Chapter III
Stories of Mahashweta Devi:
A Never Ending Story

"Being born among the working people
I know that poverty is a hard old hag,
And a monster, when you’re pinched for actual necessities.
And whoever says she isn’t, is a liar."

– D. H. Lawrence
Poverty
CHAPTER – III

STORIES OF MAHASHWETA DEVI:  
A NEVER ENDING STORY

Modern Bengali short stories are known for their rich quality, variety of subjects and experimentation in style. The story writer Kamal Mazumdar may be specially mentioned for his special style. Sandipan Chattopadhyay, Yasodajiban Bhattacharya, Manabendro Paul, Sushil Ray and Mati Nandi are other story writers who have contributed profusely for the enrichment of Bengali short story. Mahashweta Devi has taken this genre to the greater height by using it as an effective means of social change.

All the major fictions and novellas of Mahashweta Devi that have been already discussed in the preceding chapters are very serious in nature and are highly charged with her ideological fervour. She does not lose any single opportunity to castigate the perpetrators of exploitation and oppression in the name of caste, class, religion, democracy, development and civilization. She virtually declares a war on all those who are responsible for the seamy state of affair in the Post-Independent India. She ‘prioritizes her urgent human themes’ like class, caste, gender, human rights, tribal evacuations and so on. She questions and contradicts the dubious claims of development and success as an independent democratic country.

Mahashweta Devi pursues her ideology with great vigour and determination in some stories like “Draupadi”, “Breast Giver”, “Behind the Bodice”, “The Hunt”, “The Children”, “The Salt”, “Dhoulati The Bountiful” etc. But there are many other stories which bring home the sober side of Mahashweta Devi who looks at the life in a lighter vein. They are significant for various other reasons. They throw light on the problems of the aged,
the estranged children, hypocrisy in the domestic and social life and reveal the master
story-teller in Mahashweta Devi who uses irony, humour, delicacy and warmth, copiously and
effectively. They are not much relevant to our topic under discussion. Therefore, only brief
references are made to them in order to concentrate on the stories that are more relevant.
The stories in the collections like, Till Death Do Us Part (Five stories) (2001). Our
Non-Veg Cow "And Other Stories" (1998) etc. show an unusually tender side of
Mahashweta Devi who is generally known for her satiric prose and biting indictment of social
inequities. The variety, richness and an excellent art of telling stories corroborate what Malini
Bhattacharya says "Mahashweta's forte is the long story rather than the novel. Her particular
kind of dialogic talent suits the structure of the former rather than the expanse of the full-scale
novel."(EPW 1003)

There are five stories in the collection Till Death Do Us Part (2001) that are translated
by Vikram Iyengar. The first one is "The Divorce" (1973). This is an interesting story of an
aged husband and wife, Arshad and Kulsum. They were poor but had peace and content
which made everyone, including Kulsum's two sisters who were rich but had no peace of
mind, jealous of them. Kulsum who was called Kuli and Arshad had a son called Hara. He
found a job with a shipping company after his education. He too got married and had a loving
son. Thus, peace and content reigned the family for several years.

Arshad unexpectedly divorced Kuli once at the fit of an argument over a silly matter of
giving treatment to the grandson when he fell ill. After being divorced, Kuli lived with her
elder sister for some time and later with her younger sister, Duli. Arshad regrets for his act and
feels her absence very much. Therefore, their son Hara and some elders suggest Kuli
to marry Irfan Mondal for a few days and he would divorce her to enable her to marry
Arshad afresh, as it would not violate the religious restrictions. But Kuli refuses the proposal to the disappointment of Arshad, who sells his house and poultry to become a fakir. Knowing the matter, Kuli goes back to her home to take possession of her money and jewellery before the new owner occupies the house. At last, Kuli and Arshad decide to go to Calcutta and stay in a room without bothering about the gossips and accusations of others. Anyhow, they do not live as husband and wife anymore, and at the same time they cannot do without each other. Kuli tells Arshad who cannot walk and see in darkness, "Hold one end of your stick, I'll had the other. I can't hold your hand any longer!"(8)

Thus, Mahashweta Devi shows how the customs and religious practices impinge upon the individual relations. But the inherent human feelings and human relations cannot be disrupted by the external rituals. It is shown how the aged Kuli and Arshad try to keep their emotional relations intact without violating their deep-rooted religious beliefs. It is presented in a very humorous and lighthearted manner.

