Injury
Chapter 3

Injury

I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation.

- Mahasweta Devi (qtd. in Kaul 33)

Violence against women is the most pervasive human rights violation in the world today. Opening the door on the subject of violence against the world’s females is like standing at the threshold of an immense dark chamber vibrating with collective anguish, but with the sounds of protest throttled back to a murmur. Where there should be outrage aimed at an intolerable status quo, there is instead denial, and the largely passive acceptance of ‘the way things are’. Women all over the world face violence in one form or the other with varying degrees ranging from battering, assault, incest and rape worldwide to female circumcision in Africa, dowry deaths and female foeticide in India and militarisation in Philippines. Sexual and other physical tortures continue to be used by authoritarian regimes in prison and police custody.

In recent years there has been an alarming rise in the atrocities against women in India. From womb to tomb, they face increasingly violent forms of gender bias. As per the statistics given by L.R. Madhav Rao, “In India every 26 minutes a woman is molested; every 34 minutes a rape takes place; every 42 minutes a sexual harassment incident occurs; every 43 minutes a woman is kidnapped and every 93 minutes a woman is burnt to death over dowry” (194).

Data made available by the State Crime Records Bureau (SCRB), Tamil Nadu, on the period between 2005 and October 2007 and the cases recorded under the
various sections of the Indian Penal Code for "crimes against women" show that the safety of girls who survive to reach adulthood is not guaranteed.

**Table 1**

Cases of crimes against women registered for 2002-2007 (October)

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<td>Rape</td>
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<td>557</td>
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<td>783</td>
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<td>225</td>
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<td>294</td>
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Source: State Crime Records Bureau, Tamil Nadu. (qtd. in Venkat 17)

The annual Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum (WEF) released in 2007, ranked India 114 in a list of 128 countries (Rajalakshmi 6). There is a devastating decline in the status of women in terms of entitlements and opportunities in our country that has made great strides in economic growth and achievement. Something has gone horribly wrong, and the problem is still not on the political agenda of the mainstream political parties.

There has been an escalation of all forms of violence against women with the socially and economically vulnerable among them bearing the brunt. A report released in February 2007 by the centre for Human Rights and Global Justice along with Human Rights Watch said, "India had failed to uphold its international legal obligations to ensure the fundamental human rights of Dalits." (Bavadam 12). The
one hundred and thirteen pages report, entitled “Hidden Apartheid: Caste
Discrimination against India’s Untouchables”, is even more hard-hitting when it
comes to the plight of Dalit women. It charges that India has failed to address the
multiple forms of discrimination faced by Dalit women. They must contend with
threats to their personal security, including trafficking and sexual violence. In some
States in India, Dalit women are forced into prostitution and are ultimately auctioned
off to urban brothels. This puts them at particular risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

Tribal women are equally oppressed on several levels. First, because they are
women in a patriarchal and patrilineal society. Women are also oppressed because
they belong to a group considered inferior because of its ethnic or caste position:

For most non-tribals in the area [Santhal Parganas], tribals are
subhuman creatures, whose land is to be usurped, whose
possessions are to be looted, who can with impunity be laughed at
and pushed aside. Tribal women are oppressed because as women
they are used by those who have the power to oppress their people.
Rape, torture, and forced prostitution are the means landowners
and police employ to humiliate, punish, and establish control over
an entire community which is economically and materially
dependent. (Radha Kumar 139)

It is important to note that historically for most ‘adivasis’ pre-marital sex and
remarriage are sociably acceptable; however, sex with non-‘adivasis’ is considered
taboo. The rape and sexual exploitation of ‘adivasi’ women by non-‘adivasi’ men are
a violation and humiliation for the entire social group. The rape of ‘adivasi’ women
by non-‘adivasi’ men can also be seen as an attempt to control female sexuality.

Radha Kumar writes:
For non-tribals, the conflict between this taboo and the open sexuality of tribal women is an explosive one. The freedom of tribal women is a threat to diku morality—be it Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Unlike diku women, Santhali women are not ashamed of being women and not afraid of their sexuality. The dikus hate this freedom and say that they are "loose women." They rape Santhal women to force them into fear, shame and subjugation. They rape to show their hatred and contempt for tribal society. (140)

Mahasweta Devi has written about the oppressed in the feudal system and the oppressed in the capitalistic system which retains still the essence of the feudal exploitative modes. Whatever be the system, it is woman who is sacrificed on the altar of male interests and Mahasweta Devi has powerfully portrayed the travails of women in these systems. Whether it is north or south, the situation of the oppressed in the whole of India and violence meted out to women remains the same. As Simone de Beauvoir condemns in *The Second Sex*, woman is invariably considered as a sex symbol—a mere womb and ovary. Economic exploitation, sexual oppression and state violence—all the three put together make the lives of women miserable and torturous.

This scenario can be found simultaneously in the contemporary history and in the writings of Mahasweta Devi. One of her Palamu novellas, "Douloti the Bountiful" establishes a parallel between the exploitation of 'adivasi' men who become bonded-labourers of the rich upper-caste landowners and the sexual exploitation of 'adivasi' women who are used and abused because they are poor who own nothing: neither the means of their livelihood nor their own bodies. "Douloti the Bountiful", published in a collection of three stories entitled *Imaginary Maps*, serves both as a doorway to the history and present situation of the tribals of North-East India and as a lens to focus
the image on the ‘accomplishments’ of Independence, half-a-century later. In the introduction to *Imaginary Maps* Mahasweta Devi says:

In Hyderabad, there is a special area where buyers from the Middle East buy women in the name of marriage. Parents flock there because they are so poor, they cannot give their daughters food and clothing. The basic reason is poverty....As long as eighty percent of the Indian population lives below poverty lines, this cannot stop. Decolonization has not reached the poor. This is why these things happen. Women are just merchandise, commodities. (xx)

In other words, one type of oppression, in this case material oppression, leads to and sustain another, sexual oppression; in the case of women, one oppression carries the weight of another. Women are, to use Gayatri Spivak’s terms, the super-dominated and the super-exploited.

“Douloti” opens in the drought-stricken tribal area situated in the Palamu district. Quite ironically Douloti, a poor woman, and the arid region have alike been termed ‘bountiful’ in the title. The local linguistic formulation of ‘Douloti’ connotes ‘Doulot’ meaning wealth. It is a world full of predators hunting for women’s bodies. It foregrounds the toil of bonded untouchables as well as the gruel of merchandised and marketable girls. The text brings to surface the socio-religious issues related to caste-ridden discriminations and illiterate electorate, bribing and bargaining Brahmins and boozy brothel houses. In the centre of this [geo] graphic heart of darkness, Mahasweta Devi smoothly introduces the issue of gender-based discrimination. The impenetrable forest of loot and plunder mapped around economic as well as physical exploitation grows denser when body manipulation gets entangled with sexual exploitation and bonded prostitution.
“Douloti” thoroughly reads implications of more and diverse divisions of women, their work, their bodies, and their minds amid the regional corruption. It questions the placement of women and their gender in what Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha describe as “imaginative [geographies] to challenge the discourses of the nation that encode belonging and alienation” (51). As Ania Loomba puts, the story delineates “the third world women as guinea pigs who are subjected to dangerous and exploitative experiments” (172). The protagonist, Douloti, is forced to provide the cheapest labour for sex-trade and sex-industry within the specific postcolonial developments, which still have their roots in colonial legacies and their consequential multinational projects.

The story “Douloti” deals with the problems of wage earning and exploitation of women by referring to their visible as well as invisible labour. “Douloti” is not only mapped out as a piece of famine-stricken land but also as a female body. With women at the centre of the apparently abolished bonded labour system, “Douloti” expounds on the theme of selling of women in a heterosexual and predatory patriarchal capitalist system. From the very beginning, Douloti’s father, crook Nagesia, a ‘kamiya’ (bonded labourer) or free worker of Munabar Singh Chandela, the owner and moneylender of the village Seora, is forced to sell Douloti against cash. The transaction of women’s cheap sexual labour on the grounds of class and caste system merchandises their bodies into brothel houses. In the story, the deal materialised between Ganori Nagesia and Chandela sums up the facts and figures about the trade of human flesh in terms of usury and compound interest. Poverty rules the region where decolonisation has least prevented women from being treated as commodity. When a woman gets raped, the judiciary system does not support her because of the general consensus that only a woman with loose character gets raped.
The story, set in post-independent India, focuses on the plight of Ganori of the Nagesia tribe and his daughter Douloti. Ganori, has been nicknamed ‘crook’ Nagesia following an accident where he becomes crippled after having been forced by his master to carry an ox yoke on his shoulders, because the master’s young ox was eaten by a tiger in the forest on account of Ganori’s carelessness. While trying to pull the cart, Ganori falls on his face with the axle plunging into his back. After this Ganori Nagesia spends three months in Tehri hospital. When he comes out with his body broken and misshapen, he comes out as ‘crook’ Nagesia who is no longer equal to the bonded debt he owes to Munabar. The cruel and dangerous punishment literalises Ganori’s condition as a slave. From the moment he borrows three hundred rupees from the landlord Munabar Singh Chandela who “keeps Dusad, Ghasi, Nagesia, Munda, Lohar, Oraon, Bhyian, Chamar, Parhaia, all tribals as kamiya” (20), he becomes his slave for an indefinite period of time because of increasing interests and recurrent social and economic needs.

To become a ‘kamiya’ is, for the tribal, a “fate’s decree” (21); but the brute power and the systemic violence are not discounted, though. The narrator explains that Ganori becomes a bonded-servant after borrowing money from the landowner-moneylender, but Mahasweta Devi strongly suggests that although the direct cause of bondage is the loan, there is a complex system in place that perpetuates the exploitation; a system that has been in place for a very long time, “different names in different regions. The system is slavery, the marginal, the harijan, the tribal is its sacrifice” (61). Mahasweta Devi is critical of the government’s implication in the system but also of the blindness of the sociologists who comment on bonded-labour and blame the labourers and their primitive traditions for their indebtedness:
The sociologists travel around Palamu and write in their files, every sonavabitch is becoming a kamiya because of weddings–funerals– religious ceremonies. That the peasant is becoming the Kulak’s kamiya, this the sociologists avoid rather skilfully. These savants want government support. The government wants the Kulak’s support. Land-lender, this is new agri-capitalist caste. This caste is created by the independent government of India. The government wants the support of the Kulak and the agri-capitalist. (49)

In other words, the source of bonded-labour is inequality: “What will come of the gormen abolishing bonded-labour?” argues Douloti, “without land, without food, hunger will drive the people of this society to become kamiyas again” (72). And landlords, moneylenders, and government have a vested interest in keeping them poor. Ganori realises that even when laws are passed, the rich and the powerful such as Munabar can buy the law, the police and have government’s implicit support—Munabar has a son who is a government servant, a top officer of the district’s Lac Development Corporation. As Salmon Rushdie does in his novel on Indian independence, Midnight’s Children, Mahasweta Devi ironically uses the words “dream”, “fairy tale,” “story,” “yarn”; however, her irony is replete with anger at those who exploit the poverty-induced dreams. Moreover, her exposure of these dreams and myths is accompanied by a denunciation of the system of exploitation and the people who profit from it.

