’s crime was that she was willing. Now, the villagers were eagerly waiting whether the Misras are providing for Dhouli or not? If not, ‘they would see to it that Dhouli, the randi, the widow, was forced into prostitution’ (14).

Dhouli realized that she will not be spared now. Still she waited for Misrilal to come, by the waterfall, where they built their dreams. After many days he showed up. ‘She looked at him and read her death sentence’ (15). They both cried holding each other. Misrilal again promised Dhouli that, he will come back after one month and elope somewhere. Dhouli was too naive, she believed him.

Misrilal left the village. For few days Misrilal’s mother provided maroa for them, but after that she accused Dhouli’s mother of stealing and stopped giving any assistance. Her mother got furious and beat up Dhouli for the fate she brought upon them. She asked Dhouli to get Sanichari’s potion to get rid of the child which was
growing in her womb, but she declined as she still believed that Misrilal will come back for her. Time passed but he didn’t show up. At the mean time Dhouli gave birth to a boy. Sanichari was the midwife who also gave a potion to make her infertile.

‘Dhouli heard all the news’ (20). The news of Misrilal’s marriage. He will come to the village only after his marriage. Dhouli was no more in the magical wonderland of the forest, where their love flourished. She realized all the love, all the kisses, all the promises of Misrilal to her was just fantasy. ‘Only the child sleeping in her lap was real’ (21).

Eventually Misrilal got married and comes to the village. With much insistence from Dhouli, he came to meet her. Dhouli cursed him for destroying her life and to leave her in despair. Dhouli shouted, ‘You’ve ruined my life deota. Does it hurt to hear a few hometruths? Or are all rich people like you so thin-skinned?’ (24). Misrilal promised to provide them money for their living. But after leaving Taharr, ‘He sent no word, nor any money’. (25)

‘Dhouli realized that her community, the Misra family and the contractor’s labourers, would watch her keenly now’ (25). Everyone denied her any kind of work. People started knocking her doors. She realized she has to give up her body for the sake of her son and hunger. ‘If Kundan Misra didn’t kill her physically, he would finish her off by denying her food. That was her punishment for loving his brother’ (26). In despair, she tried to commit suicide by drowning herself, but she was rescued by the head coolie, who always eyed for her. At that very moment, she made up her mind, she would no longer resist:
The man made an obscene gesture, Dhouli realized that this was her fate. She paused, sighed, and then said, ‘All right.’

‘Will you let me in?’

‘Yes. And...’

‘Yes?’

‘Bring some money?’

‘Money?’

‘Yes. And some makai too. If I’m setting up shop, I might as well charge.’

(27)

Thus, the fate of Dhouli was decided. The hunger of body is so brutal that she had to give herself up to prostitution:

There were many ready to pay. They kept coming. Dhouli and her mother wore proper clothes again. Ate two square meals a day. Dhouli felt very sleepy these days, after her clients left. How simple to sell one’s body in a loveless exchange for salt, corn, maroa. If she had known it was that easy, she would have done it much earlier. Her son too would have been well fed, healthy. Dhouli thought she had really been too naive. (28)

Forcing her into prostitution also didn’t go well with Kundan. He could not bear the fact that ‘Dhouli had learnt to survive’ (28). Kundan summoned his brother Misrilal to see what Dhouli had become. Misrilal still had a soft spot for her. Hearing that she has
become a *randi*, Misrilal came to Taharr to confront Dhouli in rage. By then Dhouli had found her voice, She was no more a timid woman:

‘You’ve become a whore?’

‘Of course.’

............

‘Why didn’t you die instead!’

