Chapter III

Sufferings of Women

Suffering is a universal human experience and it is the basic element that makes up the negative valence of affective phenomena. It may be physical or psychological and may be felt in all degrees of intensity from mild to intolerable. Since literature is a mirror of life and deals with human life, it has been portraying physical as well as psychological sufferings of people. When the suffering of the characters is of low magnitude, they feel discomfort and are unable to achieve or accomplish what they want; but when it is of high magnitude the agony the characters undergo at times cripples them and makes them miserable and wretched. The women characters of Mahasweta Devi suffer due to their low status in the society because of their class and caste and also due to their gender.

Mahasweta Devi’s works revolve around contemporary social and political realities and a majority of them extend across a reasonably free time range in independent India, and are located in real or imaginary settings. The stories bring out the society’s inhuman treatment of the lower caste and also the sexual violence which often recurs. The stories happen not only in tribal communities living at the edges of the forest but also in upper middle class urban society, within the larger frame of the Naxalite movement. The police, who are supposed to protect law and order, unite with the system instead to commit violence on sensitive people. In the novel Mother of 1084, the young men are killed brutally and activists are crippled inhumanly by the police in police cells in order to suppress underground political activism and “Draupadi” is a portrayal of violence and sexual abuse among the police force at all levels.
People who live in urban, rural and tribal areas undergo untold suffering because of the negligence of the government and the government officials. It should also be noted that there was a merciless famine in Madhya Pradesh, which was declared by the government as a “no famine” area as it was trying to bring about green revolution. In his article “Adivasis and the Myth of Independence: Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Douloti the Bountiful’,” Gabrielle Collu writes about such conditions that remain only as myths or illusions:

The Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi has . . . questioned the “myth of Independence” in her fiction. She has been writing about the dispossessed people of India for fifty years. Her stories describe the lives of the tribals, the dalits (untouchables), the low castes, the peasants, the bond-slaves. And, in the process, they question mainstream history by presenting “the people’s version of history” (“Untapped Resources” 15) and expose to scrutiny the freedom and equality promised with political independence. . . . Rather than saying that the myth no longer exists, Mahasweta Devi eloquently points out that it never was for a significant group of people in India: the poor, the dispossessed, the tribals (44).

Mahasweta Devi’s works are related to the tribals’ struggling for independence, keeping their cultural identity and with the sense of their own history. She is much concerned about the progress of the tribals. What Smitha says about Mahasweta Devi’s writing is very pertinent here:

Mahasweta Devi makes the presence of an activist journalist felt throughout her writings. Although most of her works deal with the tribal communities and their exploitation by the powerful, she has been successful in representing the
oppressed in the ruling classes as well. Her basic concern is to unveil the
hypocritical power structure that looks only for its benefit. Devi’s works
reinstate the determination and final rejuvenation of the oppressed. Devi’s
works reflect the zeal for constant struggle, though the modes might differ to
the limit of contradiction (90).

Mahasweta Devi brings into action a range of injustices committed on women to
critically analyse the nation and nationalist fervour. What Mahasweta Devi says about her
writing in her interview with Gabrielle Collu is quoted in the article “Speaking with
Mahasweta Devi: Mahasweta Devi interviewed by Gabrielle Collu,” “I never consider myself
as a woman writer, as a feminist. Nothing. I am a writer. I am a writer and when I write, I
write of such people who live much below the poverty line. They are men, women and
children. I don’t isolate the woman. Women have to pay a lot. They also have their special
problems. They come to my stories naturally, not just to uphold the woman.”(224)

Girls and women have been undergoing endless sufferings in India. V.P. Singh
writes about the sufferings of girl child in the article “The Crisis of the Girl-Child: A Study
of Selected Indian Short-stories in English Translation”:

The discrimination and trauma suffered by the girl child is a beginning of her
suffering as a woman. Girlhood is a delicate phase in a woman’s life. It marks
a significant phase in terms of a woman’s sexual, emotional and psychological
maturation. As such the negative experiences of this phase become more
difficult for the girl to cope and understand than it is for the mature woman.
While the woman either stoically accepts or protests against the injustices
meted out to her in a male-dominated society, the growing girl cannot understand or come to terms with the injustices of which she is a victim (65).

The girl child suffers injustices right from her birth due to gender discrimination. She is denied proper nutrition in economically poor families while effort is made to satisfy the son’s nutritional needs in spite of economic restrictions. She is either left without being sent to school or taken out from school at an early age due to financial condition or gender bias. She is supposed to be more capable and useful at home and fireplace, studying the household works that will place her in good position as a woman. In a majority of rural societies, the girl child is liable to get married too early either at the beginning of puberty or shortly after because of the denial of proper schooling. Then after marriage the girl faces sufferings that are disheartening even for mature women.

Premature and painful sexual experiences lead to early pregnancies which in turn lead to miscarriages or high infant death rate because of the poor health of the mother and the infant. The girl becomes a sexual victim as wife and emotional victim as mother, apart from her role as daughter-in law with many household tasks for which she is too young. When the girl is not quite lucky in getting married, most of them are either enticed into the profession of sex-workers or willingly choose prostitution due to economic conditions.

In “Breast-giver” and Rudali, the probability of starvation makes the protagonists seek different means of livelihood. They act as substitutes for wealthy, landowning and offensive people in their occupations centred on birth and death. For such moneyed people, nursing their babies and mourning their dead are recurring activities for which they can hire cheap labour of those who have been deprived of their sensitive, personal and emotive features.
There are many other women characters like Jamunabati’s mother who was a streethawker, Chinta and Giribala who were domestic helps and breadwinners of their families. What Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav observe about the condition of women as depicted in Mahasweta Devi’s stories is quoted here extensively:

The most common form of victimization in Devi’s stories is that of women succumbing to male sexual violence rampant in rural areas. They usually give in without resistance (Dhowli and Tura’s daughter in “The Witch Hunt”), at times get pregnant (Dhowli, Douloti, Sanichari in a story by the same name, and Josmina in “The Fairytales of Rajabasha”) and are often sold for money by their own fathers (Douloti and the daughters of Giribala). Prostitution becomes their meagre means of livelihood, which perpetuates the brutality and routinizes the indignity of their sexual exploitation. However, a few of the tribal women militantly fight back, even at the cost of their own criminalization, contravening the seemingly essentialist interpretation of the tribal woman as a passive subject, resigned to her lot. Dopdi Mejhen, in a gruesome parody of the ‘vastraharan’ episode of the Mahabharata, refuses to clothe herself after being gang-raped in police custody in order to taunt male desecration of her body (“Draupadi”). . . . Mary Oraon in “The Hunt”, in an analogous exhibition of a woman’s indomitable spirit, valiantly resists sexual abuse by killing her aggressor (20-21).

In “Douloti the bountiful” marriage could not set Douloti or her family free from bond slavery but binds her all the more in a “bloody and pain-filled life.”(50) In “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha” the suffering of the people is related to the possible redemption of
the creature’s ancestral soul. In “The Hunt” Mary’s extraordinary courage, which was a boon of her mixed parentage, is neither representative of the resistance of her particular class, gender or group, nor can the story of her empowerment change the lives of the adivasis in the manner of miraculous fairy-tale.

As Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav point out in the introduction to *Mahasweta Devi: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*:

The political fervor of Devi’s concerns spills over into her narrative through a powerfully direct style of presentation, and debates very often unmediated through conventional generic requirements. Most of her works, particularly the longer ones, have long passages of compressed information that serve as circumstantial points of reference in helping the largely ignorant reader to politically engage with the historical constituency that she chiefly writes for i.e. the Indian tribal. This thinly-veiled political reportage stands along with complex literary and symbolic manoeuvring and creates a challenging style that subverts conventional patterns of reading. In any characteristic piece, Mahasweta Devi deploys a large battery of social-linguistic registers which are deliberately not integrated into a seamless whole according to any conventionally organic idea of narrative organization (22).