While Ganori Nagesia is in the hospital recovering from his accident, Paramananda, a Brahmin pays his debt with the landlord and releases him from bondage, though not from poverty, in exchange for Douloti whom he promises to
marry. Ganori accepts the exchange although he is suspicious, because no one in the village has ever heard of a Brahmin marrying a Nagesia. Some blame Douloti for having attracted the Brahmin and others like Munabar are fully aware of the scheme which Paramanand has pulled many times before. Going around the poverty-stricken villages and paying the debts of bonded-labourers, he has established a lucrative bonded labour trade of prostitutes:

It is a hegemonic nexus of power politics and caste or religion—a coercive force of metaphysical proportions over which the tribals have no power to exercise or resist. It is the postcolonial moment in the history of the world of tribals when the abstract privilege, greed and violence of the mainstream society could go to any lengths in perpetrating inhuman practices on the oppressed. (Chari 66)

Douloti, the newly found bond-slave who is barely thirteen years old is thrown by her master as a piece of meat in the flesh market of the market-town of Madhpura. Bonded slavery is transmitted from father to daughter: "Douloti has taken the yoke of crook’s bondslavery on her shoulders... She will repay the bondslavery loan as a beggar" (73). But unlike her father who pays with labour, Douloti pays with her body.

Douloti is thrown as a live sexual quarry to a pitiless animal, Latia Sahib, a typical postcolonial aphrodisiac-consuming elite of a contractor with an unending sexual urge for Harijan girls. He appropriates more than his money’s worth of sensual pleasure from the body of Douloti. He rapes her repeatedly every night and even while she faints, he keeps devouring her, making grunting noises like a pig. Later Douloti wonders if the man has a heart at all.

After Latia discards her, she is passed on to another contractor, a Singh Sahib for two years. Parallel to the sufferings of Douloti, Lights Out, a play by Manjula
Padmanaban presents the tragic spectacle of the daily rape of women watched by the residents of an apartment. Every night one can hear the unmistakable sound of a woman screaming for help and gradually the screamer grows exhausted, hiccupping to a halt, then starts again with renewed vigour as if a fresh assault is made. But all the residents quieten their conscience by arguing that the women are prostitutes, not decent women, hence need no help, even if they may be brutalised. This is how the public reacts to the intense suffering of the prostitutes. So the customers’ perversion is not an act of sexual passion but an act of violence and exhibition of power having women at his mercy.

Singh’s departure coincides with Paramanand Misra’s sudden death. The brothel now passes on to his son, who introduces new management policies. Unlike his ‘kind’ father, Baijnath Misra believes in making a fast buck. He compels each girl to take dozens of customers every night—insensitive to what such an overloading would do to them. He is a better economist and sees that it is more profitable to reduce their rates and take more customers than to have a fewer customers paying more money. Of course, the girls turn into old, rickety things very fast, but then, thanks to a good drought, the ‘older cows’ get easily replaced.

When Douloti enters the brothel, Rampiyari, the housekeeper and manager of the brothel warns her, “They’ll eat the fruit of your womb” (59). This warning carries several layers of meanings. Apart from the obvious and crude sexual one, it suggests the violation of abortion, the forced prostitution of daughters, and the exploitation and destitution of the sons. At another level where land and woman are more intimately linked, it alludes to the appropriation of ‘adivasi’ land by the same people who sexually exploit the women. Both before and after independence, a certain number of legal acts were passed in order to protect tribal lands from alienation (for example,
the Estate Acquisition Act of 1954 and the Act of 1971). The governments, however, relaxed restrictions whenever certain lands were required, for example for coal mining or dam building. Moreover, non-‘adivasi’ men encroach the tribal land through trickery, forgery, bribery, fraud, coercion, influence, as well as marriage to bypass the legal complications of acquiring tribal land. In fact, it has been a common practice to marry ‘adivasi’ women as a means of taking over traditional ‘adivasi’ land. At times they are abducted and forced into these marriages.

Rampiyari’s song of bonded-prostitutes reinforces the association between ‘adivasi’ women and land, possessions to be taken away and used at will for profit:

These are Paramanand’s kamiyas
Douloti and Reoti and Somni
The boss has turned them into land
The boss plows and plows their land and raises the crop
They are all Paramanand’s kamiyas
They are all some people’s maat. (59)

Rampiyari’s painful song raises several interesting points. First, this type of sexual exploitation occurs across India, the women’s names only change, as does the name given to bonded-labour (‘Kamiya’ or ‘Seokia’ or ‘Maat’), but not the type of exploiter or exploitation. Rampiyari reveals again a parallel between sexual exploitation and agricultural exploitation: the women are made into land; they are property or possession that can be used at will.

The violence suggests by the words “plows and plows” is shocking and alludes both to the rape of women and to the appropriation and cultivation of the land by ‘dikus’. The tribal lands were traditionally considered communal lands meaning lands that belonged to a community rather than to individuals, and their produce and
resources were used and shared by the community that had cleared and cultivated it. J.C. Jha writes: “Tribals believed that those who cleared the forest were entitled to cultivate the land and their descendants had a permanent right to it. The control over the village land rested with the whole village” (80).

Rampiyari also implies that while the exploitation of the agricultural bonded-labourers (who work without remuneration day after day, year after year, often across generations, to reimburse a debt incurred to pay for a funeral, a wedding, and, more important, food to survive) is recognised, that of the ‘kamiya’-whores is not:

Field work, digging soil, cutting wells is work
This one doesn’t do it, that one doesn’t do it,

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

The other one doesn’t do it. (59)

With these words, Mahasweta Devi points to a wider web of complicity than that of the landlord-money lenders, government and police. Douloti’s father sells her to pay his debt despite the fact that he feels uneasy about the transaction. Rampiyari ridicules the supposed ignorance and naivete of the fathers who send their daughters with unknown men supposedly with altruistic and progressive intentions: “Your fathers! They blow me away. The animal says marriage, he’ll marry a Dusad, Dhobi, Chamar, Parhaiya girl? Brahmans? Who burn harijans? They catch you to make you a Kamiya” (59). In the case of Somni, a fellow-prostitute her husband sends her to the brothel to pay his debt. In both situations, women are used to pay debts incurred by men.

Jayanta Mahapatra’s poem “Hunger” depicts a similar situation where a fisherman in order to satisfy his hunger invites a stranger to enjoy his fifteen year old daughter. The protagonist recalls the incident in the following words:
I heard him say: my daughter, she’s just turned fifteen,

For her, I’ll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine.
The sky fell on me and a father’s exhausted wile.
Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber. (qtd. in Bijay Kumar Das 31)

Thomas Hardy’s famous scene of the drunken Michael Henchard selling his wife and “infant daughter for five guineas at a country fair in The Mayor of Casterbridge is severely criticised by Elaine Showalter, “Henchard sells not only his wife but his child, a child who can only be female. Patricrchal societies do not readily sell their sons, but their daughters are all for sale sooner or later…. Henchard is symbolically selling his entire share in the world of women” (qtd. in Das 146). This comment is applicable to Douloti’s father also.

The other men in the story either participate in the exploitation or stand by while it continues: Uncle Bono leaves Douloti in bondage; the doctor sends her to die in the streets; Prasad Mahato of the Harijan Association although he recognises the desperate need of bonded-prostitutes will not fight for their freedom; Father Bomfuller’s support consists in a survey of the incidence of bonded labour which will end up in a file; and Mohan Srivastava, the schoolmaster, “with all his sympathy for harijan and tribal kamiya-seokias” (88), maintains his faith in the government and the police, and does nothing to save Douloti. “The social system that makes Crook Nagesia a kamiya is made by men. Therefore, do Douloti, Somni, Raoti, have to quench the hunger of male flesh. Otherwise, Paramananda does not get money” (62).

To talk of Douloti is also to talk of numerous other characters both high and low. This novella contains almost an equal number of identifiable characters, besides
many unnamed choral figures, whose narratives intersect Douloti’s. Each such character has a narrative of his or her own; it exists in clear outlines so that the reader can easily fill in the details. For example, Somni who repays by her earning the loan her husband has taken in the village is trapped in the brothel. She cannot go back home because she has already borne Latia Sahib three sons. They are beggars, and she has no money. She is allowed to leave the brothel when she is a mere skeleton, and a deranged one at that and by that time, she has lost her beggar-sons, too.

Douloti is certainly important in her own right, important as a tragically blighted life, but she is even more important as the site on which a whole variety of ‘the Great Indian Meaning’—mythological, historical, socio-cultural, class, casteist and gender-converges as a set of operative, oppressive forces. It is in their astonishing range that these forces turn “Douloti” into a national allegory or rather an elaborate charge sheet against the nation.

A number of the high characters in “Douloti” openly, brazenly project themselves as affiliated to gods. They include Paramanand Misra alias Sankatnarayan; the priest Hanuman Misra, Paramanand’s assistant, the bawd Rampiyari, and another brothel-owner named Kishanji. Munavar—which in Persian means the bright, the dazzling - calls himself a cream-white creation of God. This band of predators flaunt their divine pedigree, projecting the predicament of the ‘bandhuas’ as something divinely ordained, ordained right at the moment of their birth.