"The Saga Of Kagaboga" (1986) is a story of Mohini and Sadananda, an aged couple. Sadananda had left his property and all his precious belongings to his nephew and settled in a colony beyond Dhubulia. The elder son Ranjan is well settled in life and is living away at Naihati. The younger son Manoj Kumar is a sought after criminal. Mohini dreamed a comfortable life and a responsible son. Having lost both, Mohini becomes disappointed and contacts the talking-to-oneself disease, which causes unhappiness and many quarrels between them. When her verbosity was objected by the irked husband, she vowed to communicate only through the invisible Kagaboga, and the direct conversation between them ceased.
Later, Mohini got her wishes fulfilled with the help of the money she got by selling the land. When Sadananda fell ill, Mohini breaks the vow and talks directly to him. Sadananda dies of massive heart attack. But Mohini worries that he died because she had broken the rule of talking through Kagaboga. The tone of irony that pervades Mahashweta Devi's works is evident when she talks about the craftsman Malandi. She says: "Malandi is an expert in the manufacture of India's most plentiful product. He had gifted his motherland no less than eleven children."(21)

"The Poet's Wife" (1985) is a touching story of the old blind poet Suprabhat Dutta Choudhury and his wife Kamal (Prafulla Kamal). The poet had a minor job with the railways and his only son Swapon too gets a job and lives at Kanchrapara, but keeps no touch with his parents. The poet has four books to his credit and used to write for many periodicals and was conferred with the title 'Kavyabharati' in a felicitation ceremony at Midinipur. He is old now and is known only to the 'old fogies'.

The Tarun Sangha of the local youth decides to felicitate the poet along with an artist, singer and a sportsperson from that area. This news exalted the poet with emotion as he had been leading a poverty ridden secluded life. He dictated the speech which his wife would read after receiving the felicitation on his behalf. She attends the ceremony in a 'borrowed sari' and a 'borrowed necklace', as she did not have her own, with the great expectation of getting due recognition and appreciation. To the disappointment of Kamal, neither the speech was allowed to be read nor could she make her presence felt on the stage in the commotion. The people were more enthusiastic to have a look at their star singer and the sportsperson. She returns home broken hearted, with a citation, an envelope containing Rs.101, a box of sweets and a basket of flowers. On being enquired by the eagerly awaiting husband, she
lies that his speech was appreciated with a big applause and his contribution was hailed. But the cruel indifference of the heartless world continues to burn her heart.

Thus, Mahashweta Devi criticizes the lack of seriousness and commitment among the youth and the lack of decency among the public and their craze for the popular sports stars and the star singers.

"He Said, Pani" (1995) is a story of the poor Anandi and her companion old Mestiri. Anandi's only son Bupi is a wastrel. He comes home only to eat and sleep. His bad habits and carelessness estranged his wife. Anandi has been slogging to pay off the mortgage on her house. She manages everything alone at home, after working as a part-time maid. Mestiri on the other hand has two wives. The sons by the first wife live separately, working for the contractors. Mestiri has to look after his two wives and the two daughters by his second wife. The daughters are married but are abandoned by their husbands. Unlike Anandi, Mestiri is prosperous. He is economically sound. But both of them are good friends. Everybody knows, "Anandi and Mestiri were like the water tank or the over bridge — things that would always be around." (49)