Mary Oraon, a rural tribal, was a woman with strong physical talent. She had many admirers in Tohri market. She was a bold woman but she feared that people may betray her. She liked to live in the village searching for her identity. She was the best dancer at the feast. Although many women were her friends, she felt lonely at times. She was very stern and did things in her own way and toiled very hard like an animal. Mary was endowed with strength,
intelligence, generosity, humour, outspokenness and respect. She had two weapons with her. One was her words and the other was her machete, a dagger-like weapon. Regarding the uniqueness of Mary’s character and her story, Anup Beniwal and Vandana make a few observations in their article “Writing the Subaltern at the Interface of Fiction and Ideology: an engagement with the works of Mahasweta Devi”:

Mary’s appearance, her financial enterprise and autonomy, her easy unhindered mobility and her sexual freedom (she decides to marry Jalim, a Muslim) makes her an exceptional character. Such deliberate uniqueness, a distancing, even, of Mary’s position from the rest of the villagers along with the listing of her fairy-tale adventures serves to consolidate the uniqueness of her story and sharply contrast it with the countless stories of “mundane” suffering and exploitation that remain untold (90-91).

Tehsildar was a contractor. Prasad’s son Banwari sold the sal trees to Tehsildar with a profit for himself. He was invited to tea by Prasad. When Tehsildar saw Mary in Prasad’s house, he thought, “Wow! What a dish? In these woods?”(8) He started making advances to Mary from the very moment he saw her in the bungalow. He was unable to forget Mary. But Mary was tired of his single-minded pursuit. Since Tehsildar had money and men, he believed that he could do anything. Mary was worried about her safety and the safety of her lover Jalim.

One day Tehsildar caught hold of Mary Oraon. Mary was scared of him. In an attempt to escape from him, she lost her machete. She sprang out of his grasp. When she saw the desire on his face, she found a way of escape. She said to him that she was unclean that day and she would come to him on the day of the feast.
Mary decided to put an end to Tehsildar’s sexual aggression. On the day of the feast, Mary came to him with her plan. After twelve years, during Jani Parab, women became the hunters and men were dressed up like clowns and they were drinking and singing. Mary became the hunter in the ritual hunt. She came to Tehsildar who was very eager to have her. With the help of her machete, she hacked him to death. Then she threw his body in the ravine and escaped with her lover. Bindu Nair says about Mahasweta Devi’s views on this hunt, “the Santhals celebrated the ritual hunting festival as the Festival of Justice, when wrong doers were brought to book after the hunt.” (115)

The second story “Douloti, the Bountiful” gives a realistic a picture of oppression and disaster imposed on women’s bodies. The British introduced the bonded labour system for their own benefit to conciliate a new class of feudal order. But in the year 1976, it was abolished by the government of India formally. However, it still persists in some parts of India of which Chari remarks in his article “Deconstructing History: A Study of Mahasweta’s Imaginary Maps”: “. . . the vulnerability of the tribals is such that ‘the bonded labour system, in its naked savagery and its bloody exploitation of woman’. . . still flourishes in backward feudally oppressed districts in Bihar and other parts of India.” (58)

Douloti, a tribal woman was sold into bonded labour as a prostitute to a wealthy landowner. Douloti was ill-treated because her father Crook Nagesia signed a bond with the Rajput landlord. The tribals accepted their slavehood without any question. “To become a kamiya is, for the tribal, ‘fate’s decree.’ ”(21) It is worthwhile to notice what Chari says in this regard: “but the brute power and the systemic violence are not discounted, though. The legend goes that: When a Nagesia child is six days old, that day our lord Fate will lower from
the sky a yellow-turmeric-dyed string. For Fate will come down to earth on that string. He will look like a head-shaved Brahman.”(22)

In order to free Nagesia from the bond, Paramananda, a sadhu, wanted to marry the fourteen year old Douloti by paying some money to Crook Nagesia. He took her away to Madhpura and then she was thrown away as a piece of meat in the flesh market. Douloti, like all her tribes thought that they had to accept whatever fate brought them. Chari opines in this regard: “Douloti is no gendered passive feminine but an innocent tribal girl who has become one of Paramananda’s Kamiya. In her own simple innocent and human ingenuity, she understands the inescapability of her father becoming a Kamiya ‘as natural’.”(62)

Douloti earned for her master forty thousand rupees. When Douloti was beautiful and young, she was tortured, exploited, plundered and wasted. Once she was affected by venereal disease and could no longer be useful in the trade, she was abandoned. Suffering due to her disease and dying with hunger, she went to a hospital in Tohri, where she was robbed by the sweeper woman. She laid unconscious with fever for four days. She was affected by tuberculosis and she lost all her strength and energy. Since her condition became worse, the doctor asked her to go to the hospital in Mandar.

When Douloti left the hospital, she felt that her condition still worsened. She realised that she was going to die. So instead of going to Mandar, she decided to go to her native place Seora. She walked towards the village, where the school teacher Mohan Srivastava of basic primary school was preparing for the celebration of Independence Day by drawing a huge map of India. Douloti was unable to walk any longer and vomiting blood she fell “spread-eagled” (94) covering the entire map of India.
Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav remark about the plight of Douloti:

Douloti collapses on a map of India that has been carefully prepared with a view to hoisting the Indian tricolor on Independence Day. She fills up the empty map with the bloody scars of her exploitation and suffering. Symbolic practices through which the nation is articulated in the figure of woman as plenitude are metonymically challenged and displaced by the dehumanized and mutilated female body (16).

The way Douloti lay on the map echoes the morning after her first rape where she lay stretched out in pain and nakedness. This suggests the complete identification of the exploited adivasi woman with India. She was all over India. She was India which meant that the poor exploited workers composed the majority of the people in India.

The third story “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha” converses the suffering of the tribals and marginalized people all over the world. In his article “Transcribing Resistance: Cartographies of Struggling Bodies and Minds in Mahasweta Devi’s Imaginary Maps” Waseem Anwar avers, “Though focusing only on the lifestyle of Nagesia tribals, “Pterodactyl” is “an abstract” of what Spivak and Devi sum up as the author’s entire tribal experience” (Imaginary Maps xiv). This story also describes the traditions and lifestyle of the entire tribal world. The adivasi people of Pirtha faced permanent famine due to drought. People were dying because of famine and diseases in Pirtha. The survey map of Pirtha looked like some prehistoric creature which had fallen on its face. The story reflects the conditions that prevailed then.

A Bhil tribal committed suicide with his six family members. The tribal people lived in the land of primordial dusk. The adivasis invaded and crawled into the earth’s womb for
safety during the remote day. In Palamu district, in the state of Bihar, the parhayas were designated as criminal tribes by the British. They named them as Harashi, Mahidar, Hali, Kamiya in many tongues. Their fields and homes disappeared and their land vanished like dust before a storm.

The Bhopal gas incident destroyed their honour. The state government refused to allow a health care in Pirtha at the time of gas affair in Bhopal. From the polluted water supply, enteric fever started in the village. Puran Sahay was an urban journalist. He was projected as a representative of the mainstream culture of capitalist India. He reported on the condition of the Pterodactyl. “Sahay’s explorations of the land” according to Waseem Anwar “not only question representation against misrepresentation but also deal with the myth of inventing poverty.” (85) Both the government and the tribals did not like a journalist entering into their place.

There was famine in summer but during rainy season, plenty of water flowed down the hill sides. Their area was neglected. People suffered because of water problem. The plan of building a canal was never started. It was reported that the fever started from the polluted water supply and that people died of drinking the polluted water. The chief food of the people was fleshy tuber of the khajra. Since the roots of khajra sucked that water, people died when they ate the fleshy tuber of the khajra. They died due to enteric infection, cancer, coronaries and thrombosis. Even the doctors who worked in the health centres could not do anything to protect the people from these diseases.

Inspite of the poverty and famine, the people of Pirtha refused to leave their place. One of the tribal men, Shankar questions the logic behind their oppression: “Why should we leave? Isn’t this our place? Now no tribal will leave. The ancestors’ soul let us know that all
the places it visited are ours. Can anyone leave any more, or will they leave?” (195). He also says, “If they want to give us aid, let them give it to us here. Spreading his arms, he says, All this land was ours, the kings took it from us. They were supposed to return it to us, to whom did they give it back? No, we won’t go anywhere. Let them give us our dues here . . . If not let them forget, let them forget us. At most we’ll die, nothing worse can happen”(195-196).