Prior to Independence, the local prince fleeced village harijans to indulge in gambling. Postcolonial India has seen the abolition of princely regimes but has ironically multiplied the number of unofficial, uncrowned princes, including the District Collector and local police. Internal colonisers have been flourishing all alc The Great Indians are starkly imaged in Munavar, as he yokes Ganori to his cart,
flourishing the whip. Like Munavar, the Misra brothel-owners keep indiscriminately loading upon the bodies of their prostitutes customer after customer, until the girls become mere wrecks or die. The image they use for the girls is ‘lorries’ or ‘trucks’. They must be loaded to the full, must keep plying non-stop, must ply as fast as they can.

It is not that things have not changed since 1947, only exploitation as a system has not faced any extensive, sustained threat. If anything, it has grown more and more sophisticated and repressive. In the 1962 elections, Munavar names his candidate and he wins. In the next elections he has raised a private army of goons for election duty. In the town during the 1960s, Paramanand Misra does not altogether neglect the health of his ‘bandhua’ randis, but his successor, during the next decade treats them as trucks deserving no maintenance simply because it is better to discard the creaking ones and obtain new ones.

During the 1960s Kishanji is benevolent to his ‘fleet’ of prostitutes but in the 1970s he takes to selling off women and children in markets far away the new line involves fewer hassles. In a parallel development, the state-owned collieries stop recruiting regular labour and instead entrust the task of supplying labour to contractors who treat the workers as ‘bandhuas’ and maintain discipline with the help of professional goons. This history is the underbelly of the development story that passes for official postcolonial history.

Mahasweta Devi introduces over a dozen ‘bandhua randis’ at the Misra’s brothel. Each is similarly trapped here, and yet they are all distinct individual beings, each with her distinct past and in some cases at least, with a distinct set of aspirations. Kalawati dies in the brothel—because she is not allowed to recover from abortion by Latia Sahib. With her typical ironic humour, Mahasweta Devi says that Douloti is
luckier than Kalawati in that while she is bleeding following an abortion, the Indo-
China conflict keeps Latia Sahib busy on a different front. Somni's tragedy has
already been mentioned. Revti and Gohumani have equally poignant tales of their
own. Then, there is Jhalo with her black magic who bullies Rampiyari into sharing
her secret savings with the prostitutes. She is determined to see to it that unlike
herself and her 'bandhua' husband back in the village, their daughter does not
become a 'bandhua'. None of these prostitutes is capable of defying the structure of
exploitation. Even so, they are not identical either in their individual consciousness
or capacity for rebellion. Mahasweta Devi does not expect a revolution to begin in the
brothel, but she carefully makes us see that the victims are not mere types.

When Father Bomfuller, a missionary collecting facts about bonded labour for
submission to the Government of India, solicits the statements of 'bandhua randis' at
the Misra brothel, he is appalled to learn how an initial investment of three hundred
and fifty rupees has generated a profit of over forty thousand rupees to the Misras
without there being any prospect of freedom for Douloti. When the issue is being
discussed, the Gandhian Puran Chand recommends peaceful fasting to transform the
hearts of evildoers. When Bono asks him if he would have resorted to only such
fasting if the honour of his own female relatives were at stake, Puran Chand dismisses
the question saying that the women of his caste are never dishonoured. Mohan
Srivastava cannot shed his faith in the constitutionally elected governments. He hopes
that the governments would eradicate social evils.

The most crucial characters in the brothel scene are Prasad Mahato and Bono.
Prasad Mahato is a harijan himself, and his encounter with Douloti and other
'bandhua randis' alters him permanently. Realising the futility of peaceful
demonstrations and of rattling off appeals to government departments, he goes
underground and forms the Palamu Bonded Labour Liberation Front in 1971 with active support from the Naxalites. He is wanted by the police, and is of course involved in radical activities. He knows that although nothing can be changed by the laws alone, it is nevertheless important to fight for just laws. If the laws are just, then their radical action will be for their implementation, and thus look more credible.

Of all those present in the brothel scene, it is Prasad and Bono who feel so much for Douloti’s suffering. Bono understands the language of her fingers as they gently caress his calloused feet. Hardly any words are exchanged between them, but each understands the other. It is difficult to convey in words the impact of the poignant, mute interaction between Douloti and Bono. It is one of the most tragic, sheer lyrical and utterly unforgettable moments in world literature.

The story ends in August 15, 1975, and Douloti, born in 1947, now twenty seven years old, her body ploughed up for forty thousand rupees, is dying of venereal disease and hunger. Douloti, once very beautiful, is now used, exploited, plundered, wasted and abandoned. This bloody end is the sole reward she gets for fourteen years of merciless exploitation in the Misra’s brothel. The long term of labour has yielded over forty thousand rupees but all this money has been neatly expropriated by her owners. Even though Douloti is only in her mid-twenties, she looks like an emaciated, sick, old creature. She is discharged only when she cannot attract even one-rupee customers; she is dying, of course. The story duplicates Ganori Nagesia’s career in his daughter. Both are ‘bandhua’ slaves. His pointless release turns his daughter into a bonded prostitute. The system is illegal, but is practised in broad daylight and offers lavish returns to ‘bandhua’ owners.

The exhausted Douloti develops fever and red swelling all over the private parts with burning sensation in the passage, when she goes to the hospital. Robbed
and rejected at the Tohri hospital, she decides to go to her birth-place, Seora. Even before she reaches Seora, she is unable to walk any longer, vomits blood and falls “spread-eagled” (94) across the map of India drawn outside the Basic Primary School in Bira village of Tohri block. Douloti resembles the dancing girl in Tagore’s poem “Upagupta”, who once drunk with the wine of her youth, now struck with the black pestilence, body spotted with sores, is hurriedly driven away from the town. Douloti is discovered dead on the map of India by the people of the village and the school-teacher, Mohan Srivastava, who was preparing to hoist the national flag on the Independence day. She engulfs a patriotic spatial representation of Mother India:

Filling the entire peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies ‘bonded labour’ spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomitted up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India. (93)

This passage, echoing the morning after Douloti’s first rape where she lay “stretched out in pain and nakedness” (58), suggests the complete identification of the exploited ‘adivasi’ woman with India: she is all over India; she is India—meaning that the poor, exploited workers compose the majority of the people of India and that Independence is a lie for the vast majority of people in India or at the very least that it is meaningless to them. As Jennifer Wenzel comments, “Douloti’s final “act” is as terrifyingly spectacular as Dopdi challenging the military strategist” (149).

Most of the chief characters in this novella are quite ignorant of India—the free Independent nation. Even those few of the ‘bandhuas’ who do remember 1947,
remember it for the freedom it brought to their caste-superiors. Predictably enough, the upper-caste characters in “Douloti” are fully aware of 1947, the nation, and the new opportunities for profit that exist for them now, in post-1947 India. The novella does not grudge India or her upper castes and classes their independence but being about the prevalence of slavery in postcolonial India as it is, it is at pains to demonstrate that both the nation and independence have remained in the service of the so-called Great Indians.

Similarly Salman Rushdie in his novel Midnight’s Children suggests that despite political independence social inequalities persist—the landlords, the moneylenders, the tax collectors continue to exploit the poor, the peasants and the landless agricultural labourers. He presents the birth of a new Indian nation as a fictional construct whose meaning varies according to the subject position of the character. “He refers to the independent India as ‘the new myth’, ‘a collective fiction’, ‘a man made fantasy’, ‘a dream’, ‘a fable’—all expressions that emphasise its discursive nature” (qtd. in Collu 43). Very much like the works of Mahasweta Devi, Rushdie’s Midnight Children participates in the proliferation of myths of independent India, while simultaneously exposing their fictionality and occasionally challenging their truth-value. For instance, it asks, what does independence mean for the fisherwomen of Koli, the tribals in the hills and the bonded-labourers in the fields.

Mahasweta Devi uses the image of the bonded-sex-worker lying dead on a map of India to denounce exploitation and to destroy the myth of a free India for all. She suggests that real independence is impossible as long as there is gender, social and material inequality enabling one group to abuse another. For people like Douloti, the ‘kamiya’-whore, the tribals in the hills and the bonded-labourers in the fields, independence means nothing except the continuing and increasing exploitation, the
growing disparity between rich landowners and poor landless agricultural workers, and the overwhelming complicity of the government, the police, the landowners, the moneylenders, and the developers. Douloti dies on the chalk dust of the map of a mythical India; and in the narrator’s words, “the conclusion of the fairy tale is life, bloody, pain-filled life” (50).

Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children also closes with the prospective of the celebration of Independence Day just after former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s two-year suspension of democracy and the protagonist Saleem cynically comments that although he can smell other more tarnished perfumes: disillusion, venality, cynicism, the nearly thirty-one year old myth of freedom is no longer what it was. He adds that new myths are needed and that is none of his business.

Though the novella is Douloti’s story, its protagonists are innumerable Doulotis and Ganoris spread all over India. This drive towards national allegory explains the firm, informed authorial intrusion half-way in the narrative:

This bonded labour system prevails all over India. In Andhra the people of Matangi, Jaggali, Malajangam, Mahar and other castes become Gothi. In Bihar Chamar, Nagesia, Parhaiya, Dusad become Kamiya or Seokiya. In Gujarat the Chalwaris, Naliyas, Thoris and other become Halpati. In Karnataka the low birth become Jeetho, in Madya Pradesh Haroyaha. In Orissa Gothi and Rajasthan Sagri. The Chetty rayats of Tamil Nadu keep Bhumidases, in Uttar Pradesh the Bhumidas is called Maat or Khandit-Mundit or Sanjayat. Bonded labourers are thus known by different names in different regions. The system is slavery, and the outcastes, the harijans happen to be its victims. (61-62)
As in this novella, Jyotirmoyee Devi in her story “Behind the Arvallis” has written trenchantly of the cruel practice of girl children being sold, either openly or through a pretence of marriage to stock the many brothels that flourish in our cities, and it closely resembles Mahasweta Devi’s “Douloti”. Any honest exploration of this patriarchal society easily provides examples of women being exploited not merely as a part of the society but as women.

Resembling Douloti, another classic example of sexual victimisation is Dhouli the protagonist in Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Dhouli”. “Dhouli” is one of the four short stories in Mahasweta Devi’s Outcast, a collection of short stories, translated by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta. This poor peasant girl who is made to suffer and is literally forced into prostitution because a rich brahmin ‘loves’ her. The discourse really questions the meaning of ‘love’ in a man’s world. Thomas Hardy’s treatment of his women is usually based on his faithful observation of the realities of life which state that women being the weaker sex, suffer more. Like his wonderful heroine creation Tess who suffers because her chastity gets mercilessly violated by Alex, the entire tragedy of Dhouli stems from Misrilal’s infatuation.