The elderly person Mestiri would visit Anandi's house to while away his time after his days works. He would talk a little, sip tea, eat biscuits and go off. During one such visit, he slumps to the ground and becomes ill. He manages only to whisper 'Pani' with great difficulty. He dies after drinking a few drops of water that Anandi pours into his mouth. While she mourns the sudden and unexpected loss of her only friend and also the loss of the simple pleasures of their companionship, the insensitive policemen interfere and suspect her in the incident. They raise many questions regarding her links with the old man which hurt her more.
Thus, Mahashweta Devi is critical of those people who cannot understand the innocuous friendship that existed between Anandi and Mestiri. They are too mean to expect the possibility of such a simple and human relationship between a man and a woman. It shows the unhealthy mental make up of the persons who always look the world through the 'colored glass'. Mahashweta Devi exposes the 'prejudices' that exist in the society regarding man–woman relation.

"Love Story" (1963) exposes the hypocrisy of the relatives and friends of a dead playwright to which Kusum, the ageing actress, singer and the devoted lover of the deceased becomes a mute witness. Some of the plays that the playwright had written were highly acclaimed but later he receded into the background. Shefali who is known as Kusum was a much-sought-after actress and an opera singer. She remained a devoted lover of the playwright for thirty years. Enraged by this relation, his relatives and well-wishers distanced themselves from him. His daughter got married without informing him. The daughter and the son-in-law were too ashamed even to refer to him. During the last four years of his life, when he was bedridden, Kusum and the maidservant had to sell everything for his medicines. It was a miserable struggle to make both ends meet.

When he dies, his relatives and well-wishers make a big show of mourning with lengthy speeches and large garlands. Some of them arrange a presentation of his play in his memory with the help of Kusum. But they ignore Kusum throughout without mentioning her anywhere. They merely talk of the playwright and his achievements. Even the reviewers, who appreciated the playwright, had forgotten to refer to mention Kusum who was the real inspiration behind his success. This hypocrisy of the people around hurts Kusum more than the death of the playwright, her lover.
Thus, these stories which appear in the collection *Till Death Do Us Part* (2001) present five ageing men and women living as husbands, lovers and friends. Though the stories here look very sober and tender, Mahashweta Devi does not forget to expose the hypocrisy, selfishness and narrow mindedness of the people around us.

The stories in the collection *In The Name Of The Mother* (2004) reveal Mahashweta Devi’s interest in the idea of motherhood. This aspect of maternal idea is presented with diverse figurative constructions in *The Breast Stories* (1997) which will be discussed towards the end of this chapter.

In the four stories in this collection, Mahashweta Devi perceives a clever and calculated move of the patriarchal society behind the traditional deification of motherhood. The intention is to contain her freedom and right to articulate her individual needs and desires. Deification of motherhood and associating the image of mother with the concept of motherland, mother nature and mother tongue has a long tradition in India. The hypocrisy that exists behind the discourse of motherhood and the paradox of the myth of mother’s divinity based on self-denial and self-sacrifice is exposed in these stories. The issue of women’s oppression is not an isolated one. It is a part of the larger issues of social exploitation. Mahashweta Devi does not forget to recognize the value of genuine motherhood which is a true force behind the self-empowerment and emancipation of women.

“Ma, From Dusk To Dawn” (1970) is an amazing story of the transformation of an ordinary woman, Jateshwari into a divine being and the dusk-to-dawn mother of her son Sadhan. It is set in Kharagpur, West Bengal. Jateshwari belongs to the Pakhmara community who claim to be descended from Jara, the hunter, whose punishment for killing a God had
placed them all under a curse. They were forced away from their land and were debarred from marrying outside the community and were not supposed to have own houses. Violating these rules Jati married Utsav, a Kandori by caste who weaves fine mats. Utsav, who was working as a coolie at Kharagpur, died after the birth of Sadhan, the idiot. Jati had to wander from place to place and had to face a number of problems from men because of her beauty and attractive appearance. She realized that without donning the armour of the supernatural she would have nothing to protect her. After much thought she became Thakurni (a holy woman) in order to save herself from the eyes of men and to save her idiot son who was just a year-and-a-half old. After assuming divinity, Jati becomes Jati Thakurni during the daytime. She could be called Jati only during the night. Thinking of Thakurni as a mother, wife or as a sister was forbidden during the day. Even her son could not call her mother during the day. He can do so only from sunset to sunrise. Thus, she became the dusk-to-dawn mother.