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

Though for a little time, Dhouli got to challenge the Misras. In her retort she made it clear that she was not willing to be controlled by the diktat of the Misras. She compromised with her honour to live. She made it clear that being a woman she too have her voice. But as said earlier her voice was for a little time. The Misras called a panchayat meeting and announced that, Dhouli could not practice prostitution in the village as it is still a respected village where Brahmans live. She could go to Ranchi and do her whoring there or else they will be burnt to death. No one dared to challenge the verdict:

Early next morning, Dhouli and the contractor took a bus. A bundle in Dhouli’s hand. Dry tearless eyes. Totally shattered. As if her mind had stopped functioning. Mechanical movements. A puppet, controlled by the will of others. (32)
Dhouli was after all a woman: a non-existent. Her experiences of the harshness of the society taught her to accept her fate. Her realization of the world and the society was only limited to Dhouli and her likes:

...she was about to become a professional *randi*. When you are a kept woman, you’re all alone. But now she would be a part of a community. The collective strength of that society was far more powerful than an individual’s strength. And those who had forced her to be a whore were the ones who controlled the society. They were the most powerful! Her mother wouldn’t understand this, but Dhouli did. (32)

Mahasweta Devi, while ending many of her stories pronounces the death of God. She makes God along with the better-offs the accomplice for the crime committed against the protagonists. The last words of the story echo the same:

The sky looked blue and the trees as green as always. She realized that nature was unaffected by the upheaval in her life. This painful thought made her weep. Wasn’t everything supposed to change from today? Everything? The day Dhouli was to finally enter the marketplace? Or is that, for girls like Dhouli, nature accepted such a fate as only natural? The nature which, after all, was not created by the Misras—or had the sky, the trees and the earth sold out to the Misras as well? (33)

It is not only the story of only one Dhouli but thousands of lower caste women in India are subjected like this by the Hindu Brahmans like the Misras. Brahmans are the living deotas or god-like for the lower castes. Brahmans are the supreme self in the
Hindu caste system. According to Sita Agarwal, Hindu scriptures like Manusmriti played a great role in the exploitation of the women in general and lower caste women in particular. In her book *Genocide of Women in Hinduism*, she criticizes the Hindu caste system at length and argues that the Brahmanic tyranny in India is the main cause of the exploitation of women (archive.org). When Misrilal’s mother was talking casually about her husband and son and about their affairs with the lower caste women, she was actually following the words of Manusmriti, ‘Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere); or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a dutiful wife’ (*Manusmriti*: V.154). Though the Misras can sexually exploit the likes of Dhouli but they cannot marry them. ‘Twice-born men who, in their folly, wed wives of the low (Sudra) caste, soon degrade their families and their children to the state of Sudras (ibid. III.15). Mahasweta Devi while depicting the story is satirizing the society and the system where women are treated as non-existent. Dhouli and her likes can only accept their fate or kill themselves.

Though Dhouli at the end submits her subjectivity at the hand of fate, she is not at all a character who does not have any agency. Often she tried to put up fight against her oppressors but every time the system and the society suppresses her resistance. The trauma she endures through her experiences pushes her subjectivity to the margin, from where she could not resist anymore. Her decision to accept the sexual overtures of the village men to earn her living mocks at the structured power of the Misras against which she is an utterly powerless one and yet they cannot better the fate of an erstwhile mistress of their family to provide herself and her son, their blood, a safeguard to make her ends meet. The Misras appear enslaved by their constructs of
caste and power. They cannot break away from it. Notwithstanding their power, they are not empowered enough to bring even a small positive change in the life Dhouli who in turn earns a little strength and pragmatism out of this wretched situation. Her prostitution becomes a subverted tool to represent the endurance to sustain no matter what. The fact that she prefers the professional set-up of prostitution in Ranchi as more secure system than the social set-up of her village that she had to leave is a juxtaposition of the two societies; village against the prostitute’s market, the better choice for Dhouli is the market. The story ends with an unnerving conviction in the voice of the narrator in favour of the prostitute’s market and the reader is left ruminating over the fragments of propriety that appears too insignificant to be worthy of existence when it came to decide for Dhouli’s life and future.

Sanichari was another girl like Dhouli who is exploited in the name of employment. Sanichari was a beautiful little tribal girl of twelve. She once went to the haaat of Tohri by train. She loved to ride on the train, sitting on the floor of the compartment and listening to the stories of her old grandmother. While on the train she met Hiralal who wandered from train to train singing songs with his harmonium. Hiralal was a wise man who warned everyone of Gohuman Bibi, the woman who took many young girls to Kolkata, on the pretext of giving job in the brick kilns. Gohuman Bibi would take girls and sell them to the maliks, who would make them work inhumanly and force the girls to have sex with them.