Sanichari of Rudali was a poor low-caste woman. She was cursed because she was born on an unlucky day. From the beginning of her life, she suffered a lot. She did not cry when her mother-in-law, brother-in-law and his wife died. When her husband died also, she did not weep because she was busy doing the funeral rituals for him.

Sanichari’s sick son also died of tuberculosis. Her daughter-in-law Parbatia left her and she had to take care of her grandson Haroa. She suffered a lot to repay the amount which she borrowed for her husband’s shraddha. She led a hard life. After many years she met her playmate Bikhni who also lived in poverty without any one to look after her. So Bikhni and Sanichari lived together and became rudalis – professional mourners. But when Bikhni died, Sanichari was left alone. She continued the job of a mourner, earning some money and food out of it.

Sanichari then became a professional mourner. Her daughter-in-law Parbatia became a whore and lived in the whore quarters. When Sanichari got a chance to meet her daughter-in-law Parbatia, she asked her to leave her work and come with her to be a rudali. But she refused to become a rudali. However, Sanichari was able to change many whores who were driven to such condition by hunger into professional mourners. Finally, Sanichari attended the funeral of Gambir Singh. It was here Sanichari shed her real tears. She brought with her a lot of whores from the whores’ quarters. When the plight of these poverty stricken women is
like this, one cannot but write of their suffering. Maitreyi Chatterjee has quoted in her article, “Three Faces of Eve” the words of Mahasweta Devi, “It is not possible to write romantic stories around hunger.” (20)

The story *Rudali* has been made into a commercially successful film. It has also been given a vastly perceptive performance by Calcutta’s Rangakarmi. The central character is a woman who fights with the society she lives in, for her mere survival. It is an enduring fight against poverty because of unashamed manipulation. Poverty, hunger and class repression cannot be confined to regions. There was no difference between a village in Palamu, the poorest district in Bihar and a village in West Bengal because the same conditions prevail all over India.

Thus *Rudali* pictures the predicament of a poor dusad woman Sanichari for whom mourning for her dead husband and son was considered a luxury because she had to procure money even for their last rites. The irony of the situation is that when she was not able to mourn for her husband and son, she became a professional mourner who would weep at the death of others for a living. The profession she took up introduced by her childhood friend Bikhni, fetched her two square meals a day and she could not dream of anything beyond that. The following passage brings out the pathetic condition of not one Sanichari but many rural women who suffer a similar fate:

She could see that he was going to die, and knew that her dreams of building a life around Budhua would never be fulfilled. Even her more modest dreams have never been realized. She had wanted to buy a wooden comb for her hair, to wear shellac bangles for a full year - neither of these dreams had materialized. With time, her dreams had changed shape. Her son and
daughter-in-law would earn enough, they would support her, she imagined sitting in the winter sun sharing a bowl of gur and sattu with her grandson - had this last dream been over-ambitious? Had she sinned by wanting too much? Is that why Budhua was wasting away before her eyes? (77)

The relationship between the childhood playmates Sanichari and Bikhni was the major record of bonding and support within a community. These women were not related but they had lived in the same situations. Both suffered as they had been neglected by members of their family, who could have supported them in their old age. Bound by the common bond of poverty, these poor women had to struggle for their survival. By joining together, they not only strengthened their relationship but also gained economic stability by pooling their resources.

Mahasweta Devi’s ‘community’ includes the prostitutes also who were traditionally seen outside the community, as a group of outcasts, or as a separate community of their own, even though their mothers and families were within the village community with histories which locate them in the community. They suffered as they were exploited under different circumstances. Some have been used as fresh meat by the malik-mahajans and then thrown away. Some had mothers who were kept women and in their turn were forced into prostitution. Other ambitious women who ran away from home looking for better opportunities ended up as prostitutes. They led a confined life and it was protected by poverty and social class. Dulan explained the socio-economic causes that had made them prostitutes, and blamed the malik-mahajans who were responsible for their plight. By establishing that they were like every other poor working women trying to fill their stomachs, he undid the common belief that they were the ‘other’. That is why he encouraged Sanichari
and Bikhni to take them into the community to work with them. Parbatia, the daughter-in-law of Sanichari escaped from a brutally limited, extremely poor living, leaving behind all her duties and responsibilities. She ran off with a travelling medicineman, who convinced her with promises of places to see, attractive surprises like Nautanki (dance) shows, cinemas and circuses and daily treats of puri-kachauri. In a few years she was back as a provisionally ill-fated prostitute in Tohri. At the end of the story, she was drawn back into the fold by her former mother-in-law, who invited her to join the community of rudalis. And the text closes on this note, with Sanichari arranging and training the prostitutes into a group.

With this transformation of them from being housekeepers to organizers and professional mourners they gain positive energy and confidence. As Anjum Katyal states,

The household is a domain where the woman can have control. Being in charge is a good feeling, and domesticity allows Bikhni to relish it. And finally, although Mahasweta Devi shrugs off the gendered metaphor of the rudali by saying that this particular profession just happens to be open only to women, she has created a powerful and complex symbol- rich in ironies - in the closing image of her text: an organized band of women, comprised of the marginalized and outcast, intervening to subvert the solemn hypocrisy of an occasion which is a metonymy for a patriarchal, exploitative system (24).

Sanichari’s meeting with Bikhni is of great significance because that happened when she had lost every member of her family - her husband and her son through their death, her daughter-in-law who had become a prostitute and her grandson, who had run away. It was brought out clearly in the text: “When she had given up hope of recovering Haroa, suddenly she met Bikhni.”(24) Like Bikhni, she too was not tied up with any bond or relationships.
She was no one’s daughter or wife or mother or mother-in-law or grandmother. Her condition was similar to Bikhni’s who, abandoned by her son had left home with no place to go. Sanichari and Bikhni were in a highly unusual situation for Indian women, as they were free from all family ties and familial roles. They were equals socially and financially. Their companionship was formed on the basis of their common situation. As Anjum Katyal asserts in “The Metamorphosis of Rudali”: “Once again, the author turns disability into an enabling force.”(25)

When compared to Sanichari, Bikhni was more cheerful and reckless and more rebellious. When her son refused to help her pay off the debt she had incurred to meet his marriage expenses, and cut off her means of livelihood by taking away her cows, she did not lose heart. Instead, she escaped with their goats and sold them. She valued life and survival more than anything else and she was prepared to survive even by begging at railway stations.

When Sanichari was much worried about the society and what people would talk about them, Bikhni never bothered about anything. She took up the suggestion given by Dulan and she made Sanichari see things in a different light. Bikhni accepted the suggestion of Dulan to become a rudali and her willing acceptance helped Sanichari also to take it up. When she asked, ‘Won’t there be talk in the village?’ Bikhni playfully replied, ‘So let them talk!’(26) When they needed more support, Dulan suggested that they bring in the prostitutes from Tohri. Bikhni readily agreed to go and negotiate with them, while Sanichari objected thinking again of what the village would say. However, later she realized the need to stand together as a community and thus changed her views. Thus Dulan and Bikhni were the main instruments behind the empowerment of Sanichari.
The arrangement between them was that Bikhni, for sharing her little house, would offer Sanichari her nest-egg: Rs. 20. As they were pooling resources, they formed an economic unit which was completely different from the traditional family unit. This was something extraordinary and the village community was surprised when Bikhni settled down and became a part of their life: “Bikhni surprised everyone. She didn’t go to visit her son even once”. To these two women Sanichari and Bikhni, community was more than the family and blood ties. As Anjum Katyal states: “People who come from far away, strangers, can become as close as one’s own kin. Like the bark of one tree grafted on to another.” (26) Bikhni was very pragmatic and did not give in for sentiments.

Bikhni and Sanichari developed into a professional team. By visiting the markets, bazaars and the shops near the bus stop, Bikhni would know about the dying and gathered the required details about them. They would cover themselves with their black cloth and tie a snack into their anchals and set out to the houses of these rich people. As soon as they entered, they would quickly lay down their terms, negotiating with the accounts-keeper. They would never be hesitant or shy. Thus a social ritual turned into a profession. When the women lay down their terms, the gomasthas did not have any choice but to agree to their terms, since the rudalis were in great demand after their spectacular debut and there was a scarcity of options in the area. Thus Sanichari, in the company of Bikhni learnt to shine in her profession and this brought them close to each other.