Some tea or ganja and the rice she got from the devotees was used to feed the insatiable hunger of her son. When she was alive, her ‘holy body’ subsisted only on Ganga water. As the narrator says, she died of the ‘highly contagious disease of starvation for which no cure has been found so far in the land of India’. Thus, Mahashweta Devi takes up the issue of a woman and shows how a woman of a nomadic tribe becomes a spiritual mother by the circumstances and her so-called mystical powers depend upon her denial of maternal affection towards her own son, during day-time. Ironically, she is exploited in both roles. In the role of the holy Thakurni, she had to help those who sought her, and as the dust-to-dawn Ma she had to use all the rice she got to feed the ever-hungry son. He even does not leave the rice to give the priest to perform the last rites of his mother. His hunger was so strong. Getting exploited is certain for a woman whatever may be the role she plays in life. Thus, here Mahashweta
Devi shows another face of exploitation of women in our society.

“Sindhubala” (1971) is a moving story which reveals the anguish of a woman who is forced to play the role of a divine healer by her mother, at the cost of her own physical and emotional needs. Sindhubala who was born with her feet first was the daughter of a mason who dreamed of becoming a builder. The girl was ugly in appearance. After her father died in an accident while working, her mother got her married to Sanneshi, the son of a mason. Tempted by the prospect of getting more money and jewellery, her mother-in-law made Sanneshi discard Sindhubala and marry a new bride.

While Sindhu’s mother was struggling to survive, Manudasi’s discovery of devangshi in Sindhu provided a means of exploitation to Sindhu’s mother. Sindhu was called upon to save the lives of innumerable offsprings of other people with her holy kicks without getting any chance to fulfill her own physical and emotional needs. Her mother managed everything like a shrewd businessman. Her ‘divine revelation’ went on uninterrupted until Sanneshi’s son by his second wife died after receiving her ‘divine touch’. After being exposed with that incident, Sindhu stopped her practice irrespective of the criticism by others. The realization dawns on her at last. The narrator questions the propriety of leading a life of pretension in the following words “If you’re human, you must burn. If you’re holy, then too you must burn. If life has the same end for both, then why should the woman Sindhu spend her days pretending to be a Goddess?”(44)

Thus, Sindhu lives like a fruitless tree craving for the fulfillment that her ugly appearance had placed beyond her reach. After being discarded by the husband and exploited by the mother, Sindhu realised the hollowness of her divinity which is based on self-denial. But it was
too late. Mahashweta Devi here focuses on another way of exploitation of women in the society.

"Jamunabati's Mother" (1972) is one of the serious stories of Mahashweta Devi that offers a stringent critique on the society which considers the marginalized like Jamunabati's Mother (1972) as 'redundant', 'expendable' and 'are just garbage locking the path to success'. It also criticizes and exposes the modern consumerist society which is unsympathetic even to the simple needs of the poor people and considers them as the blot on the beauty of the cities.

Jamunabati’s Mother and father, who belonged to the poorest section of the society, do lowly works for their livelihood. Both were thin and timid. They were not in a position to provide nutritious food to the only loving daughter. She too grew thin and was not healthy. The mother’s desire to get a doll, a red dress and the nutritious foods for her child remained a dream. The money she collected with great difficulty to buy a doll had to be spent for her treatment and by the time she collected money for the red dress the child died. The simple desire remained unfulfilled.