Dhouli, an untouchable, is Dusad’s daughter, and a pretty young widow. But a pretty face is no use to a widow. She cannot marry again and never again will the other girls call her to sing wedding songs or paint ‘rangoli’ patterns on the walls of a bride’s home. Yet her tremulous eyes, slender waist and blossoming breasts have attracted the younger son of her master, the brahmin Misra and he incurably falls in love with her. Dhouli knows the fate of the women of her untouchable community who have fallen prey to the lust of the caste Hindus and so repulses his advances. “Dusads and ganjus like us bear your children, it’s not unusual…. Please don’t play
with a poor woman like me, 'sarkar'. You'll play your games and push off, but what will happen to me? Look what happened to Jhalo and Shanichari” (9).

But Misrilal convinces her of his love and promises to marry her, saying that, “I don’t care about things like caste and untouchability. Besides, Jaharr is not the only place on earth. And the government law too sanctions our marriage” (12). This selfish trap set by men to entice women in the name of love is aptly described by Kamala Das, when she says that the strong man’s technique is always the same and he serves his love in lethal doses. According to her, love is Narcissus at the water’s edge, haunted by its own lonely face.

In Diane Maytwayashing’s Horror Movie, a piece about the abused women, she says, “What are we women to do about these monsters [husbands]? These monsters tell us that they love us, then we fall into their traps, we give them everything, our love and beautiful children, and they give us hurt and pain and take away our precious lives” (qtd. in Mohan 198). This is absolutely true of Dhouli.

Being so young, Dhouli cannot resist his enticing words and gets pregnant. But when Misrilal’s family comes to know of this, they send him away and subject Dhouli and her mother to abject humiliation. According to these caste-Hindus, “It’s always the fault of the woman. For not considering a brahman’s honour, she’s even more to blame” (13). Dhouli’s tragedy reminds us of Vijay Tendulkar’s heroine Benare in his play Silence! The Court is in Session. Like Dhouli, Benare is also a victim of life and love. The men she had loved have betrayed her and made her bear the burden of their sin. As Mahasweta Devi’s heroine, she too has not found justice in the court of life, court of love nor in the court of law. She alone has to bear the betrayals of her lovers, associates and even her flesh and blood. Being accused of unwed motherhood, Benare undergoes the ordeal of a mock trial for attempting
infanticide. Sukhatme another character in the play states, “When there’s a woman in
the dock, the case does have a different complexion and that is true” (3.73). The
society goes by double standard, Prof. Damle who is equally responsible, goes
untouched, his social image, honour, job all intact. One is also reminded of Girish
Karnad’s *Naga Mandala* where Rani who is pregnant has to pass through the fire and
oil ordeal to prove her chastity having been accused by her husband Appanna, but
Appanna, who had publically and openly neglected his wife and lived with his
concubine from the first day of his marriage is not even questioned.

In Dhouli’s village this is not the first time that a brahmin’s son has ruined a
‘dusad’s’ daughter. There are several illegitimate Misra children growing up in the
‘dusad-ganju-dhobi’ quarters. But in the case of Dhouli, the village society holds her
solely responsible, and her kinsfolk rejects her because she has fallen in love and till
now she has kept aloof from the men of her community. If Misrilal had used force,
they would not have spurned her. But Dhouli, had been willing in that affair and that
is an unforgivable offence.

Hester finds herself in the same situation in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. As she has
committed the sin of adultery, she is awarded with a very harsh, demoralising and shameful punishment. She is made to put on the scarlet letter ‘A’ on her breast constantly, exhibiting to the people that she is guilty of adultery. But the public venerates Dinmesdale, who is equally guilty of adultery with Hester, as a pure man.

In “Dhouli” the ‘dusad-ganju’ men and the contractor’s coolies are watching closely to see how the situation will develop. Sometimes the Misras look after the mothers of their illegitimate children and hands out doles. Such women and children are treated well by the villagers, otherwise the Misras will be offended. If the Misras
provide for Dhouli, the villagers are ready to forget about the entire episode. Otherwise they will see Dhouli, the 'randi,' is made an outcast and is compelled to become a whore.

Dhouli holds out for as long as it is possible for her, but sheer hunger drives her to become a common prostitute. But this invites the wrath of the Brahmins' family because Dhouli has learnt to survive and it is a case of the survival of the fittest. They contemplate, "Untouchables must always be kept totally under control; at times one could take pity on them but one must be a man! Otherwise how would Kundan [Misrilal's brother] manage it all? So many fields, orchards, illegitimate offspring, sexy, low caste females? How else would he manage his empire?" (29).

The Misras have decided to drive her out of the village because she has brought 'dishonour' to them, by allowing "the door through which the lion entered is being visited by rats and swines!" (30). They summon a panchayat meeting and announce that Dhouli cannot practise prostitution in this village. She can go to some town, to Ranchi, and do her whoring there. If not, her house will be set on fire and she will be burned to death along with her mother and child. They declare that such sinful activities cannot continue in the heart of this village. "This village still has brahmans living in it. Puja is still done in their homes everyday" (31).

Dhouli is dragged to the panchayat and accused of prostitution, as the woman who was taken in adultery was brought before Jesus Christ for his judgement. When every male member in the group insisted that she should be stoned to death for her sin of prostitution, Jesus said unto them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first" (New Testament, John 8:7). But in the case Dhouli, there is no saviour humane enough to rewrite the panchayat's patriarchal dictate on Dhouli. The 'dusads', 'ganjus' and others can not raise a question about a 'brahmin's role' in
Dhouli's fate and none dare to challenge the verdict. As Ibsen rightly puts it in the introduction to his play *A Doll's House*, "A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view" (xxxii).

Dhouli's desperate plight closely resembles that of Mariamma in Bama's *Sangati*. Like Dhouli, Mariamma is also a victim of the twin oppressions—caste and gender together. She is humiliated before a panchayat which calls her a slut when she resists the sexual advances of the upper caste 'Mudalali'. It is insisted that she should prostrate before the panchayat and beg forgiveness. Her pathetic protestations of innocence are met with severe beatings from her own father. Mariamma realises that she will not get any support from any one in the community, and no one will dare oppose a man and an upper caste one at that. The pitiful fate of Mariamma projects the vulnerability of the Dalit woman in patriarchy as Dhouli does. Yet another example of 'twin oppressions' is Mulk Raj Anand's creation Sohini in *Untouchable*. This outcaste is used by the novelist to expose the hypocrisy of a high caste Hindu, the priest in the temple, who tries to molest her. At the hue and cry made by Sohini against the attempted molestation, the priest to save his skin cries that she has polluted the temple.

After the panchayat's judgement, Dhouli consoles herself by thinking, "when you are a kept woman, you're all alone. But now being a professional 'randi' she would be a part of a community. The collective strength of that society was far more powerful than an individual’s strength" (32). As with Sanichari in *Rudali* there lies her comfort.
Even if one does not go to the extremes of reading national allegories into Mahasweta Devi’s stories the stark fact is simply inescapable that the mainstream people and the political parties across the ideological spectrum have treated these poor creatures as less than human. Violence and exploitation in sexual relationships is vividly portrayed by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. He illustrates this with the myth of Philomela who turned into a nightingale after being raped by King Tereus.

“And still she cried: and still the world pursues, / ‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears” (6). It is common knowledge that in the caste based and in some cases highly communalised even criminalised-national politics, crimes against the lower castes and 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, Mahasweta Devi has reconstituted the female subject of rape in textual space which becomes the site for negotiations of the rights of women and women’s subjectivity. (Asaduddin 35)

The male chauvinistic and hegemonistic tendencies rooted and shaped by economic structures and relations whether feudalistic or capitalistic, are manifested in the sexual offence on women irrespective of time and space. To cite an example, by 1978, the North Telangana movement gained momentum which could clearly bring forward the contradiction between the people and the state. Consequently, attacks were started on the party workers and sympathisers of the movement. The attacks were so inhuman that seven goondas sexually assaulted a fifty year old woman, Rajavva, who was an active member of the movement and this took place on 29th October 1978 (qtd. in Rani and Katyayani 131).
However, after seven years of this incident, history repeated again. In the same district and taluk, a woman was gangraped as she was the wife of an active member of the Agricultural Labour Society. But this time, the assault was by the police. This incident took place on January 13, 1985. Even in 1999, a Girijan woman Bharatibai of Adilabad district was assaulted by the police in the interrogation about the whereabouts of the Naxalites. When she expressed her innocence and requested them to allow her to feed her baby, the cruel police insisted that she should prove it by showing her breasts (qtd. in Rani and Katyayani 131).

One more incident which calls for our attention here is the one which occurred during the period of Telangana Peasant struggle. A naked woman entered the train which was full of passengers. When the shocked people asked her whether she was not ashamed to be naked in public, she replied that the people of Telangana had to be ashamed as she was subjected to gangrape by goondas and Rajakars of Nizam (qtd. in Rani and Katyayani 131). This moved Kunduruthi, a Telugu poet to write a long lyric about Telangana. Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Draupadi”, the first story in the collection entitled Breast Stories can be seen as a parallel to the above mentioned incidents.

Mahasweta Devi’s fiction is dangerously real. Although it abounds with bizarre of all kinds, there is very little really fictive or inventive about it. It is a product of careful, though always involved, research and often comes accompanied by documentary insets. Even more terribly, it puts everything—our mythology, our obsession with gods and godmen, our history, our morality, in fact our cherished self-definitions—on trial. One aspect of the feminist movement, generally more or less confined to middle class intellectuals who are increasingly becoming aware of not only loosening up of the age old structures but reinterpreting them, “is the beginning
of an intellectual questioning, and points to the need to step out of the traditional role models—the mythological heroines like Sita and Savitri” (Jain 36).