These simple women developed a bond of unity between them as their relationship grew. Bikhni, who returned from the Tohri prostitute quarter, reported to Sanichari that she saw her daughter-in-law there. Though Sanichari did not want to discuss the subject with Bikhni, she was disturbed by the information. She recalled the details about her daughter-in-law and discussed her with Bikhni at leisure:
It was her fate. I wouldn’t have turned her out after Budhua’s death.

No, no, of course you wouldn’t have.

Did she look very poor?

Very.

Sanichari fell silent (27-28).

To Sanichari, this was the beginning of recognition and compassion after a cautious inquiring towards finding and justifying her present situation. Their friendship grew along with their interdependence.

One day Bikhni wanted to go to Ranchi so that she could have a glimpse of her son. The conversation that took place reveals the strong bond between them.

Sanichari said, Well, since you put it like that I won’t say anything. You say you want to see your son. But will you come back soon? Or will you stay on there?

How can I? That day I had walked out of my home, and I met you by chance.

If you hadn’t been there that day, what would I have done?

. . . It was a three-mile walk to the bus stop. Sanichari accompanied Bikhni, saw her onto the bus, advised her - It’s eight rupees for a seat, squat in the aisle, you’ll only have to pay two rupees (28).

After Bikhni’s departure, Sanichari felt lonely: “At home, Sanichari felt restless. Out of habit she went into the forest to collect firewood, and returned with a bundle of dried twigs. Bikhni would never return empty-handed. She’d bring back something or the other – either a couple of withered twigs or a length of rope she found on the path, or a pat of cowdung.”(28)
Bikhni did not return as she promised and the news of her death came to Sanichari as a rude shock. Though Sanichari was much grieved at heart, the lessons she learnt with Bikhni made her brave. She did not shed her tears. Since the loss was great, her tears which have become a commodity could not be used to compensate for that. They were to be used only for her business.

In the story of survival, Sanichari emerged as a self-confident and empowered woman overcoming all obstacles. She became bold and relaxed and did what she hesitated to do before she met Bikhni. She invited Parbatia and Gulbadan, the two ex-village girls to join the profession as it would be a means of their livelihood when other means failed them. The emboldened Sanichari guided others also towards empowerment. She urged the prostitutes to use the profession also as a means of revenge. Gulbadan turned lament into mockery when she cast a sneering wink at her father’s nephew to whose lusts her father Gambir Singh wanted her to submit.

The author gave a realistic picture of the poor in the society and their struggle against poverty and for survival. According to Maitreyi Chatterjee:

Mahasweta Devi has excelled in the docu-fiction form. Reality is frozen in time to represent the deprived of the earth. None of the conclusions are forced or wish fulfillment. They are inevitable as destiny. Her portrayal of the society’s underbelly is different from the usual depiction by most urban Bengali fiction writers. For them the low caste woman is an amoral entity with an insatiable sexual appetite. But Mahasweta Devi’s activist role has overlapped the writer and has helped her to portray real life characters. Her women are survivors against heavy odds a dignified in their poverty (20).
Rudali is the powerful novella about professional mourners. Chitralekha Basu says in her article “Women unlimited,” “Set in the arid badlands of rural India, this is a timeless tale about women who can survive only by making a spectacle of other people’s death. A comment on the state of caste-ridden rural India, Rudali’s story is poignant in its understanding of the human mind, disarming in its dispassionate candour.”(20)

The novel *Mother of 1084* presents the psychological struggles of the protagonist Sujata in search of her identity in a world ruled by money-governed hypocrites. Sujata, a bank employee was the sensitive wife of a wealthy man Dibyanath. She was also a loving mother to her four children. But she was a stranger in her own household and had been relegated to the level of a slave. Sujata’s husband did not have any real love for her. Even when she developed labour pains, she had to finish all the household work and go to the hospital alone in a taxi. Her husband or mother-in-law would never accompany her because her husband Dibyanath’s philosophy was that she should be under his feet. After the death of her son Brati, Sujata realized that her son too remained a complete stranger not only to the family but to her also.

Sujata’s husband was a womanizer and a hypocrite. She did not protest against her husband but suffered silently. When he wanted her to take up a job in a bank, she thought it would be an escape from the unloved world of her family. She silently bore the humiliation she was subjected to and continued to discharge her duties to the family. When the death news of her son reached her, Sujata felt guilty for not knowing about her son while he was alive. So she decided to conduct a search for the discovery of truth about her son which ended up as a self-discovery. Her meeting with Brati’s friends and their relatives and what she heard about their experiences helped in that journey of self-discovery.
Sujata met Brati’s friend Somu’s mother. Like Brati, Somu was also killed in the encounter. Sujata learnt more about her son from Somu’s mother. She also met Nandini, Brati’s lover and faithful follower. Nandini was crippled in police torture. The story of Nandini exposed Sujata to the realities of the contemporary society and about the young revolutionaries. Nandini’s strong faith in human dignity inspired Sujata. Though Somu’s mother also suffered due to the loss of her son in the encounter, she pacified and consoled Sujata and she had a good opinion of Brati. Sujata’s meeting with Somu’s mother brought her face to face with reality. She said, “I lost my son, my son’s father, and I, with this tortoise’s life of mine shall live on forever, the two funeral pyres burning within” (35).

Sujata was taken aback to find her husband Dibyanath interact with the men who were responsible for the death of her son Brati and who gave the number “1084” to his corpse which denotes the countless disgusts grasping the common life during the total destruction of the People’s Movement and the organization’s endeavour to reduce its rebels to the level of an unimportant number. Precisely on Brati’s second birthday after his death, Sujata sets out on her search for him.

Satyanarayana remarks about the feelings of Sujata in his article “Subaltern Voices: A Note on Women in Mahasweta Devi’s Five Plays” are quoted extensively here:

For the first time, she feels the pangs of being left alone. She goes through a painful process of discovering Brati. She is now fully aware of the situation she lives in. The more she learns about him, the closer she gets to him. And her encounter with the followers of Brati provides her with an insight into the reality of the struggles of the oppressed. The barriers between the hapless mothers, whose sons have also been killed along with Brati and Sujata seem to
be dwindling away, as she frequents their huts. She can find an echo of her silent scream of torment and desperation in their unending sufferings. Having realized the significance of Brati’s sacrifice, she feels no regret at her being classed with him. The vacuum created by his death is thus filled and she decides to take on the fight against the present system, represented by the likes of Dibyanath. Infact, her discovery of Brati helps her discover her “self” and her cause as a mother and a human being (81-82).

At the end of the story Sujata died because the appendix burst in her stomach.

Sujata found a right basic reason for her son’s life she had never known. She was not aware of her situation of life or of the politics of economic deprivation and exploitation. She saw in Brati’s revolt a clear consistency of the silent revolt she had carried within herself against her corrupt respectable husband and her other children and their spouses and friends. The closer she felt to her dead son, the more painfully she felt the loss. In a sense she could find in his death a satisfaction she has longed for and never dared to claim for herself. That one day in Sujata’s life which was spent in ‘discovering’ Brati for the first time, in a sequence of encounter with people beyond her area of experience was spent in creating a connection with Brati or with what he struggled and died for.

The son’s death was an instance of self discovery for the mother. She travelled into the past to think about her personal life – the daily dishonor she faced as a woman and her silent, firm struggle against the self-centred world around her. For the first time she realized that throughout her life she had a dark survival and she had been very obedient, silent and faithful. Her husband Dibyanath and his mother were the centre of attraction in the home. Sujata carried out whatever she was supposed to do. Whenever Sujata went for delivery, her
mother-in-law would go and live with her sister. Even Dibyanath never took her to the
hospital during the time of delivery as he had to obey his mother. He “had not allowed
Sujata the most common rights that a mother has. His mother held the reins. Dibyanath never
knew that one could honour one’s mother without humiliating one’s wife. His wife under his
feet, his mother held aloft. That was his ethos.” (45)

Dibyanath was a male chauvinist. His concept was that as an Indian wife, Sujata’s
primary duty was to love, respect and obey her husband unquestioningly and he was not
required to do anything to win his wife’s respect, love and loyalty. Sujata knew that her
husband flirted with women, but she did not have enough courage to question him. Sujata
was told to take up a job, when her husband had financial problems, and when there was
improvement in his condition, she was expected to give up her job. Even Brati who hardly
moved with others in the house understood his father. He told Sujata “father used you like a
doormat.” (81) In the beginning, she took oppression as a deceitful act and did not possess
the courage to dispute. Sujata’s husband always criticized that she wanted to be independent.
He did not like to share the responsibilities of bringing up children or running the household.