The tone of narration is ironical throughout. The narrator ironically asks the planners and the scientists, if it is not possible for them to rid of poverty. Why should they not find out measures to rid of the poor people themselves? The narrator remarks:

"Now it seems that without getting rid of her, others like her, this city, this country, this life will never look beautiful. Because they exist, there are so many obstacles in the path of progress. It seems that, for people like her, some immediate, emergency measures are necessary. With so many scientists, so much planning, such a lot of gas and so many chambers — was it not possible to arrange something?"(55)"
The question the story poses is a challenge to the planners and the managers. It forces the votaries of development into a soul-searching exercise. Apart from being a stringent critique of the heartless consumerist society, this story exposes the false claims of success and development by the planners, scientists and other agencies whose years of deliberations have been making the marginalized more and more impoverished, resulting in a lopsided society.

"Giribala" (1982) is a story that deals with the plight of an innocent poor village woman whose two lovely daughters were sold into the flesh trade by their own father to materialize his dream of building a house. Giribala, an ordinary girl of Talsana village in the Kandi sub-division (Murshidabad district, West Bengal) was married to Aullchand, after taking due bride-price. Aullchand, the ganja fiend had no land or property of his own but solemnly yearned to have his own dwelling. Giribala’s parents had no clear idea about Aullchand’s state of affairs.

Giribala gave birth consecutively to four female children; Belarani, Paribala, Rajiv and Maruni. Mohan, a pimp, had predicted Aullchand that he would get only male issues after the fourth girl. But Giribala chose to have an operation to sterilize herself. This act of her enraged her husband. She suffers a thorough beating by him. She had to pay penalty for her failure to produce male offspring. Being obsessed with male offspring, Aullchand claimed the right to sell off all the four daughters as an act of retribution for not giving birth to the male children.

Aullchand, in connivance with the bohemian vagabond, sold his first two daughters one after another for a few crisp hundred rupee notes. It was a part of common widespread racket, the girl-trafficking business. The desperate Giribala raised a hue and cry and sought everybody’s help in vain. Nobody could do anything as the father himself got his daughters
sold in the garb of marriage. The helpless people could only say, "A girl’s by fate discarded, lost if she is dead, lost if she is wed. And your fate, no different."(77). At last, to the amazement of every one Giri went to the town leaving her husband behind, to work as a maidservant and to bring up her remaining children. Everyone disapproved this act of Giri. They started to behave as if they were convinced that it was not Aullchand but Giribala who’s at fault.

Thus, Mahasweta Devi takes our society to task for practicing gender discrimination and thereby encouraging the racket of girl-trafficking by the pimps. Though late, the empowerment of Giri, at last, gives an optimistic end to the story.

The four stories in the collection *Bait* (2004) give us an idea of the transformation that had taken place in the Bengali underworld during 1960s and 70s. It, in turn, brought about changes in the social psyche of the Bengali population, leading to the criminalization of the political scene. In these stories, Mahasweta Devi captures the police-criminal-politician nexus that prevailed during those days in Bengal. It reflects on the Naxalite Movement and the anti-Naxalite offensive by the police which was rather machiavellian. The police also launched the direct onslaught by recruiting local young hitmen to finish off the Naxalites in their respective localities. How the police used to manipulate the underworld criminal gangs or eliminate them according to political situations and other socio-political trends of the time are very vividly presented in these stories. By using slang of the underworld, distinctive pseudonyms, titles and euphemistic terms the writer has added a touch of reality to the stories. Regarding this Sumanta Banerjee, the translator of these stories opines:

"It is these hoodlums and desperados, the derelicts and drifters of the Bengali underworld as well as their political patrons and protectors in the police, whom Mahasweta brings to life with her caustic pen in the pages of these stories. As she pillories the respectable
representatives of power in our political system who sustain this underworld, she offers us the extraordinary chance to watch a lifelike effigy of the bizarre structure of Indian democracy burning in the background."(XXII)8

The story "Fisherman" (1973) is linked with Naxalite movement in West Bengal. At a time when the political scene was getting increasingly criminalized in West Bengal during 1960s and 1970s, the ruling politicians and the administration made a tactful move to destroy the emerging Naxalite movement. They took the help of the underworld for the purpose. Mahashweta Devi makes no mention of the Naxalites. But the intrigue and suspense that goes into the ruthless anti-Naxalite offensive launched by the police in those days, looms large over this interesting story.