Irawati Karve is an anthropologist and her book *Yuganta* has attained something of a cult status as a critical commentary on the great epic *Mahabharata*. In the chapter entitled “Draupadi” which is a critical analysis with a fictional addendum, Karve is concerned with historicising the myth and reconstructing the value systems, hierarchies and rituals of the age, and within this matrix she explores the reality of the character Draupadi. The essay is informed with the need to fill out Draupadi as a woman, and to materialise the special nature of her negotiations with her world. Karve highlights Draupadi’s pride, sharp intelligence and intellectual finesse which is revealed in the manner in which she saves her husbands from utter ruin after Yuddishthir has lost his kingdom and wife.

Karve’s fictional intervention that appends her critical study, may be read as her project to recover the silenced voice, as her endeavour to replace Draupadi’s summary erasure with a self-determined closure. According to Karve, at the point of death, with her final breath, Draupadi issues a hope and a prayer to Bhima, one of her husbands, “In our next birth be the oldest, Bhima [the greedy, rough and tempestuous]; under your shelter we can all live in safety and joy” (qtd. in Ghosh 94). What Draupadi asks for finally is a more benign paternalism in place of a harshly patriarchal order.

If Karve attempts to historicise the Draupadi myth, Mahasweta Devi in her short story “Draupadi”, wrenches her character out of myth to insert her into reality. This displacement out of myth is accompanied by a displacement out of class, for Mahasweta Devi’s Dopdi, is a tribal woman actively engaged in the Naxalite insurgency of the late sixties. As a further step, here Draupadi is displaced out of a
polyandrous marriage. She is placed first in monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape. With the subversive power of a troping "a metaphorising that includes a displacement as well as a re-figuring" (Niranjana 5), Mahasweta Devi transforms the mythological Draupadi into the tribal Dopdi, the agent of a potential unmaking of gender and class containment. Gayatri Spivak, one who has translated the Bengali story into English, reads this story as "an allegory of the woman's struggle within the revolution in a shifting historical moment" (In Other Worlds 187).

This story is a calculated act of violence upon the received myth of Draupadi in the manner that it displaces the mythical character out of myth and class to insert her into history in the figure of the Naxal tribal Dopdi. It moves with the urgency of an almost continually sustained present tense in narrative to explode in an act of absolute unpredictability. The story is a telling commentary on the present social system which is bent on getting rid of all those persons who defy its insensitive ethics. In fact, Mahasweta Devi always brings legends, mythical figures, mythical happenings into contemporary setting in order to capture the continuities between the past and the present held together in the folk imagination. Draupadi encompasses the space and time of post-independent India and presents the history of the eastern states in the 1960s and 1970s when the peasants of Naxalbari in West Bengal staged a successful rebellion against the landlords.

The author is primarily concerned with the problem of the landless agricultural labourers, the majority of whom are tribals who make a precarious living depending on the mercies of the Jotedars. The dialectic of domination and hegemony in the story reflects a reality which is based on a built-in series of relations which are oppressive. "Draupadi" is a story of confrontation that takes place across the intersections in the hierarchies of power, class, gender and commitment. Mahasweta Devi while
emphasising the fact that her work crosses the borders of mere political narratives, states, “Life is not mathematics and the human being is not made for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics” (Agnigarbha 8).

“Draupadi” explores the male constructed cultural and social discount and acts as a site where the meaning of the gender is defined. Revolving round the physical and psychological activities of the main character, Draupadi, there is a shift towards a female demand to be heard along with its emphasis on other related concerns of authenticity, authority and authorship. The inner dynamics of the text, while engaging in cultural negotiations with male defined hegemony, oscillates between history and myth, and tribal and non tribal realities. It complicates further the social and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity by sustaining two conflicting lines of arguments through out the narrative. The subversion of male hegemony and the border crossing of gender disclose the flexibility and indeterminacy of gender boundary.

“Draupadi” is the story of a woman warrior who desperately strives for a government that can fight against racism and poverty and restore a sense of lost human dignity. The story introduces Draupadi in the following way: “Name Dopdi Majhen, age twenty seven, husband Dulna Mahji (deceased), domicile Cherakhan, Bankrahjarh, information whether dead or alive and/or assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees” (19). Being a member of the Santhal tribe and having strong conviction in the communal cohesiveness, Draupadi becomes an activist in the indigenous agrarian reform movement led by the lower classes including the tribal cultivators. She forms a part of the guerrilla-style insurgency and resists the long established oppression of the landless peasantry.
She is introduced to the readers between the two names ‘Dopdi’ and ‘Draupadi’. Draupadi is the name given to her at birth by her mistress in a mood of benevolence felt by the oppressor’s wife towards the tribal bonded labourer. But she is called ‘Dopdi’ because either as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name Draupadi, or the tribalised form ‘Dopdi’ is the proper name of the ancient Draupadi.

At first the heroine is presented as a warm human being with deep love towards her husband and respect towards her forefathers who protected their women’s honour. But as the story develops, the innocent tribal woman grows into a hardcore rebel and becomes notorious in the circles of the privileged. She becomes an inexhaustible human spirit, defying the oppressive ontological social reality. As Gayatri Spivak comments, “When the subaltern speaks in order to be heard and gets into the structure of responsible resistance, he or she is on the way of becoming an organic individual” (qtd. in Guha xxi), Dopdi’s transgression is an instance of the celebration of an organic individual.

Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi, who shares the anxiety of cultural and political emasculation with other tribals, is undoubtedly a more integrated human being than, her archetypal counterpart. She dwells at the margins of prior concepts, codes and conventions and refuses to be a spectator in the position imposed on her by the dominant society.

Instead of being the victim of norms, she becomes the norm. Interestingly, however, this metamorphosis does not occur suddenly in her case. She has been a witness to the death of Bashai Tudu, a formidable leader of the oppressed Santhals in the late 1970s, and her own husband Dulna Mahji. As soon as Bashai Tudu is killed, Dulna and Dopdi decide to continue the struggle. So they become one with the people
for whose sake the heroes like Bashai strove and died. Strengthened by the support from the couple the masses begin to demand better wages from the landlords. Irked by the unusual situation, the landowners decide to suppress the revolt. The government responds quickly whenever its patrons get threatened, and goes to their rescue. As a part of this, the army takes to the forest in search of the main instigators. Having known well about the forest’s topography, Dopdi and Dulna disappear into it.

Captain Arjan Singh, the architect of ‘Operation Bakuli’, and a reliable army man, is sent to operate in the forest belt of Jhadkhani where the ‘black-skinned’ couple is in action. Surprisingly enough, Arjan Singh, with all his experience, could not make much headway in his assignment. Instead, he feels threatened whenever his plans are foiled by the illiterate couple. The official records show how their memories haunt the army and how their mysterious escapades cause anxiety and depression in Arjan Singh:

Dulna and Dopdi worked at harvests, rotating between Birbhum...Bankura. In 1971, in the famous Operation Bakuli, where three villages were cordoned off and machine gunned, they too lay on the ground, faking dead. In fact, they were the main culprits murdering Surja Sahu and his son, occupying upper-caste wells and tube wells during the drought, not surrendering those three young men to the police. In the morning, at the time of body count, the couple could not be found. The blood-sugar level of Captain Arjan Singh...rose at once. (20)

Thus the couple has escaped throwing dust in the eyes of the army into ‘Neanderthal darkness’ for a long time. The underground couple’s skill in self-concealment and unflinching commitment scares the army officers out of their wits.
After Arjan Singh’s premature and forced retirement, Mr. Senanayak, a specialist in combat takes upon himself the task of hunting the couple. He knows the activities and capacities of the opposition better than they themselves do. Whatever his ‘practice’, in ‘theory’ he respects the opposition, “respects them because they could be neither understood nor demolished if they were treated with the attitude, it’s nothing but a bit of impertinent game playing with guns. In order to destroy the enemy, become one” (22). Nevertheless, he seems to have understood them only theoretically for he finds no other way rather than getting rid of the young by means of ‘apprehension and elimination’.

The struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor continues. Many young men and women rise against the establishments that have thrived on them for ages. They attack police stations, terrify and elate the region, and disappear into the forest of Jharkhani. Since after escaping from Bakuli, Dopdi and Dulna have worked at the houses of virtually every landowner, they can efficiently inform the killers about their targets and announce proudly that they too are soldiers, ‘rank and file’. The dehumanised act of elimination which the privileged resort to with tacit support of the people in power has only aggravated the situation further, resulting in a senseless orgy of murders, assaults, counter assaults, and sadistic tortures.

Besides, the ghost of betrayal, which has been active from the times immemorial in the history of oppression of man by man, is always at work. Having been informed, the army enters the forest and shoots at Dulna as he is lying on his stomach on a flat stone, dipping his face to drink water. Leaving his corpse on the stone as a bait to attract more rebels, the soldiers climb the trees in green camouflage. This is nothing but the degeneration of man into a cold-blooded man-hunter. But no one comes to take the corpse.
Neither the fear of tortures nor the loss of life desists the committed persons like Dopdi, from fighting for the common good. She holds the fort after her husband’s killing. In fact, his death seems to have given a new direction to her struggle and she learns to be bold. After the government has declared two hundred rupees as a reward for her arrest, she casually informs a relative of hers, “Go home. I don’t know what will happen, if they catch me don’t know me” (28). And she reflects further: “What will they do if they catch me? They will ‘kounter’ me. Let them... If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue” (28).

Dopdi’s activities cause a war scare among the army persons. As a result, the hunt for her is intensified. “It is a carbuncle on the government backside. Not to be cured by the tested ointment, not to burst with the appropriate herb” (25). Having found that it is not easy to dispatch the tribals who are good at using primitive weapons, the army sets traps at every bend of the falls where Dopdi and her followers are expected. Consequently, every village, where the hungry and naked are still defiant and irrepressible, becomes the target of the army. Freakish as he seems to be, Senanayak adapts himself to the new situation. He might not be satisfied until he sees the annihilation of the last of the rebellious group.

At last, Dopdi is captured when the shrewd Senanayak enlists a few insiders, and constructs a ‘chakravyuh’. When Dopdi recognises that she is being followed, she thinks of nothing but entering the forest to warn her comrades of the escalating military presence. Indeed, given the army’s obvious fear of the forest, it would make sense for her to retreat there, as she reflects, “You fucking jackal of a cop deadly afraid of death, you can’t run around in the forest. I’d run you out of breath, throw you in a ditch, and finish you off” (32).
But despite the topographical advantages of the forest, she is more concerned about not giving anything away—the location of the hideout, information or a comrade's life. She thinks steadfastly of the guerrilas' pledge, borne of experience, "No comrade will let the others be destroyed for her own sake" and remembers proudly that her husband "didn't lose anyone else's life" (33).