Every work of Mahasweta Devi deals with one kind of social problem or another.
Rudali and Mother of 1084, represent this feature. These two works symbolize Mahasweta
Devi’s relentless battle against the inhuman society. Sanichari and Sujata, the protagonists of
these two novels, opposed and overthrew the power structure in their own way. When Rudali
deals with the caste system and the brutal abuse of the poor, Mother of 1084 explores the
powerful reactions against such oppression, which led to the origin of movements like
Naxalism. It brings out the deceptiveness of the society and its baselessness.
Mahasweta Devi’s *Rudali* deals with the struggles and final emancipation of Sanichari against her poverty in the cruel landlord system. *Mother of 1084* portrays the emotional struggles of Sujata in search of her identity in a world ruled by rich and self-deceiving people. Sanichari belonged to the lowest social class of society and Sujata was a bank employee from an upper middle class family. Though Sanichari and Sujata come from two ends in the communal division, both were equally oppressed by the existing dishonest system.

Mahasweta Devi is an exceptional writer who is conscious of her social responsibility and duty towards her readers. Uma Parameshwaran’s view regarding this is quoted by Smitha in the article “Rising Out of the Ashes: The Indomitable in Mahasweta Devi’s *Rudali* and *Mother of 1084*”: “She writes in her own agenda, in her pursuit of addressing her own countrymen in her own language, about the politics of her own environs in a medium that she believes should be used in the service of awakening people to the injustices of the world in which they live.” (91)

In Mahasweta Devi’s works, the gender problem comes to the light while depicting class and caste tussles. She tries to frequently survey the causes for the endless sufferings of the marginalized people. She picturizes woman not as a separate organism but just as a new type of sufferer. Although both *Rudali* and *Mother of 1084* portray the sufferings of women, they are created as part of the whole. In *Rudali*, Sanichari’s husband, son, Dulan and many other men also suffer the same marginalization as Sanichari and other women. In *Mother of 1084*, Sujata and Brati equally traverse the suppression.

Though the female characters of Mahasweta Devi were shown as victims of the male-dominated social system, they were not pictured as sad swans of suffering. The superior part
of her works was that the downtrodden finally came out as survivors. In the novel *Mother of 1084*, Sujata, “... begins her personal journey from an illusioned ignorance, submission, compromise into the realm of awakening and knowledge. Not only does she understand the ideologies that snatched her son’s life, but also rediscovers her own suppressed self-esteem and learns to assert it” (Biswal, www.shvoong.com). When Sujata asserted her individuality, the lower class woman Sanichari rose against suppression. Thus they activated to alter the patriarchal societal norms. Anjum Katyal, in “The Metamorphosis of Rudali”, expresses, “In both incarnations of Rudali, it has been a woman auteur who has wrought and rewrought this text which revolves around the life of a woman-the poor, low caste Sanichari.” (1) Sanichari trained herself to amend the poverty and other forms of repression. She also required great effort to use the system to her purpose. Sujata accepted the self-deceiving rules of the patriarchal society and realized her alienation. This helped her in protesting against the hypocritical legal, political and social system which insisted on the act of denying her identity and her motherhood.

Dibyanath’s interest in Sujata was restricted to sexual satisfaction. His indifference to her and his extra-marital relationships was taken silently by Sujata. *Mother of 1084* was an effort, not to show the cruelty upon the lower class by the upper class, but to illustrate the result of the subjugation and the methods chosen to deal with these results. The influential people would attempt to do anything for upholding the structure because their life depends on this division. While the killing of Brati was one of the ways of using the power, the wiping out of his memories from the household by Dibyanath and others who were an essential part of this system was an attempt to keep the political control in proper place.
The common lead in *Rudali* and *Mother of 1084* is the power structure and its functioning. Power does not differentiate between the lower classes and the upper classes. In *Rudali*, it was the untouchables who suffered due to the power structure. In *Mother of 1084*, Somu’s family suffered due to their deprived financial state and Sujata suffered owing to the lack of the freedom and gratitude she had to meet in the family. In case when one has to suffer to the maximum, the downtrodden tried out various plans to resist and survive. In the article “The business of mourning” Gagan Gill remarks about the novels *Mother of 1084* and *Rudali*:

In *Mother of 1084*, the central character, a bereaved mother, circles around her grief with a strangely moving numbness. In *Rudali*, there is no space for personal grief, because surviving an inhuman economic ordeal is the overwhelming concern. Both the texts deal with the business of mourning without shedding any tears. In both, the protagonists are considered unnatural, even monstrous, by the community around them for not shedding any tears. And yet, it is precisely at this juncture, that Mahasweta Devi takes up the narrative of their lives to examine it with clinical precision . . . *Rudali* is a witty counterpoint to *Mother of 1084*. While the mother in *Mother of 1084* finds her own life intensifying the closer she moves to the dead body of her son, the central character of *Rudali* finds herself only by moving away from her dear, dead ones. She herself is so precariously close to death from hunger, that she cannot allow herself the indulgence of grief. Her penury has completely divested her of all human dignity (30).
The continuous negligence and the little part of support that both Sanichari and Sujata got, led to their freedom. Sanichari rose against the system by becoming one with it and attaining it. But Sujata got her freedom when she was able to gather courage to question the power structure which was performed against her and had indirectly led to the death of Brati.

Malavika Karlekar’s comments on the novel *Mother of 1084*:

*Mother of 1084* is a story which can be read at multiple levels; Mahasweta Devi’s particular genius allows her to tell us about the Naxalite movement, the idealism of its actors, their strategies, and concomitant police brutality. She also tells it as a story of many women. The activist Nandini, and the two mothers, Somu’s and Brati’s, as well as his sisters speak of many things, narrate many events. The movement brings together women who may never have met; and when they do, personal grief interweaves subtly with the public world of violence and death (141).

Sanichari was free to identify the boundaries of her existence, dissimilar to the upperclass wives of the maliks. Anjum Katyal has quoted in the article “Metamorphosis of Rudali” Mahasweta Devi’s interview in which she has said about the background of Rudali: “The background of ‘Rudali’ extends much beyond the [story]. I have travelled the whole of Palamau extensively by foot. I have seen all kinds of exploitation including bonded labour . . . A good number of my stories, including ‘Bichan’, ‘Shikar’, ‘Jagmohan’s Death’, ‘Shishu’ and ‘Rudali’ are placed in this particular locale.” (30)

The fourth book taken for the study is *Breast Stories*. In the first story “Draupadi”, Dopdi Mejhen was a bonded labourer who turned into a tribal revolutionary. She was arrested by the police officers under the instructions of the army officer Senanayak and was
gang raped in police custody. She was continuously raped and was not given food and water. When Dopdi was arrested, her political career and her fearless temperament could not save her from the indignity she suffered at the hands of these people. Due to the brutal treatment, she lost her consciousness. When she finally gained consciousness, Dopdi faced a situation which no other woman could face and showed her resistance in a quite unusual way. She made her torturer confused and go mad because she refused to be clothed after the sexual harassment and she preferred to be naked. She protested by throwing back the clothes because they were removed by the police.

As Jyothi Rani and K. Katyayani opine in their article “Violence on Women in the Context of Indian Political Economy-A Study of Mahasweta Devi’s Sri Sri Ganesh Mahima and Draupadi”, “The protest is against the insult meted out to women in the patriarchal culture which not only subordinates woman but insults her and tortures her sexually.” (131) She refused to drink and when she was about to say the word water, she caught her lower lip in her teeth. When a soldier gave her water, she poured it on the ground refusing to satisfy her thirst. She showed her thighs meted with dry blood to Senanayak. Challenging him she said, “You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man”? (37) Thus even while she was suffering, she was able to question the power structure.