No one willingly leaves their native land and goes to the foreign land to work. When circumstances become hard people become bound to leave their place in search of work. In places like Rata where the story took place, people survived on farming.
In the times of draught and other such calamities people found it hard to survive, which lead them to go out other places in search of odd jobs. Gohuman Bibi would look for these kinds of opportunity and lure the young girls to come along with her. She would fill their eyes with unseen dreams of good food, good pay, *chamak chamak* saris and jewelsries, which the young girls found very hard to resist and eventually give up.

The story was set against the Adi Jati Raksha Morcha Movement. It was the time when BMP, CRP and BSF unleashed a reign of terror which displaced the tribals from their lands and forced them to live in the forests:

The BMP, CRP and BSF are combing the entire area and have unleashed a reign of terror. They are killing, torturing, plundering, destroying the crops in the field. It’s inhuman. They’ve devoured all the poultry and goats. Smashed the ploughs. Destroyed whatever few possessions there were. Pots and pans, huts all razed to the ground. The homeless adivasis have been driven to shelter in the forest. They have no rice, no salt. No clothes. They are hiding in the hills and forest caves. Families are split up, lost. No one knows where anyone is. (45)

Gohuman Bibi sensing the opportunity in these situations appeared to the people of Rata like a goddess. ‘She told them, ‘We’ll get you new clothes and take you to Kolkata to work in the brick kilns. You’ll work hard, eat well make money. Come, come!’ (47). Many young girls fall prey to Gohuman. Sanichari resisted all through her life to go to Kolkata and work there but as fate would have it, ‘Sanichari
voluntarily gave herself up to Gohuman’s fangs’ (42). Sanichari was by then a grown woman of eighteen.

Gohuman Bibi took the girls in a train to Howrah. From there they took a bus to Barasat. She finally handed over the girls to Rahamat Sardar who was the owner of ‘Taraknath’- brand brick kiln. The brick kiln was surrounded by high walls like a jail. There were pucca houses for Rahamat and his goons. A row of pigsties with walls of palm leaf thatched with coconut leaves for the working girls. There was a single tube well for three hundred people.

As soon as the girls reached there, they were asked to register their names and address. They were to work like animals and will be paid little. Rahamat further added ‘After working here for nine months you’ll realize you were better off with the BMP’. Sanichari and the other girls were shocked and terrified hearing the announcements. Sanichari retorted ‘We won’t work here. Send us back.’ Sanichari’s life in hell started the moment she resisted. Rahamat grabbed Sanichari by the hand, saying, ‘Come, share some meat curry with me. You’re just my type. Spunky girls like you are more fun’. (50)

Rahamat made Sanichari his mistress. He fed her and dressed her well but at the end of the day he would ‘tear into her ruthlessly’. Sanichari was kept well but the girls like Josmina, Lungri, Jhini, Parai, Phulmani and others faced the worst. They were made to work all day and paid merely fifteen rupees per week. The rest of the money was kept as chapaiya with the malik, which was to be given when they will return home. With those paltry fifteen rupees, they bought their rice, salt and other things. And ‘At the end of the day, when you’re too tired to keep your eyes open, the
head mastan will call out your name in the daily auction. Today you go to him, tomorrow the driver, the day after the munshi’. (51)

They did not get any holidays for festivals like pujas and Holi. But the festival of Holi was like nightmare for them. ‘The malik’s friends arrive in hordes from Kolkata. They force liquor down your throat till you pass out. Pull off your clothes. What happens next only your body knows’. (51)

Sanichari would curse and spit at Gohuman when she saw her:

Gohuman would say, ‘I was once reja like you.’

‘Thuu! Thuu! Thuu!’

‘Now I do this kind of work.’

‘You’ve turned into a snake.’

‘Thuu! Thuu! Thuu!’