She knows about her arrest, and the tortures that will follow. She remembers the words of Arijit, an activist, "Just as you must know when you've won you must also acknowledge defeat and start the activities of the next stage" (34). Proudly Dopdi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns towards the forest, and ululates with the force of her entire being for three times. The echo of the call travels far as resounding warning to her comrades to flee.

Apprehended in the evening, Dopdi is taken to the camp. 'Statements' in police custody duly follow and Senanayak disappears after issuing orders, "Make her. Do the needful" (34). And what happens to Dopdi here after has been charged with a sense of authenticity by Mahasweta Devi's sympathetic description of the incident. Dopdi has lost many of her comrades including her loving husband to some form of police violence—bullet holes, crushed arms and legs, severed limbs. But when she herself is captured—'apprehended'—the violent reprisal she suffers is not from the bullet or the knife. It is a gender-specific reprisal, namely, multiple rape.

On Senanayak's orders, Dopdi's captors 'make' her. This 'making' is, of course, an 'unmaking' of her as a revolutionary and a 'remaking' of her as a woman in the role of victim. The process of 'making' her continues till dawn for everyone in the camp is allowed to pacify his animal desires. Unlike her mythological namesake, Dopdi has no divine male rescuer. In a significant narrative shift, Mahasweta Devi
moves out of Dopdi’s mind and emotions to focus purely on her physicality—her "black body, thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood; two breasts, two wounds" (36).

As Gayatri Spivak points out in her introduction to Mahasweta Devi’s Breast Stories, the breast is far more than a symbol in these stories. It becomes the means of a harsh indictment of an exploitative social system. In “Draupadi” Dopdi turns the terrible wounds of her breasts into a counter-offensive. The barbarous attack on her femininity is not only a sign of insult to the dignity of an individual but also a threat to the human values. Ironically, Senanayak and his men appear to have surpassed their counterparts in the epic.

The spontaneity with which Dopdi reacts after this brutal ‘making’ is in fact one of the essential elements of the revolutionary project that Mahasweta Devi conceives. What a woman considers sacred and important in her life is plundered. So there is nothing more that she is scared about. She is in a place and situation where she must act for herself. This she does by refusing to cover herself after the multiple rape. According to Spivak, “Dopdi acts in not acting” (In Other Worlds 195). The effectiveness of Dopdi’s resistance is not the refusal to act, but the refusal to act predictably. She is, as it were, reframing the paradigm of action itself. In doing so she in turn, ‘unmakes’ her ‘being made’ as a victim, for she resists guilt, fear, shame or servility.

In the Mahabarata when the male assembly orders’ public’ stripping of Draupadi, she cries in disbelief at her immanent shame and at her husbands’ impotence in the face of it: “Is morality gone? or else how can you be looking on this atrocity? There are my husbands...I do not understand why they stand there transfixed” (Narayan 79). Ultimately Lord Krishna comes to her rescue after hearing
her appeal and saves her from disgrace. Lord Krishna’s clothing and saving Draupadi fits smugly into the prescribed role for women in a patriarchal set up. But Mahasweta Devi’s revolutionary creative imagination can never imagine Dopdi helplessly crying aloud for the divine help. Mahasweta Devi’s representation of the power and freedom of Dopdi is an outright rejection of the phallocratic myth of the Mahabharata. Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta’s comment in her article “Contesting Polarities: Creating Spaces—Reading Myths in Mahasweta Devi’s Stories” is very much relevant in this context:

Myths return with an insistence in history in the world of Mahasweta Devi in a dynamic and vibrant manner, with one perspective undercutting another and with the stories embodying myths themselves acquiring the status of myths. One has to take cognizance of their affective dimension and grant them their status as creative forces underlying Indian history. (205)

Dopdi knows that in a certain sense, morality is gone; she expects no better from her enemies, and instead challenges them to behold the atrocity they have committed. She rises above her humiliated and mutilated body and questions the values of this world where a man is free to use a woman thus and still call himself a man. She boldly rejects the patriarchal myth of feminine shame associated with her body, as she stands naked deliberately and asks,

What’s the use of clothes? you can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man....There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? come on, ‘kounter’ me. (36-37)
In the introduction to her novel, *Chotti Munda and His Arrows*, Mahasweta Devi observes:

> By just making them nonexistent, they do not exist for her [Dopdi], all this male stuff, they are trying to do this, by mass raping, by gang raping also you just cannot destroy a woman’s spirit, she does not recognize their existence, they are non-existent for her. (xix)

Naked, her breasts bitten raw, the nipples torn, vagina bleeding, Dopdi walks towards Senanayak with her head held high. By pushing him with her mangled breasts, she challenges him, and for the first time, Senanayak is terribly afraid to stand before an ‘unarmed’ target. For the first time he knows an irrational fear. “His theory, his empathy, his manliness, his elegant, clean aestheticism—all crumble around him before this naked, bloody ‘counter’ revelation” (Jaidev 7). Mahasweta Devi ends the story here, and this terrifying moment of confrontation transcends history, engulfs time, and crystalises Dopdi’s defiance. Recognising the power of this tribal woman, the feminist writer Patricia Duncker asserts:

> Dopdi has refused to endorse men’s system of value. She has refused the meaning he has placed on her body. She has refused to bend, to give way, give herself up. He can kill her; but her power, her spirit can never be broken. (qtd. in Dasgupta 49)

Closely resembling “Draupadi”, Ambai, a short story writer in Tamil, has also powerfully handled the question of political rape in her famous short story “Black Horse Squire”. The story registers the strength and solidarity of two women, the activist Rosa, who has been a victim of police violence and rape, and her sister-in-law, Abhilasha, a radical journalist.
As it is reiterated again and again that there is nothing inventive about Mahasweta Devi stories. Two real incidents, one from a Southern State and the other from a Northern–Eastern State both in India, endorse the painful cruel reality behind Dopdi’s tragedy. In the first case the victim Padmini, a sweeper in a local educational institution, was gang-raped in front of her husband, Nandagopal, by five policemen in the Annamalai Nagar Police Station, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, on June 2, 1992. Her husband who was illegally and wrongfully confined, was later ‘found dead’ inside the lock-up. After a statewide furore, with many prominent women’s organisations taking up the cudgels for Padmini, the police personnel were convicted on September 4, 1997 (qtd. in Subramani).

The second incident was the agitation in Imphal, Manipur on July 15, 2004, demanding the withdrawal of the Armed Forces Act. It was triggered by the alleged torture, rape and killing of thirty two year old Thangjam Manorama in the custody by some Assam Rifles personnel. A dozen Manipuri women on a nude protest against the security forces condemned the atrocity, holding up banners with the slogans “Indian Army, rape us overtly” and “Rape us the way you did Manorama” written on them. This fight for justice very closely resembles the naked Dopdi’s pushing Senanayak with her torn breasts, challenging him to ‘kounter’ her (qtd. in Talukdar).

By eschewing a resolution and a closure Mahasweta Devi carries Dopdi’s resistance beyond the text to feed it into a larger discourse of resistance. The story is remarkable not only for its exploration of modes of resistance, but also for its attempt to locate possible ‘sites’ of resistance. It is a curious paradox that rape, perhaps the most violent strategy of gender containment, is also the most intimate of acts, wherein the boundaries between self and the other stand the risk of rupture. By locating Dopdi’s appropriation of subjecthood at a point immediately following her
rape, the story works with the force of a truly liberatory text that erupts through an imperceptible fissure in the seemingly inviolable estate of patriarchy.

A similar real life story is the life of Phoolan Devi popularly known as 'The Bandit Queen', an Indian dacoit who later turned a politician in Uttar Pradesh. At the age of sixteen, being accused of stealing, Phoolan Devi was arrested and gang raped repeatedly in the lock-up. The experience broke her body but ignited her hatred for men who routinely denigrated women. She realised that society could do nothing worse to her than what she had already experienced. She became fearless and led a gang of dacoits. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poolan_Devi) In "Draupadi" the enslaved protagonist finally attains, asserts and exerts her freedom by breaking the constraints of time and gender. Her gesture highlights the existence of male/female cleavages and discloses the immense possibilities and potentials of incessant crossing over.

The other two stories in the 'Breast Trilogy'—Breast Stories—are “Breast-Giver” and “Behind the Bodice: Choli ke pichhe”. As Gayatri Spivak who has translated the stories observes, “The breast is what the stories have in common. What they don’t share is shown by the staging of the names of the three protagonists: Dopdi, Jashoda, Gangor; in ‘Draupadi’, ‘Breast-Giver’, ‘Behind the Bodice’” (viii).

Breast is the dominant icon in these powerful stories. But Mahasweta Devi’s mature fiction never romanticises the socio-libidinal relationship between the sexes. In “Draupadi”, breast an erotic object is transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between sexuality and gender violence begins to waver. In “Behind the Bodice” Mahasweta Devi bitterly decries the supposed ‘normality’ of sexuality as male violence:
While Dopdi in "Draupadi" challenges the state with a weapon from which its defenders flinch: the untamed trope of female sexuality, mangled, well-used breasts, in "Behind the Bodice", Gangor who made everyone sin against God because of her sensuous beauty, loses her ‘assets’ in a series of gang rapes. (Karlekar 143)

As Gayatri Spivak observes the aboriginal Dopdi and the migrant proletarian Gangor are the subjects of resistant rage. Although the power of Gangor’s resistance and rage is worked out more explicitly than Dopdi’s, the staging of the provenance of her name is interestingly obscure. ‘Ganagauri’ as the origin of ‘Gangor’ is a bit of documentation offered by the most problematic character in “Behind the Bodice” Shital Mallya, Upin’s wife. She is a ‘new’ Indian woman, the mountain-climbing individualist in a liberated marriage, and an official interpreter for ‘The Festival of India’. It is, however, quite certain that her explanation, given in tones of contempt to an ‘uncultured’ Indian, is ridiculously wrong. “Gangor? You mean Gangor? Gangauri?...The Gangur festival takes place in Rajastan, Ganga worship Goddess Ganga. Strange! The Ganga river does not run through Rajastan” (143-144). The name Ganagauri has nothing to do with the river Ganga as Shital has suggested. This is a new object of critique for Mahasweta Devi: “Indian intellectuals not knowing a single Indian language meet in a closed seminar in the capital city and make the following wise decision known. Cultural invasion is much more dangerous than cultural revolution” (140).