Jennifer Wenzel says in “Epic Struggles over India’s Forests in Mahasweta Devi’s Short Fiction”, “Mahasweta’s Dopdi uses her mutilated body to impress upon her enemies that it is they who have made her into a bloody whore, not the fact that as a widow, she hides out in the forest with young men. Principled, disciplined subversion of caste Hindu sexual norms is at the heart of the figure of Draupadi.”(145)
Dopdi stressed her feminity and refused to surrender due to abuse and physical suffering. In the article “Art as Protest: Social Commitment in the Novels of Mahasweta Devi” Urmila Chakraborty quotes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s words that Draupadi is a “revolutionary feminist material.”(174) She also quotes Mahasweta Devi’s words in an interview: “I’m not a feminist. I consider woman as an integral part of society, and I think that women are equally oppressed as men in the present social set up.”(174) The plight of women remains the same all over the world. Regarding the sufferings of women, Jyothi Rani and K. Katyayani remark:

Male Chauvinism and economic hegemony have always subjected a woman to suffering and inferior status. Once a writer chooses to address himself/herself to the basic issues plaguing the society, he/she becomes universal by cutting across the barriers of time and space. So Mahasweta Devi is as much relevant to us as she is to the oppressed women in West Bengal (132).

Jennifer Wenzel says, “Mahasweta’s stories ‘Draupadi’ and ‘Douloti the Bountiful’ draw on the epic . . . conflict between Hindu and tribal cultures to elucidate the dynamics underlying contemporary forms of exploitation and protest.” (141)

The second story “Breast-giver” in the collection of Breast Stories is the story that builds itself on the cruel ironies of caste, class and patriarchy. The protagonist Jashoda, a poor Brahmin woman became a professional wet nurse to support her family. Jashoda’s husband met with an accident and got his legs hurt. She started breast feeding the whole Haldar family’s grand children in order to earn money. She had to breed annually to make her breast yield milk so that she could earn more money to make both ends meet; that means that she had to suffer endlessly. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “‘Breast-giver’: For Author,
Teacher, Subaltern, Historian . . .” says regarding the (exchange) value and its immediate appropriation:

The milk that is produced in one’s own body for one’s own children is a use-value. When there is a super-fluity of use-values, exchange values arise. That which cannot be used is exchanged. As soon as the (exchange) value of Jashoda’s milk merges, it is appropriated. Good food and constant sexual servicing are provided so that she can be kept in prime condition for optimum lactation. The milk she produces for her children is presumably through ‘necessary labour’. The milk that she produces for the children of her master’s family is through ‘surplus labour’. Indeed, this is how the origin of this transition is described in the story (87-88).

Jashoda suckled fifty kids, including thirteen of her own children; and thus became the milk-mother of the whole world. She was given food and her husband was also given a job in the Haldar household. Jashoda spoiled her health to save the beauty and health of Haldar’s daughter-in-laws. Finally when she suffered from breast cancer, no one cared for her. All her children and her milk children abandoned her. The mistress was also not bothered about Jashoda’s health.

Jashoda who was exploited by her children, milk children, her husband and her masters was kept in a lonely room. Later she was taken to the hospital where she died. Thus she was not only betrayed by her breasts which were her chief identity for years, but also by the dozens of sons, she suckled. Kalyani Dutta says about the sufferings of Jashoda in her article “Battling for the people: Mahasweta Devi” : “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)

The third story “Behind the Bodice” is about Gangor, a migrant labourer. One day when she was breast feeding her infant, a professional photographer Upin took a photograph of her amazing breasts and sold the photographs without realizing what would be the outcome of it. From the money he earned by selling the photos, he gave to Gangor as and when he took photographs. Since he was a photographer, he was excited and took some natural photos. By seeing the photos many men approached her and she was ruined by them. The people who abused her included a police man, a labour contractor and so many others. She was abused and exploited, and later she turned out to be a prostitute.

When Upin met Gangor after a long time, he asked her to show her breast. When she showed the breast, he was stunned to see her breasts ruined. Her breasts were scratched by nails and fingers. Nothing remained there except a gaping hole. Upin realized that all these things happened to Gangor because of the photographs taken by him. Every day she suffered with pain in her breasts and a baby in her hand. Gangor died due to the pain she suffered in her breast and also because of the exploitation by the upper caste men. In the Introduction to 

*Breast Stories*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states, “Upin made Gangor self-conscious about the unique beauty of her breasts, without any thought of the social repercussions. His political correctness ended with personally not lusting after Gangor’s breasts: ‘Learn to praise and respect a beautiful thing,’ he chides.” (xiii) Even before Upin realized his fault, Gangor blamed him. Finally, the innocent Upin Puri, judged by his victim, encountered his sentence upon the tracks.
The first story “Dhouli” in the collection of *Outcast: Four stories* is the story of Dhouli, a dusad’s daughter. Dhouli was a widow. Her husband was not a good man. He died of fever. After her husband’s death she lived with her mother-in-law and worked in the mahajan’s farm. She became an object of her husband’s elder brother’s gaze. “But her husband’s elder brother from Bhalatore landed up. Began eyeing her.” (8) He was the main cause behind her ending up as a prostitute. The high caste Misras – who in the end influenced Dhouli’s widowhood into prostitution, were also not consistent, as there are voices of opposition within that upper-caste family too. So Dhouli came away from her in-law’s house.

In her village, Dhouli was loved by a Brahmin boy Misrilal. He was called as ‘deota’. Misrilal wanted to marry her. When Misrilal’s mother and brother Kundan came to know about the love affair between Misrilal and Dhouli, they did not like Misrilal getting married to Dhouli. So they sent him to another place.

Although Mahasweta Devi is known for her unavering dedication to realism, at certain moments in the story she seems to idealize Dhouli’s sexuality. Dhouli was aware of her charming beauty, and celebrated it: “She knew it was because of her tremulous eyes, her slender waist, her blossoming breasts.” (7) Likewise, images of the forest nearby the village burned with unexpected richness: “In the forest bordering their village, the afternoons were primordial, languorous. Dhouli’s mind and body were caught off guard.”(11) When Dhouli went to the forest, she either slipped into “memories of long ago.”(8) or she “would lie down and rest, spreading the end of her sari on the ground.” (9) The forest seemed a more peaceful place when compared to the society to which Dhouli belonged to: “She wasn’t scared of wolves or leopards. If men were afraid of animals, so were animals afraid of man. The forest
was peaceful. She was almost over the uneasiness caused by Misrilal’s words. She was at peace.”

Dhouli loved Misrilal but was afraid to marry him because in Misras family, they would use the tribal women and then abandon them. The women would bear their children and they would be given work, money and food. Dhouli carried Misrilal’s son in her womb. But Misrilal did not give her land. He gave her money whenever he met her. However, that was not sufficient for her living. Meanwhile Misrilal got married. Dhouli gave birth to a son. In order to save her son and her mother, she had to do some work. The village men started knocking and throwing stones at her door. She slept with a dagger-like weapon near her. She went to a nearby shop to get a job. But the shopkeeper refused to give her job because he was afraid of Misrilal’s brother Kundan. Dhouli felt that if Kundan did not kill them physically, he would make them die without giving food.

Dhouli’s mother was angry with her and said to her that if she could not do anything, it was better to kill herself. So Dhouli went to the waterfall where she met Misrilal. She tried to drown herself thinking that if she died, the community would look after her mother. Regarding her son, if her mother looked after him, he would live, otherwise he would also die. But a man with a printed lungi and shirt (head coolie) saved her. He asked her about the dagger-like weapon. She understood that he was also one who pelt stones at her door. Realizing that such was her fate, she asked him to come to her house with money, and some makai. As soon as she reached her house, she asked her mother to go to Shanichari’s house along with her son. From that day she became a whore.

When Kundan came to know that Dhouli became a whore, he was angry with his brother. He met his brother and told him that it was because of him that they had a whore in
their village. Misrilal came to the village and confirmed the fact. He shouted at her by saying that instead of becoming a whore she should have died. Dhouli said that she did not want to die because she did not commit any sin. A panchayat meeting was held and they decided that a whore should not live in their village. So Dhouli was sent to Ranchi to continue her job.