‘Who’s to blame for all this? Who?’ (51)

Eventually Sanichari became pregnant and started throwing up. Rahamat was no more interested in her. He at once ordered her to start work as reja. Start lugging bricks and get paid. Sanichari was lost in the oblivion. She was now bearing Rahamat’s child. She knew that her village would not accept her for bearing a diku’s child. Tribal people consider it as a great sin to get pregnant from people other than their tribes. There is no repentance for it and people will make her an outcast.
Suddenly one day the brick kiln was shut down. Nobody was given the *chapaiya* money. Rahamat just handed them a new janta sari and a train ticket:

Sanichari too wore a new sari and, clutching a ticket, climbed on to the truck. All the other girls had also been abused, but she was the only one returning with a child in her womb. Gohuman had given the others pills. (52)

When Sanichari returned to her village, she was not accepted by the villagers for carrying *diku*’s child. Though repentance rites were held, still she remained an outcast. Her child was born and she was worried about the future of the baby. Her child will too remain an outcast for life. According to the *khawasin* custom such boys can only get married with girls having similar parentage. Sanichari accepted her fate. She was an outcast now. ‘She cooked separately, ate alone’ (54).

At the end of the story, Sanichari had her share of realization of the true face of the world where she and her likes live in. While talking with Hiralal she says:

‘Gohuman Bibi too is not the real culprit. You didn’t know that. But I’ve realized it.’

‘Then who is, Sanichari? Who?’

‘Everything around you, ev-er-y-thing.’ Sanichari stretched out her arms to include the world around her, standing stock still. (54-55)

It was not Sanichari’s fault that she was raped and got impregnated. It was not her fault to fall prey to Gohuman Bibi. It was not her fault to go to Kolkata and work at brick kilns, as she was forced by the situations and hunger of the body. Still she lived
a life of an outcast and she would remain so throughout her life. Her only fault was that she was a woman! The author too bashes the system and the society at the end of the story:

I know Sanichari is showing us who the real culprits are. I also know she’s waiting.

But I do not know how long she’ll have to wait. Her story is not over. As long as people like Rahmat unabashedly run brick kilns, as long as Go humans entice girls like Sanichari, till our motherland can provide basic food and clothing to girls like her, the freeze shot of Sanichari pointing her finger at the accused will remain. (55)

Sanichari and the other girls were objectified to the extent that they were auctioned daily. They had to endure rape and torture which becomes inevitable for them in their daily struggle for survival. Their body becomes the site of sexual innuendos and savagery, and the accomplicity of the state machinery makes the story grimmer. Sanichari at the end remains tortured, traumatized and ostracized. Her experiences do not demean the stature of her subjectivity rather her endurance makes her subjectivity strong enough to identify the real evils of the society. Mahasweta Devi makes her the key to awaken the mainstream who are oblivious about the facts that to what extent the girls like Sanichari has to endure to survive in this society.

"The Fairytale of Rajbasha" is yet another tale where similar fate of the protagonist is depicted. In the story Sarjom Purti getting married with her beloved Josmina was indeed a fairytale for him. They were deeply in love. Sarjom borrowed
money from Nandlal by putting his thumb impression on a blank sheet of paper for paying the bride price. They were married with a big feast and great celebrations.

After their marriage Sarjom and Josmina worked hard to live happily. Josmina gave birth to a son, whom they named Masidas. Sarjom laboured on the land of Nandlal to repay his debt. Nandlal never asked for money. They were very happy. It was indeed a fairytale setting for them.

But the fairytale had its grim side too. The rains stopped one day. The Koyena River started drying up. People were starving and dying. They planted paddy on the dry land but the harvest time was still months away. It was a time like this when Nandlal like a slithered snake gave a visit to Sarjom’s hut.

Nandlal was a rich money lender. ‘He had two fine houses in the districts of Monoharpur and Raikera. And two wives in those two houses’ (59). He was also a dalaal, who is involved in human trafficking. ‘Nandlal would tour the distant villages to find out about Kolhanis, Rautias, Harijans and Hos’ (59). He would lure them to come with him in promise of good jobs. Sardar Malkan Sing, a government officer was the leader of the racket. Malkhan Sing gave Nandlal twenty thousand rupees in cash and ordered him:

Send the maal to Punjab—one hundred, all handpicked—and you’ll get the rest of your dues—twenty thousand more in cash. I’ll see to it that you make forty thousand a year. But make sure the goods are fresh and sturdy, so that my money doesn’t go down in drain. (60)
In search of those necessary *maals*, Nandlal came to Sarjom's hut. Sarjom was not in the hut when Nandlal visited. He asked Josmina to tell Sarjom to meet him so that he can give him the details about a good job. Sarjom goes to meet Nandlal. Nandlal lures him with the offer of good job in those hard times:

‘An excellent job. Big farmers. Plenty to eat. Work for a short period. The two of you will get, say, about four hundred a month. Enough clothes. Work for a year and at the end of it—*baap re baap*! You'll come back with almost five thousand bucks! Sit at home and enjoy!’ (62)

Nandlal further advised them not to utter about this job to anyone. Sarjom discussed this with his wife, Josmina, and agreed to go with Nandlal to Punjab. ‘Come, Josmina, let's go. We'll take the train and reach in jiffy. Earn pots of money’ (63). They took a train from Monoharpur to Tatanagar and from there they boarded Amritsar Mail to go to Punjab.

Nandlal would get hundred or hundred and fifty rupees per coolie supplied to the *maliks* of Punjab. Malkhan Singh, who was the chief contractor, would get two hundred to three hundred rupees per coolie. It was a big racket with big money involved. The government's minimum wage for harvesting given to per coolie was Rs. 17.55, but these coolies who were brought from other states would only get Rs. 10.08. For threshing wheat was Rs. 13, but these coolies would get Rs. 11.12. For sowing, harvesting and threshing paddy was Rs. 10.30, but these coolies would get no more than Rs. 8.20. But again they were not given that too. The *maliks* cheated them and are kept as bonded labours and ‘Well—endowed, attractive women like Josmina
are added bonus. There was a popular saying ‘Punjab ke kishan, adarsh kishan!’ (65), and the prosperity of those adarsh kishans were due to these dark skinned people.

Nandlal sold Sarjom and Josmina for four hundred rupees to Niranjan Singh from Haripur village of Ferozepur district. They were taken to Niranjan’s house by jeep. Niranjan had a big house spread over ten kathas of land. ‘He had an electric irrigation pump, a tractor. A washing machine at home. This and other gadgets were all phorrain’. (66)

Sarjom and Josmina were made to live in a tiny room which Niranjan’s man Harchand locks from outside when they were not working. ‘It was his job to keep the buffaloes, cows and bonded labour under lock and key’ (68). Both Sarjom and Josmina were forced to work 16 to 18 hours a day with little or no wages. They were devastated. They planned to escape but they didn’t know anything about the place.

Sarjom was made to work in the field. Josmina was made to work at Niranjan’s house from morning till noon, then in the field. On the very first day ‘After cleaning the house, Josmina washed four buckets of clothes. Why use the phorrain washing machine if cheap labour is in abundant supply. Niranjan said, ‘Look! So many kinds of soap and so many brooms! We have an efficient system’ (68). After good days of work she was provided with roti and sabji. ‘Niranjan said, ‘We give rotis plus vegetables. We have an efficient system’ (68). At afternoon she was made to work in the sugarcane field. At the field there was a hut. Harchand told her, ‘You can have your lunch in that room. Put your son to sleep there and get to work’. (69)
Sarjom was nowhere to be seen in the field where Josmina worked. She worked on the field with few other local labourers. A local woman labourer Surinder, warns Josmina of the Niranjan and the hut, where ‘The malik uses it for all sorts of wickedness’ (69):

A few days later, the malik came to the hut and stripped Josmina naked. Baby Masidas watched in fear as his mother was abused. ‘Arrey, this hut is here just for this—ha ha ha. We have an efficient system. Come on, put on your clothes. Seen how virile I am?’ (69)

At night while sleeping, she could not face Sarjom. And Sarjom ‘with all his manhood and deep love for Josmina, lay dumb, enraged by the futility and helplessness of the protest smouldering within’ (69). Lying helpless they again planned to escape when opportunity provides:

Niranjan Sing came the next day and the next. Gradually, Josmina turned into a ghost-ridden presence. She would get up at four in the morning and put on the salwar-kameez. Then she would sweep the cowshed, the courtyard and the house. Wash all the clothes and leave for the sugarcane fields. At tiffin time she would surrender her body to Niranjan and work in the fields again. When she got back, she would sweep the room and cowshed and work like a machine till eight at night.