Mahasweta Devi opens the story with her characteristic tongue-in-cheek tone, discussing the great furore over a ‘national problem’ of that year—1993. This serious mystery trampled upon other non-issues:
When it became a national issue...crop failure-earthquake, everywhere clashes between so called terrorists and state power and therefore killings...the unreasonable demands of Medha Patkar and others around Narmada Dam, hundreds of rape-murder-lockup torture et cetera...all this remained non-issues. Much more important than this was choli ke pichhe—behind the bodice. (138)

‘Choli ke pichhe’ was the title of a popular song in a Hindi film released in 1993. Thus everyone got busy to find out what was there: national media, censor-board, liberated anti-bra girls, television channels, all the religious groups and politicians. In the story, the same obsession of Upin, an itinerant ace-photographer causes Gangor’s tragedy and his own bizarre end. Gangor, a high breasted rural woman, is first seen with her breast carelessly shoved into the child’s mouth. Her crowd has come to Jharoa looking for work in the kiln for light bricks and tiles. Upin’s camera captures “the clevage of her Konarak chest, the resplendent breasts like the cave paintings of Ajanta, against the backdrop of the sky” (145), and the pictures as usual fetch him top rates abroad and at home.

But even after a few months he cannot overcome the ‘hangover’ of those mammal projections. It has become a seismic upheaval in his brain. He does not know why Gangor and her natural, most complex sweat glands or bosom has turned his head. May be, it is not a breast blessed by liquid silicone like that of Shital, but natural and hence unique. But somehow a fear for their safety creeps in. He confesses his fear to his friend Ujan, “Won’t keep it...can’t keep it...can’t keep such a body line ... not a thing will remain-do you realize that the breasts of the girls at Elora are eroding? Gangor is fantastic” (146-147).
He intuitively feels that Gangor and her chest are endangered and somehow he must rescue Gangor. His sense of emergency takes him once again to Jharoa. But he is rudely shocked to see the consequence of the ‘fame’ his pictures brought to those breasts. As the Caretaker puts it:

You ruined her with your pictures Sir, otherwise how would she dare? ...Gangor made everyone sin against God.... Women have to be careful in Shiva’s world. You’re punished if you don’t understand this. The police came here because of the girl so many times....When the girl doesn’t understand the police are men too, they will craze if you tease them. (152)

He stresses that it is ‘natural’ that men should be men. It is therefore ‘natural’ that women should be modest, and not provoke, “by making the living breasts dance” (xiii). Gangor has been exploited by the police, the labour contractor and others, and now she has become a whore and an alcoholic. Upin becomes guilt-ridden:

Somewhere a feeling of vulnerability, for some time now an obsession has been spinning him like a top. Suddenly he feels he’s alone in a place like this—he’s alone everywhere....Gangor’s developed breasts are natural—not manufactured. Why did he first think they were the object of photography? Why did it seem that that chest was endangered? (154)

His political correctness has ended with personally not lusting after Gangor’s breasts. But to preserve, the breast as aesthetic object by photography or implant is to overlook its value—‘coding’ within patriarchal social relationship. He has made a mistake in assuming that Gangor’s chest is no more than the object of photography
and unwittingly triggered off a train of violence against it. So with a great sense of emergency, he resolves that he must rescue Gangor at least now.

After a desperate search, he finds her and a sharp experienced smile blooms on Gangor’s lips on seeing Upin. “She pushes away some man’s hands. Says, the Camera-Sir has been going around for me for a very long time, Contractor. Today he’s my client” (155). When he asks, “You’re doing whore work Gangor?” (156), pat comes the reply “What’s it to you, son of a whore?” (156). In order to be assured of her breasts’ safety and security, hesitantly Upin asks, “You... take off... your blouse...” (156). Gangor breathes hard and says in a voice raged with anger, “Don’t you hear? Constantly playing it, singing it, setting the boys on me... behind the bodice... the bodice... choli ke pichhe.... You’re a bastard too Sir... you took ‘photoks’ [photos] of my chest, eh? Ok... I’ll show” (156). As Gangor takes off her blouse and throws it at Upin, what he stares at is, “No breasts. Two dry wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava at Upin—gang rape... biting and tearing gang rape... police... a count case... again a gang rape in the lock-up... now the contractor catches clients” (157). Being rudely shocked, he runs along the railway tracks and flings himself before a train to encounter his sentence upon the tracks.

Mahasweta Devi, in her typical way observes that Upin’s news has got only an inch-and-a-half of space in the newspaper and escaped the nation’s eye because the nation is busy with much more important issues like ‘choli ke pichhe kya hai?’ As Mahasweta Devi ends Gangor’s story with the conclusion “there is no non-issue behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it” (157), the name Ganagauri gains a remarkable resonance. “For ‘gana’ is, of course, ‘demos’-the people-as in ‘democracy’-ganatantra. Behind the bodice is a rape of the people. Here the breast becomes a concept-metaphor of police violence in the democratic state” (x).
Mahasweta Devi’s critical excavation of the brutal violence on women, as it views women edged and confronted by the bizarre requirements of men’s sexuality, is closely echoed by the famous Malayam poet O.V. Usha in her poem “The Hunt”:

Has the beast put  
A slow burning step forward?  
Have those fearsome teeth  
Splashed white liquid fire?  
Yes it draws close,  
...scoops out my heart and devours  
And now in one sweep  
It catches  
The little bird, encaged in my frame  
And it growls and rolls  
In awesome play. (qtd. in Tharu and Lalitha 568)

“Breast-Giver” is yet another breast story in the Breast Stories collection. The protagonist Jashoda in this story becomes the symbol of the ultimate exploitation of woman as woman—an exploitation of her nurturing body, while the society shirks all responsibilities for the terrible consequences she reaps. In “Breast-Giver” Mahasweta Devi’s omniscient narrative technique includes ironic comments about Indian womanhood. She observes that Jashoda is the archetypal Indian woman whose unquestioned devotion to her husband defies logic and reason. Her love for her children, her unnatural ability to make sacrifices is part of Indian womanhood ranging from the mythic figures of Sati, Savitri and Sita to the movie stars enacting mother roles in the movies. The irony becomes further embittered as Mahasweta Devi elaborates that seeing such women all and sundry understand that in India the
tradition still flows and so keeping such women in mind such moral maxims had been composed:

A female’s life hangs on like turtle’s
Her heart breaks but no word is uttered,
The woman will burn, her ashes will fly,
Only then will we sing her praise on high. (47)

Unsparing in her ironic asides, Mahasweta Devi further adds that the educated and cultured Indian men admire Indian prototypes of La Passionara or Simone de Beauvior at social gatherings. But they desire all this from women outside the home. When they cross the threshold of their own homes, each man becomes the ‘Holy child’ expecting each woman to be the ‘Divine Mother’. Taslima Nasreen, the feminist writer from Bangladesh shares the same platform with Mahasweta Devi in her commitment towards consciousness - raising and emancipation of women and in her exposures of the oppression of women in her texts such as Nashta Meyer Nashta Gadya (The Corrupt Girl’s Corrupt Tale) and Lajja (Shame) among others. Taslima Nasreen observes:

If you are a woman, you must traverse beyond living death to live. They will teach you fidelity, the virtues of ‘Sati’, they will preach to you about womanhood, they will describe the glory of motherhood. If you step into these evil traps of false education, they will kiss you, lifting you in their arms, they will dance with frenzy. They will give you four walls, golden chains, they will offer you food as they do to their pet parrot. If you are human being then break off your chains and stand up.

(qtd. in Dasgupta 49)
In the postmodern literature images of women have been destabilized, deconstructed and reconstructed. No longer does the writing of women concern itself with the search for identity alone. Increasingly, women’s literature has striven to establish a separate ethos, an exclusive feminine myth as a counter-point to the existent myth of male standards. In the past two and a half decades, literature in general and fiction in particular has reflected the rejection of certain ‘malestream’ traditions and stereotypes summarily. The influence of feminism has meant that women no longer have to see motherhood, heterosexuality and marriage as the only possible life style, and myths portraying women’s happiness as being confined within these parameters have now been exploded. The efficacy of the institution of marriage and family life idealised by patriarchy and identified as the woman’s source of contentment has been exposed by postmodern women writers as a patriarchal myth. For example, Alice Walker’s Meridian illustrates the manner in which child bearing makes women vulnerable to male control and manipulation. Walker affirms woman’s ability to challenge the maternal role and achieve independence by breaking the patriarchal shackles.

Mahasweta Devi’s “Breast-Giver” builds itself on the cruel ironies of caste, class and patriarchy. The mythic Jashoda is the foster-mother of Lord Krishna and Mahasweta Devi keeps Jashoda’s name unchanged from the Sanskrit scriptural form. Here, Jashoda, a poor Brahmin woman, is obliged to take up a bizarre job when her husband Kangalicharan is crippled, thanks to a rich spoiled brat from the Haldar family and his newly acquired Studebaker. Although the orthodox Hindu-middle class nominally reveres the bramin, the prerogatives of economic class are in fact much more real for it. Motherhood is Jashoda’s way of living and sustaining her world of countless beings. She is a ‘professional’ mother, forced into the job of
breast-feeding the children of the six daughters-in-law of Haldar household who breed every year.

It all has started accidentally, when Jashoda is asked by the Haldar Mistress to breast-feed a grandchild whose mother is sick. The Lady observes that Jashoda has such full breasts and is a ‘Kamadhenu’, the legendary cow of fulfilment herself while her daughters-in-law do not have quarter of that milk in their nipples. The Haldar matriarch’s arrangement of Jashoda’s breast-feeding the whole brood of Haldar grandchildren and great-grand children will go quite some way towards keeping the young Haldar wives slim and attractive, without diminishing their urge to beget armies of children and it will also discourage the young male Haldars from taking to immoral way.