Anup Beniwal and Vandana comment about the life of Dhouli in their article “Writing the Subaltern at the Interface of Fiction and Ideology: an engagement with the works of Mahasweta Devi”: “Poverty alone is not her curse; her gender, too, is the reason for her exploitation. Low-caste status further adds to the miseries of young Dhouli. Thus, class, caste and gender combined together to generate a scenario of grim social and cultural inequality. Since Dhouli suffers on all counts, she is a victim of a hegemonic social regime rather than of economics-driven ideology.”(86-87)

The second story “Shanichari” in the collection of Outcast: Four stories is a story of Shanichari, a lovely sixteen year old Oraon girl from Rata. She was to get married to Chand Tirkey. Shanichari’s story was set against the setting of the Adijati Raksha Movement. The tribal people were moved from their area and were forced to migrate to Kolkata to work in brick kilns in brutal conditions. Shanichari refused to go to Kolkata but during the movement when the BMP, CRP and BSF set free a control of terror, they subjugated her to gang rape along with other women and left them in the jungle without food or clothing. In the end she was forced to look for work in the brick kiln where she was raped daily by the brick kiln owner, Rahmat. His friends, cronies, the local goons, and even the police got their fair share of the female flesh, and the cuts. The brick kiln was separated from the world outside and there was no means to run away.
One day Shanichari began throwing up. This act of Shanichari made Rahmat enraged. Out of anger he said these words:

From tomorrow you’ll work as a *reja*. Josin will stay here with me. Lug bricks, get paid . . . Lug bricks, lug bricks, Shanichari. You wonder where you are, where you’ve been brought – you can’t quite figure out where this place is. With Rahmat’s child in your womb, you stare blankly at the paddy fields stretching to the horizon. The endless fields beckon you to freedom, but you know you’re a prisoner. You don’t know the local language, nor do you remember the way here. If you were carrying Chand Tirkey’s child, your people would have accepted it. But how can you return home with a *diku’s* child in your womb? In your mind’s eye the paddy fields turn into the sal forest, the narrow path between the fields becomes an undulating hill track, and the quiet village in the distance turns into Dhurbaha (51-52).

Later one day the brick kiln was shut down. So Rahmat sent all the women including Shanichari to their home. All the other women were abused, but only Shanichari returned home with a child in her womb. It was because Gohuman gave them pills. When she came back, Shanichari was not accepted in her village. Instead of Shanichari, her father agreed to pay for the repentance feast. Even though the repentance rites and the feast were held, Shanichari remained an outcast.

When a son was born to Shanichari, the villagers did not ask her to abandon her son because they loved children. But Shanichari was worried about her son. It was because according to their custom, the boys who are born to a woman like Shanichari could get
married to only such girls. She also asked her mother to build her a room. Then to save her son, she went and gathered coal near the railway track and sold it.

Shanichari did not accuse her people nor did she question them. With her son tied to her back, she began to collect coal. One day when she sold the coal and was buying oil and salt, she met Hiralal, the wandering singer. To pacify him she said, “Gohuman Bibi too is not the real culprit. You didn’t know that. But I’ve realized it.” (54) When Hiralal asked her who the culprit was, Shanichari said, “Everything around you, ev-er-y-thing” (55) by stretching out her arms including the world around her as culprits. Regarding this the author says, “As long as people like Rahmat unabashedly run brick kilns, as long as Gohumans entice girls like Shanichari, till our motherland can provide basic food and clothing to girls like her, the freeze shot of Shanichari pointing her finger at the accused will remain.”(55) V.P. Singh in the article “The Crisis of the Girl-Child: A Study of Selected Indian Short-stories in English Translation” points out the theme of “Shanichari”:

Poverty and its compulsions is the theme of Shanichari. Children are particularly suspect to poverty since they are easily exploited. What makes it worse for the girl child is that she is exploited sexually. There is a stark reality about this story that one cannot deny or escape from. The real culprit in Shanichari is not the brick-kiln owner who sexually exploits her but the poverty which deprives her of the right to survive with dignity. Mahasweta Devi points out to the vulnerability of the girl in the face of poverty (67-68).

The story “The Fairytale of Rajabasha” portrays another face of the exploitation of tribals. Josmina was a Ho tribal. Even though she was poor, she lived a comfortable life with her husband, Sarjom Purti in Rajabasha. But Nandlal Shahu, the village moneylender, who
was part of a complicated fraud for supplying cheap coolie labour to Punjab, tempted them
with dream of higher wages. He took them to Punjab, and sold them off to Niranjan Singh,
where they had to work for eighteen hours a day. Niranjan raped Josmina daily. They were
able to escape in some way and took refuge with Karnal Singh. Even there Josmina suffered
at the hands of the owner. When they escaped from them again they were caught by Pritam
Singh. After a few days Pritam also abused Josmina. So they escaped from there. Then they
went to Sardar Gyan Singh of Hoshiarpur. Josmina felt that they were suffering because they
had named their son Masidas. Here also Josmina faced the same problem. Gyan Singh
dragged her away and he poured liquor down her throat and he told his cohorts to have her
one by one. After four months they escaped from there. Then they went to Sardar Sarban
Singh of Badala village. They were given the same work schedule. They were happy for a
month. After that Sarban Singh’s son young Sardar Dileep Singh arrived there. Then he went
to the sugarcane fields and grabbed Josmina and abused her. This torture went on for a long
time.

When Sarban came to know of his son’s act, he felt bad and he gave them a full
month’s salary and sent them to their place. Josmina returned home with the hope of
beginning a new life. But her dream of hope became an illusion because she had the
symptom of pregnancy. She was worried because if the villagers came to know that she was
carrying a diku’s child in her womb, they would expel her husband from his own community.
So to save her husband from such disgrace, Josmina jumped into the river Koyena. Before
dying she pleaded to the river, “Oh Koyena, please ask Kolhan not to make Sarjom pay a
penance. He doesn’t have money. He only has twice twenty rupees left. How can he pay?”
(80) The next day Josmina’s body was found floating in the river.
The fourth story “Chinta” in the collection of *Outcast: Four stories* is the story of a young girl Chinta. She was short and fair and wore silver bangles and a tattooed necklace. She was a widow and mother of a two-year old girl. She worked near the house of the narrator in Calcutta. She tied a rope around the waist of her daughter while she was doing her work. Before going there, she lived in a village, with her son Gopal. Since she was a young widow, men came to her house. At that time she would hold on to her son and recite God’s name.

When Utsab came to their village from Calcutta, he too was attracted by her. He was very kind to Gopal and got to her through her son. Utsab was the only support for her in the village. He asked her to leave her son in the village and go with him to Calcutta. He also promised that he would marry her. But when Chinta went to Calcutta with Utsab, he ruined her. He started beating her and after giving her two daughters he absconded.

Chinta couldn’t go back to the village because she had to spend two hundred rupees as penance for having sinned. Meantime her late husband’s uncle and his son who were looking after her son came to Calcutta since it was time for him to get married. They asked her to leave her two daughters and come with them to their village. They would organize the repentance rites. She agreed to go to the village because if she was unwilling to go, nobody would cremate her body. And she feared that her son would be made an outcast.

Before coming to Calcutta also Chinta faced many problems in her village because she was a widow. She faced many difficulties on the way to her work place. The paanwalla had an eye on her. If she was not scared of sinning, she would have earned a lot of money through him. Finally her children were sold and she went to her village with her son and in-laws.
Mahasweta Devi’s *Outcast: Four stories* is a collection of four short stories with women protagonists, three of whom are of adivasi origin. In addition to the stories, two essays from Mahasweta Devi’s activist writings that provide the background for the stories have been included in the text by the translator. Those essays highlight the authenticity of the stories. The stories show Mahasweta Devi’s lifelong connection with the troubles of the tribal people.