She no longer said, ‘Come on, let’s leave.’ (70)

Sukharam, a fellow labourer of Sarjom agreed to help him escape from the place. But by this time Josmina was bearing Niranjan’s child in her womb. She could
not go to her community with an illegitimate child. ‘How can I go? I bear a diku’s child they’ll make us outcasts. Forget me. Get married again’. (71)

Niranjan Singh got worried when he came to know that Josmina was pregnant, so he got her aborted the foetus. Sarjom and Josmina escaped from Niranjan with the help of Sukharam. They even didn’t take their dues of four month. But as fate would have it they landed on the hand of Kamal Singh, another adarsh kishan of Punjab:

Sarjom got a grey pair of jeans and a green T-shirt and Josmina got a salwar-kameez. The same work-routine, the same everything. This time they were not locked up at night and Kamal Singh took Josmina away at nine every evening.

‘Why shouldn’t I? Did Niranjan spare you, you wild junglee female? Don’t pretend to be so virginal!’ (73)

Again they ran away from that place after a month, but they were caught by Pritam Singh of Kosa village. Sarjom agreed to work for him too with a condition that he should not touch his wife. Pritam Singh replied:

‘Of course not, your wife is like a mother, a sister to me.’

But after a few days Pritam started sending for the mother-and-sister like Josmina.

So they ran away. (73)

They did not have money for the train to go home, so they had to work under Sardar Gyan Singh. But,
There was nothing phorrain about Gyan Singh. He was every inch an Indian. Dragging Josmina away, he poured liquor down her throat and told his cohorts, ‘You can have her one by one.’ (76)

Again they ran away from that place with the help of another Sukharam. In the next episode of the fairytale, they took shelter under Sarban Singh. He was a widower and lived alone. His son lived in another town. Sarban Singh fed them well and never misbehaved with Josmina:

Then after a month, normalcy was restored. Because Sarban’s son, the younger sardar Dileep Singh, a ‘phorrain-returned; contractor, sauntered to the sugarcane field, grabbed Josmina and got into the act. (77)

Sarban Singh was ashamed when he came to know about it. He released them and sent them in his truck to the station, so that they can go home.

They returned to their village. Everything became normal for them. Life was again refreshing as before. Josmina thought their bad times are over. But for the girls like Josmina fate is never kind. Her happiness was only for two months. Then ‘Josmina vomited’ (79):

‘No, it was not Sarjom’s child. No bleeding for two months. Two months ago that young sardar... in the sugarcane field... Josmina had thought everything would turn out all right... but it did not... (79)
She decided not to tell about this to Sarjom. She knew if the community comes to
know then Sarjom and her son too would be ostracized. Fearing all this Josmina
drowns herself in the river Koyena.

Mahasweta Devi, while talking in a session at the Jaipur Literary Festival
(January 2013) said, ‘The right to dream should be made a fundamental right.’ She
condemned middle-class morality, saying she found it "a sham" because of its
tendency to "objectify and suppress" things. Devi knew better than anyone that for the
people like Josminas, even dream is a luxury. They cannot afford to dream when all
the state machinery turn their eyes when they sight them and people like Niranjans
continue to thrive with the help of the same machinery. The Josminas has nothing of
their own, no identity, and no existence nothing for people like Niranjans ‘bought it
all up, everything. Everything that belong to the Josminas’ (72):

... [The Fairytale of Rajbasha] deconstruct the structure of a fairy tale and
juxtapose the human capacity to dream against the harshness of reality in
which every dream is scorched. The encatastrophic ending, so essential to the
traditional fairytale is reversed. The human capacity to construct a private little
world of dreams, to attempt to insulate it against infiltration and to find in the
dreams a strategy for survival are amaginly portrayed. The ongoing faith of a
trapped human being reveals a degree of stubborn persistence. They are socio-
cultural fairytales in which human vulnerability is also a factor. (Jain 129)

Josmina presents an interesting case of love and endurance for the people about whom
she cares. She endures throughout till the end but only for her love for Sarjom, she
sacrifices her life. Mahasweta Devi by reversing the traditional structure of fairytale

59
propels the mind of the readers to ponder about the true facets of India. Josmina’s endurance ends with her submission to that ‘Independent India’, which remains a farfetched dream, a fairytale for the marginalized people like Josmina and Sarjom. It remains true to the fact that the female subjectivity dwells upon the patriarchal oppression of the society, which of course Devi wants to change through her portrayal of these characters.