At a time when Jagat, the fisherman had no fish to net, found a work which was enigmatic but more profitable. The local police found his expertise very useful in retrieving the bodies from the Raypukur tank. Jagat would get seven rupees per corpse. He is ignorant of why the young men drown in the tank in such a large number. He wonders why people have become indifferent to such ghastly murders. Later, it comes to his realization that the last resort of all those boys who disappear often from the locality would be the bottom of the tank. The value of money and human life had become cheap.

In the course of time Jagat becomes a part of the tangled web of the criminal world. He was confidant of mobilizing required amount of money for his son's business. His son Abhay had undergone technical education. Both the father and the son remained ignorant of each other's activities. Everything became clear to Jagat when Abhay was also killed. Daroga babu's dead body, that was found in the tank, was tied to his bicycle with Abhaya's Gamchha. People who are familiar with Bengal of 1970s, easily come to know that the dead bodies
dumped into the tank are of those boys whom the police suspected to be Naxalites and are killed in suspicious manner. The narrator ironically says that the police treated the Naxalites as, “more dangerous than tigers in the forest, more deadly than snakes in their holes.”(4). It was a common practice to kill the suspected Naxalites and their sympathizers in a surreptitious manner and dispose their bodies in some distant places. They would be added to the list of unaccounted murder.

Thus, Mahashweta Devi revives all the intricacies of criminal and inhuman acts that Bengali society witnessed during 1970’s in the name of Naxalite and anti Naxalite movements.

The story “Knife” (1985) is a graphic account of gang warfare in Anantapur, a suburban town of West Bengal, bordering Bangladesh. It evokes the trauma the Bengali society was undergoing during 1980’s. The system had used Naxalites during 1970’s. Those gang lords started demanding their dues from their political patrons and the police during 1980’s. The criminal activities of the underworld gangs continued to thrive by unleashing horror and anarchy into the society. As a result the underworld had not only come out in the open but also dominated the social life. Mahashweta Devi exposes the unholy nexus of the gang lords – police – politician troika. In the underworld slang, the ganglords are called Mastaans or controllers. The five Mastaans – Germany, Sachcha, Baba, Bota, Paolan – virtually ruled the small border town of Anantapur. They used to extort their share in every transaction and harassed the public. Germany enjoyed the tacit support of the police who expected him to snuff out the remaining four controllers. So the police did not take a serious note of their ghastly activities and inter-gang warfare.

The thirteen-year-old girl of Hamid was raped and murdered by Germany. He was
left scot-free by the police. Instead, a poor rickshaw puller was arrested. Explosions and murders had become almost a routine. When the situation reached an intolerable stage, the public formed a Citizens Committee in the town. They took the law into their hands, caught Germany's miscreant followers red handed and thrashed them thoroughly. Enraged by the act of the Citizens Committee, Germany, the policemen's goonda planned to remove Akhil Babu, the elderly leader of the committee. He would like to execute the plan with the help of Hamid, an expert knifer. But Hamid avenged his daughter's murder by killing Germany at an opportune time. People celebrated the end of the Mastaan Raj but the Thana Babu (police officer) was unhappy as he could not save Germany.

Thus, Mahashweta Devi gives a vivid account of how the Bengali society suffered under the goonda raj during 1980s. At the same time she hints at the rise of the people's power. The story becomes more vivid with her use of the lexicon of the Bengali underworld. The use of certain nomenclature shows her perfect knowledge of the ways and habits of the life of the underworld. The names like Sachcha and Paolan are the distorted forms of 'Sacha' (honest) and 'Palowan' (wrestler). She uses the terms like 'freedom', 'struggle', 'controllers', 'action', 'Mastaan' and so on euphemistically. They are elevated from their derogatory meaning.