Rape takes place as a persisting trope and is accepted as the destiny of the protagonists along with the deprivation of their rights to vote in post-Independence India in the first three stories. In the first story, Dhouli was a dusad’s daughter and a young widow. Misrilal fell in love with her. Dhouli knew the destiny of the women of her community and she fell a prey to the desire of a Brahmin - Misrilal and rejected him. But Misrilal persuaded her of his love and assured to marry her, by telling her that their union would be “all right by the government rules.” (34)

Since Dhouli was a young girl, she couldn’t oppose him and she became pregnant. When Misrilal’s family knew about it, they sent Misrilal away and subjected Dhouli and her mother to miserable humiliation. The destiny of such a woman in her own society depended on the attitude of the Brahmin family. If the Brahmin family pitied the sufferer and offered remuneration, she would be peaceful. Or else she would be made an outcast and would be forced to become a whore. Dhouli resisted such a situation as long as possible, but her hunger forced her to become a common prostitute. The higher caste people who were the cause of her ruin could show only their anger. Dhouli was sent out of the village because she had brought “dishonor” to them, by allowing “the door through which the lion entered” to be “visited by rats and swine!”(30).
Rekha and Anup Beniwal state in “From Re-Presentation to Self-Presentation: The Problematics of Female Body/Sexuality in Contemporary Indian Women Writing”:

The ethical-moral context of Taharr, the locale of “Dhouli,” normalizes the sexual exploitation of dusad women by deotas as an upper caste and class privilege. Here land, female-body and money blur into and substitute each other. Those women who passively conform to this arrangement are patronized and those who dare to infringe on it become vulnerable not only to inter but also intra-caste/class exploitation (79-80).

The conditions portrayed by Mahasweta Devi in the stories are terribly depressing and a shocking accusation of the social system that allows such injustice to continue. It appeared as though rape has become an unavoidable reality of daily life for the tribal women who venture out of their natural habitat for their livelihood. One must keep in mind the fact that within the tribal society rape was very rare and women enjoyed a grade of respect. What made those events more culpable was the truth that the whole executive system was involved in something illegal. In his article “Of Rape and Marginalization” M. Asaduddin quotes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s views on Mahasweta Devi’s “Breast -giver” as “the parable of India after colonization” and the condition of Douloti in “Douloti, the Bountiful”, the bonded prostitute who died of venereal disease, to be “true for the rest of India” as her bleeding, rotting carcass covers the entire Indian peninsula.” (34)

Enakshi Chatterjee comments in “In Splendid Isolation: ENAKSHI CHATTERJEE pays tribute to Mahasweta Devi, winner of the 1996 Jnanpith Award”,

Some have found Mahasweta’s stories too contrived, too calculated to prove a point. But there can be no two opinions about the sincerity of her concern.
Compassion and sympathy join hands with various literary devices like the use of myth and sweeping historic imagination, resulting in an intensity which gives her work a distinctness unmatched in contemporary Bangla fiction. Between her admirers and detractors, the writer Mahasweta stands in splendid isolation. The issues tend to blur the writer. No serious attempt has yet been made to assess the real Mahasweta, who has the power to mix realism with melodrama, irony with indifference and documentary with creativity to produce a blend so unusual that it defies any accepted model (5).

If anyone reads national descriptions into the stories, the truth that will become evident is that the mainstream people and the political parties have treated them as less than human beings. In the story “Chinta” the theme of abuse is the same but the background which is located in urban setting is different.

The tribal Naxalite heroine Dopdi in Mahasweta Devi’s story ‘Draupadi’ was gangraped by the followers of the law. But she stood naked before their senior police officer Senanayak and overcame her humiliation. She also laughed and spit blood at him, and pushed him with her two mangled breasts which made him afraid of an unarmed target for the first time. Dopdi can be compared to the heroine Ketaki of the story ‘Body’, who was abused and used by a politician and his cohorts who were the makers of the law. Both Dopdi and Ketaki of tribal origins became the victims of the voracious male organization. When Ketaki did not succeed in taking revenge both for the arrest of her beloved parents and for her own disgrace, Dopdi was a political activist who fought against the oppressors.
T. Jyoti Rani and K. Katyayani remark in the article “Violence on Women in the Context of Indian Political Economy - A Study of Mahasweta Devi’s *Sri Sri Ganesh Mahima* and *Draupadi*: 

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. She has portrayed the travails of women in these systems. While her Ganesh Mahima depicts the plight of women in the feudal society, her Draupadi lays bare the miseries of urban women in a capitalistic society. Whatever be the system, it is woman who is sacrificed on the altar of male interests (124).

As a result of the works of Mahasweta Devi, women, possibly the most oppressed community in the history, swung into action immediately after they started breathing in open air. Today they are not only the most distinct community, but also dedicated to challenging the traditional custom. Throughout Mahasweta Devi’s fiction, women’s subjugation is portrayed as linked to the oppressions of caste and class. But in the best of her writings she quite brilliantly and with significance explores the articulation of class, caste and gender in the specific situations she depicts. Anup Beniwal also avers, “Mahasweta Devi’s subaltern woman ultimately explodes into a revolting and rebellious woman who totally shatters the andro-centric stereotype of a raped woman (as in “Behind the Bodice” and “Draupadi”). Her woman thus passes through the trajectory of evolution and poignantly charts an intricate progression towards a composite subaltern womanhood.”(91-92)

Sujatha Vijayaraghavan comments on Mahasweta Devi in “Women Writing/Righting the Nation in and through Fiction” A Postcolonial Perspective”: 
The short stories and plays of Mahasweta Devi are fictional descendents of national realities offering a key testimony to the continuation of the legacy of social oppression and as such force a debate between the nation’s historical consciousness and our conscience, beginning with the undeniable premise that the two nurture themselves on mutual incompatibility. [Her] writings are specific products of our times. Her works open up the established boundaries of literature, not in a simple exercise of making literature a socially responsible institution but firstly, redefining and counteracting the formalizations of what would now constitute literature itself and secondly, how we read it (31).

Mahasweta Devi analyses many ways of internalizing resistance against power. She provides methods of resistance and the way to survive. Mahasweta Devi’s oppressed women find their own distinctive areas, hidden strategies in a merciless framework of violence, oppression and deception. M. Dasan writes in the article, “Writer as Fighter: Concern for Human Rights Violations in Mahasweta Devi’s Plays”

By lending voice to the voiceless, Mahasweta Devi emerges as a fighter for human rights. From 1976 onwards, Mahasweta has become more and more involved with the lives and struggles of the tribal and underprivileged communities settled in the border regions of the three neighboring states of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, especially the districts of Medinipur, Singhbhum and Mayurbhanj. The subject of her writings has become the subject of her life and vice versa. She says in the introduction of Five Plays: ‘I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation’ (132).
In most of her works Mahasweta Devi has written about the individuals of a community who suffered a lot due to exploitation. Ranjana Kaul points out in “Individual in History”:

Mahasweta Devi has often acknowledged her fascination with ‘the socio-economic history of human development’ and has repeatedly chosen to write about individuals who have been nurtured and matured by sharing the sufferings of their community as well as by experiencing exploitation and injustice at first hand. She . . . asserts that she researches her subject thoroughly before she represents any historical event in the form of fiction yet she also has ‘a reverence for materials collected from folklore, for they reveal how the common people have looked at experience in the past and how they look at it now’ (33).

As Usha Bande says in “Women writers with fire in their pen” : “Pratibha Ray, the Oriyan writer has stories and novels depicting the plight of the tribals. If Mahasweta Devi has the Santhals for her subjects, Ray has the Bonda Tribal of Orissa as the subject for her stories.”(24)

Like the Santhals, Mahasweta Devi portrays the plight of many other tribal communities also. Mahasweta Devi uses fiction, as Anup Beniwal says, “as an empowering tool for the subaltern’s struggle.” (31) When she portrays the condition of the tribals in a realistic manner, she insists that they be given their dignity and rights that are their due. Moreover she wants the tribals themselves to stand united as they fight for their rights, the models being given through the characters of Draupadi, Bikhni and Sanichari.
Anjum Katyal’s criticism about *Rudali* in the article “The Metamorphosis of Rudali”:

“This insistence on embedding Sanichari in the broader context continues through the text, in various other ways. Direct authorial statements link her story to a larger discourse of struggle and exploitation. There is a continuous suturing of her private life to the socio-economic situation to history.” (5) Katyal also says that *Rudali* depicts “the relationship between Sanichari and Bikhni, childhood playmates who rediscover each other as ageing, lonely women and decide to team up, is the major statement of bonding and support within a community made in the text.” (19) When they fight for their rights unitedly and unceasingly, the day is not far off when they would realize their dreams.