The stories discussed are inspired by real events. But the story ‘Fairytale of Rajbhasa’ has a direct link with the testimonials that Devi recorded of the victims.

Testimonial (1)

Loknath Harijan (25), his wife Sombari (20) and their child from the village of Jorobori, District Ranchi, Bano Thana, were sold to Karnal Singh of Johanara Basti village of Punjab by the village middleman Demo Chik. Karnal Singh promised to pay Rs 100 and Rs 30 to Loknath and Sombari respectively, every month. And to provide for their meals. Loknath used to work in the cattle sheds from four to eight in the morning. And then, till eight at night, he would work in the fields, farming wheat. Sombari used to start work at four in the morning, sweeping and swabbing the cattle shed and the house, washing utensils, washing clothes, and then work in the sugarcane fields. Sombari was also raped by Karnal, everyday. And was forced to undergo an abortion when she conceived. Loknath and Sombari left this job after nine months. At the time, instead of the Rs 1170 which they have earned over this period, they were paid only Rs 500. (107-8)
Testimonial (2)

Phagu Shahu, a middleman from Harani village, Bano Thana, sold Gurumohan Rautia (28), his wife Ratni (22), and their three children to Sardar Niranjan Singh of Haripur village, in the Firozepur district of Punjab, for Rs 400. Niranjan owned an electric pump, a washing machine and a tractor. Guru was promised Rs 80 per month and Ratni, Rs 40. Just as the instance cited above, this couple too worked for 16-18 hours every day. Ratni and her children would work in the sugarcane fields. There, in the small hut in the middle, supposedly meant for keeping a watch over the crops, Niranjan, along with his other male relatives and friends, used to rape Ratni every day, even as her children looked on. Within four months Ratni was forced to undergo an abortion. Assisted by the local farm workers, under cover of night, Guru and Ratni managed to escape. Till then, they had not received a single rupee by way of pay. After this, they sought employment under Karnal Singh of Johaner Basti. Here too, they worked for the same 16-18 hour stretch and Ratni continued to be raped, this time by Karnal. But where could they run to, with their three children? Guru and Ratni had no choice but to endure every hardship. After a month, they ran away. To Sardar Preetam Singh, in Kosa village. Once again, they worked for 16-18 hours every day and Guru’s wife was raped continually. After 12 days, they sought work at Hoshiarpur, from Sardar Gyan Singh. And remained in his employ for four months and were exploited in an identical manner. Ratni continued to be raped. Then they moved to Badala village, in Kapurtala and began to work for Sardar Sarban Singh. He too made them work mercilessly, although he never laid a finger on
Ratni, and provided the entire family with plenty to eat. A month later, one of Sarban's relatives, a young Sardar, raped Ratni. Collecting a hundred and fifty rupees from Sarban, Guru and Ratni left home. (108)

All the three protagonists of the stories discussed above are tribal women, thus they are marginalized in multiple levels. In context of the Indian hierarchical social set up these women find their positions at the base of it. Firstly as they are tribals they are treated as ‘other’ by the mainstream society; secondly they are born as woman in this staunch patriarchal set up of the upper caste mainstream religious people where women are treated as under privileged and thirdly they are outcast or the marginalized within the marginalized. Through these stories Mahasweta Devi unmask the true face of India, the nation where slave trade and flesh business under the superficial democratic society of India, and clearly indicates the plight of these women who usually have no one to turn to, nothing to look forward to, and have only a few to lend them a voice—women who are regarded as sub-human and treated as commodities both without and within their own communities.