Jashoda never blames her idle husband for her misfortunes. 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. Mahasweta Devi in her characteristic way reports:

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...Such is the power of the Indian soil that all women turn into mothers here and all men remain immersed in the spirit of holy childhood. (47)

Jashoda becomes the divine engine, the paid mother. She considers the offer from the Haldar Mistress as a great fortune. Since her breasts have plenty of surplus milk, she is convinced, mothering is the sole point of being born a woman. So the more mothering and milk-mothering she can do, the more blessed she will be.
But she soon realises, no matter how abundant, this milk supply is still subject
to biology. Her breasts cannot yield milk unless she keeps breeding annually. When
her husband being illuminated by the spirit of ‘Brahma, the Creator’ explains, “Now
you’ll have to think of that and suffer. You are a faithful wife, a goddess. You will
yourself be pregnant, be filled with a child, rear it at your breast, isn’t this why
Mother came to you as a midwife?” (51).

Joshoda accepts her husband as her guru and does not mind the annual labour
pains. She consoles herself, “Where after all is the pain?...Does it hurt a tree to bear
fruit?” (51-52). Jashoda is well fed by the Mistress as she is the ‘Mother Cow’. She
is confined twenty times in thirty years. At the end of it all, she has suckled fifty kids,
including thirteen of her own. While the going is good, her self-perception and how
others view her are in perfect accord, she being a latter-day ‘Yashoda’ Lord Krishna’s
milk-mother, becomes the milk-mother of the whole world. Jashoda thereby earns a
living not only for herself but for her entire family dependent solely on her earnings.

But after the demise of the Haldar Mistress, her grandchildren are swept off by
the evil wind of family planning. Jashoda understands that her usefulness has ended
not only in the Haldar house but also for Kangali. He has shifted his love to another
woman, Gopali and Jashoda is reduced to the state of a mere servant. She also begins
to feel a strange pain in her breasts; the top of her left tit has grown red and hard like a
stone. The nipple has shrunk, her armpit is swollen. The doctor knows it is breast
cancer and probably because she has borne twenty children and suckled nearly fifty.
She cries, “My lap was never empty, if this one left my nipple, there was that one, and
then the boys of the Master’s House. How I could, I wonder now! (66-67).

Seeing Jashoda’s broken, thin suffering form even Kangali’s selfish body and
instinct and belly-centred consciousness remembers the past and suffers some
empathy. The Haldar sons who do not want to have the sin of a Brahmin woman’s
death on their heads ask Jashoda’s sons to take her away. There is little hope of her
survival since she is in the secondary stage of interaction and continuous fever. The
doctors put her on sedatives and she hangs on about a month in the hospital.

She has now no visitors since the stench in the room is insufferable. Even
Kangali stops coming and he has rejected her the moment the doctors have declared
that there is little hope. The sores on her breast keep mocking her with a hundred
mouths and a hundred eyes. She moans spiritlessly, “If you suckle you’re a mother,
all lies! Nepal and Gopal don’t look at me, and the Master’s boys don’t spare a peek
to ask how I’m doing” (67). As she lies discarded by all her children and milk-
children, dying of breast cancer, she makes a crushing discovery both about her
pathos and her ethos. She has been ruthlessly exploited by all kinds of people—her
children, her milk-children, her husband and her masters. There is nothing glorious
about her mother image and it is only an effective ploy to exploit her. As Dutta
describes:

The traditional twin roles of womanhood have been fulfilled by her
in excess....That the disease should strike that part of the body, and
that should touch what had once nurtured life, as well as her
abandonment and destitution—dramatises the eternal tragedy of
women in society and history (5-6).

It is worthwhile to quote a few lines from the poem entitled “Song of This
Earth” written by S.Usha, a Kannada poet, and translated into English by Tejaswini
Niranjana. The poem, as these stories of Mahasweta Devi, symbolises women who
have been subdued and reduced to being objects of sensual pleasure:
You did not see the brood
of Krishna that sucked
the breast and grew
Calling again and again
Mother! Come!
Did not see
that she has
besides breasts and thighs
a heart
full of dull red desires

My thighs
gashed by a hundred plows
I, my mother, her mother, mothers,
above all my aunt
bearing the pain
the wound drying. (qtd. in Tharu and Lalitha 591)

Gradually Jashoda’s left breast bursts and becomes like the crater of a
volcano. Yet, neither her biological children nor the thirty others she has nursed are
present by her hospital bedside when she dies, “Jashoda thought after all, she had
suckled the world, could she then die alone?... One must become ‘Jashoda’ if one
suckles the world. One has to die friendless, with no one left to put a bit of water in
the mouth” (74).

Jashoda’s body lies in the hospital morgue for a night and there is none to
claim it. Next day it is cremated by an untouchable and Mahasweta Devi concludes
the story with a poignant statement, "Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda’s death is also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone" (75).

This story can be considered as a parable of India after decolonisation. Like the protagonist Jashoda, India is a hired mother abused and exploited by various hegemonic groups and classes, the landlords, capitalists, bureaucrats, diasporas and ideologues of the new state flourishing on the culture of the passive, unarticulated suffering of the people at large. She has grown weak and tired by feeding these ungrateful hoodlums and will be consumed by cancer if not assisted scientifically and sustained by those who have been benefitted by her. Gayatri Spivak extends the parable to interpret the end of the story like this:

The ideological construct ‘India’ is too deeply informed by the goddess-infested reverse sexism of the Hindu majority. As long as there is this hegemonic cultural self-representation of India as a goddess-mother (dissimulating the possibility that this mother is a slave) she will collapse under the burden of the immense expectations that such a self-representation permits.

(Brest Stories 78-79)

"Breast-Giver" as a critique of Indian womanhood that has so completely identified itself with patriarchal notions and as an ironic attack on the projected image of Indian women in general—from legends and epics to the modern media bears close resemblance to Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale which provides an ironic and parodic representation of maternity, sex and child bearing. Margaret Atwood’s protagonist Offred possessing viable ovaries is regarded as a national resource in the
Republic of Gilead where the birth-rate has become alarmingly low. Offred, the handmaid is assigned to a Commander to breed as his wife is barren. In such a society love is irrelevant, so Offred reflects, “We are for breeding purposes ....We are two-legged wombs, that’s all, sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.” (qtd. in Dasgupta 47). The resemblance between Breast-Stories and The Handmaid’s Tale highlights the significant fact that globally, exploited women have been regarded as synonymous with womb and breasts in a patriarchal society.

All the stories analysed in this chapter including the novella which is a long short story, fit well into to H.G. Wells’ definition of a short story:

A short story is, or should be a simple thing; it aims at producing one single vivid effect; it has to seize the attention at the outset, and never relaxing, gather it together more and more until the climax is reached. The limits of the human capacity to attend closely therefore set a limit to it; it must explode and finish before interruption occurs or fatigue sets in. (qtd. in Rees 203)

Here is a fearless exposure of reality and the author sheds all weakness and sentimentality as she moves into her clear, precise narration. Austerity of style has always been her speciality, but here she is finally successful in stripping language of all its unessential elements, clipping it almost to bareness. The characters are drawn in sharp, precise colours, and they are delineated with an objectivity that comes only to a master artist. It is the deliberate exclusion of sentimentality and emotionalism, the conscious adherence to realistic details that makes for the tremendous effect of these stories. With the minimum of deft strokes Mahasweta Devi allows the incidents and the characters to appear before us in sharp outline and the readers are staggered by the direct encounter with truth.
What makes Mahasweta Devi's works unique among her contemporaries is the manner in which she enriches her writing with many different kinds of language and speech. She points out in an article how she uses the oral tradition for the interpretation of events—the folk songs, beliefs, myths and social laws of the tribal and the non-tribal people—for these form a rich source of Indian culture. As part of her effort to explore this aspect of Indian culture, she has had to experiment with language and move out of the Sanskritized Bengali prose. She asserts that the living language of the people, tribal or not, is a must for her kind of literature.

Gayatri Spivak has described it Mahasweta Devi’s prose as “a prose that is a collage of literary Bengali, street Bengali, bureaucratic Bengali, tribal Bengali and the languages of the tribals” (Bashai Tudu 162). She also acknowledges that Mahasweta Devi’s stories always pose particular challenges for the translator. Not only is the surface realism of her stories destabilized by mythic and satiric configurations, but the language used is itself unfixed, incorporating a mixture of folk dialects, slangs, urban Bengali, Hindu mythology and quotations from Marx. Vocabulary apart, ‘the feel of the book’ that inheres in the movement of the original prose has also to be carried across in the translation. This very plurivocity and discursive diversity has resulted in vastly differing translations of her works.

Of special interest necessarily are the comments relating to how Gayatri Spivak sees her task as a translator. Disarmingly frank, she admits to her qualms in the early stages, faced with having to convey the sustained aura of subaltern speech, without the loss of dignity of the speakers. But a touchstone of her success as a translator of Mahasweta Devi stories is that she has, according to Mahasweta Devi, shown that dialect can be dignified. Added to that in one of her interviews,
Mahasweta Devi acknowledges, "Gayatri is the best...all her translations are extremely faithful...Gayatri does not distort, not even one word" (qtd. in Colu43-44).

To conclude, all these female protagonists of Mahasweta Devi are victims of the socio-economic and patriarchal system. And yet, the wordless language with which they confront the privileged male is one which challenges conventional modes of dialogue. What happens to these women is almost of little consequence—it is the memory of their need to resist in terms where they can not be matched which endures.

In inscribing women's resistance, in what one could call a female body language, Mahasweta Devi situates these stories in a continuum with her other work which calls upon the protagonists to question stereo-typification. Though some of these women do not evolve the group support as Sanichari enjoys in Rudali, they are none the less able to reverse conventional notions of how the oppressor views subjugation and the victories inherent therein. The breast, women's wailing and their rape—attributes regarded as essentially female and therefore parts of the discourse of oppression—are used by Mahasweta Devi to contest this very oppression. All these stories bear testimony to what Lalithambika, a major Malayalam writer observes:

A woman's heart has secrets that even the funeral pyre cannot reveal. Suppressed continually by the opposing forces of religion, society, even destiny, they finally explode within her. Like weeping without tears, living without breathing, like a mountain of fire that cannot give out smoke, they are contained inside her and shatter her inner being. (qtd. in Ramakrishnan 356)
Insufferable mental agony is always more excruciating than physical injury. But once again being Mahasweta Devi’s creations, the mothers depicted in the next chapter, rise above their sufferings through the deep insight they acquire out of their traumatic experiences.