The situations depicted by Mahasweta Devi in the stories are extremely grim where the protagonists undergo extreme pain and trauma. The social system and the state fail to give them justice, rather these becomes tools to their exploitation, which makes the protagonists all the more vulnerable. Rape becomes inevitable fact for these women and a common phenomenon in their daily life. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak while talking about Devi's another story “Breast-Giver”, characterizes as ‘the parable of India after colonization’ (qtd. in Breast Stories 77) and her character Douloti in “Douloti the Bountiful” a bonded prostitute who dies of deadly venereal
disease, as ‘true for the rest of India...Doulotis bleeding, rotting carcass covers the entire Indian peninsula’ (qtd. in Imaginary Maps xiii-xiv). In the same way these stories too become a study of national allegory. The Dhoulis, Sancharis and Josminas too ‘cover the entire Indian peninsula.’ In his review of the book Outcast, M. Asaduddin says:

It is common knowledge that in the caste-based and in some cases highly communalized—even criminalized—national politics, crimes against the lower castes and the tribals often go unpunished. By locating these raped women in the structures of oppression, often facilitated by the state, rather than in the context of heterosexual, “romantic” aberrations, Devi has reconstituted the female subject of rape in a textual space which, though not overtly feminist, yet becomes the site for negotiations of the rights of women and women’s subjectivity. (qtd. in Sen 239)

Time and again Devi has denied calling herself a feminist but her writings display wide forays where she fights for the rights of the women. According to her, whatever be the society women are more exploited and marginalized because of the existing social values and gender politics. She makes it clear that the women of India are being treated as sub-human and in independent India women are far from independence. Their voices are unheard and laws are compromised when a crime is committed against women.

Simone De Beauvoir in her Introduction to the famous treatise The Second Sex writes ‘One wonders if women still exist, if they will always exist, whether or not it is desirable that they should, what place they occupy in this world, what their place should be’ (Marxists.org). Yes their existence has been in danger and is continuing to
be in danger. We may cite examples of few women who made to the top but still it is a stark truth that most of the women are finding it hard to make their own identity; to make their existence felt to the world around. Rape and sexual abuse has become a part of the daily phenomenon. While women are raped in the home, in the street in the broad daylight; we still continue to live in this so called ‘bhadralok’ society.

Though Mahasweta Devi sometimes creates stoic characters who endure pain, trauma and torture throughout, like in the stories discussed here, her language itself is the language of resistance. When the whole system surrounding is against the people, one cannot do much to resist, except to endure. She remains true to the facts devoid of any fictionality, which itself becomes resistive against the exploitative system in which we live in. Anuradha Ghosh writes:

...Devi’s work is not the cry of anguish and pain but the zeal for resistance, an indomitable urge that wills her characters to fight on in spite of all odds. It is this hope in the law of change, the hope in humanity, reason and justice that creates a unique space for her in the world of literature. Her work as a writer is organically linked to her experience as an activist and writing therefore becomes both a integrating worlds of the Bashais, the Doppdis, the Budhans, the Bratis and the Shomus that are far apart from the author’s own, and at the same time, breaking through the silence to articulate the vision of an alternative through the language of resistance. (Ghosh 121)

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2 Literally 'gentleman', 'well-mannered person'. Bhadralok is a Bengali term used to denote new class of 'gentle folk' who arose during colonial times in Bengal. It is still used to indicate members of the upper middle and middle classes of Bengal.
Since the condition of female in India is quite different from other developed countries, the subjectivity of Indian female need to be placed in different context related to Indian patriarchal system. It is universal that the Indian female are suppressed or oppressed within the boundary of domestic as well as in the societal structure where Indian female has no right to register any protest or to bring their sufferings in the consideration of patriarchy. In this patriarchal structure Indian female is a non-entity, identity less, a mere creature that remains in its own web of torture and suppression, in which even most of the times women themselves are accomplice of the male counterpart (Gohuman Bibi in ‘Sanichari’ and Misrilal’s mother in ‘Dhouli’) and thus women are too become a vehicle for the suppression of this non-entity and identity less creature. Obviously in this circumstance women have lost their voice and a sudden paroxysm is required to bring them out of their shell to register an identity through which the female subjectivity is emerged through their ordeals. In this process of emergence of female subjectivity the endurance plays a significant role to voice their protests silently which sometime the patriarchal structure takes it wrongly and considers their silence as a form of subjugation, whereas through their silence women actually try to form an identity and nurture their subjectivity as a whole organism beyond the recognizance of male psyche.
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