The role-played by Malati, the whore is very significant. She became a 'repository of the town's news'. By hiding the stolen goods and by sheltering the gangsters who were on the run, Malati acted as a link between the police and the underworld. She played a significant role in bringing about the downfall of the notorious gang lord, Germany.

In the extremely condensed story "Body" (1972), Mahashweta Devi reflects on various criminal activities that went on uninterrupted beneath the seemingly calm and gentle surface of the social life of Calcutta.
Ketaki, who is called ‘girl’, is the daughter of the tribal parents who were hanged for committing several murders. She grew up and studied in the Government institutions and later took to the act of filching. Once when she was caught by the police, a man called M, ‘an operator’ rescued her. Later, he supplied her to Nripati. It was his chosen business to supply girls to such men. Nripati was a typical politician, always talking about the ways and means of reviving this nation from its ignominious, death-like stupor. He was always yelling on behalf of the ‘common man’. But he had nursed an intense fascination for ugly faces with beautiful bodies and found the perfect combination of his choice in the girl. He had maintained fifteen separate flats for fifteen separate girls. ‘The girl’ gave shelter to Anupam who was on the run. Nripati, Anupam and M. used her as a secret agent. All the intrigues and underworld ‘operations’ were woven around her body which was her only asset. She expressed a sense of protest, an ultimate protest against the patriarchal establishment by destroying her body, the only asset she had.

Thus, Mahashweta Devi, in this very interesting narration, hints at the emergence of a new class of call girls moving with the higher ups in metropolitan society like, Calcutta and carry out, their ‘operation’ in a more subtle and sophisticated manner, by using that links with both the police and the criminals.

"Killer" (1987) is a story of Akhil alias Sona, a twenty six year old unemployed youth who became a professional killer and killed thirty one young boys in two years. He did it at the behest of his master, Anupam Mitra. Rajan’s case was Sona’s first lesson. After that he discovered himself. He discovered his true identity of a killer. Then he never looked back. His ‘profession’ went on uninterrupted until the peasant Sajad Mandal’s ‘case’. In that incident
Sona had been attacked unexpectedly which left him partially deaf. At the same time, he received a terrific beating from Khoka and Taju who left his both arms disabled for a long time. The two incidents convinced Sona that he was taken over by the ‘professionals’. He was advised to ‘stay off’ and he also perceived a great danger and threat to his life. Hence, he left Calcutta to stay for sometime in Coochbehar. This shows that the desperate urge for self-protection beats within a killer too, just as in everyone else.

Anupam Mitra, who had been performing various social works and had widely travelled, could easily envisage the danger if Sona lived. Sona had carried out all the thirtyone killings at his behest. He would remain an authentic witness to all the crimes committed by Anupam Mitra. So he planned to sacrifice Sona just for the sake of leaving no witness to his evil deeds. He took the help of a young boy who had started mucking about with Anupam’s favourite Basanti.

Sona was summoned to Calcutta and was told to wait at Satish Patra’s Garden. There he was cornered by the boy with a knife and other four men. The interesting thing in the story is that the family of Sona, the ‘pre-university fail’, unemployed son, never bothered about the source from where he was getting so much of money. Instead, they treated him like a rare gem and played the game of hide-and-seek. The ‘profession’ gained so much of sophistication in the hands of ‘professionals’ that they managed to publish the report of a crime in the newspapers before the vans (police vans) could reach the scene of crime. The use of the underworld slang like ‘case’, ‘profession’, ‘business’, ‘job’, ‘contract’, ‘record’ and so on gives a touch of reality and vividness to the story. It once again reflects Mahashweta Devi’s knowledge of the life of the underworld and its very complicated network.
"Wrong Number" And Other Stories (Seagull, 2005) is the collection of four stories where we find Mahashweta Devi’s usual theme of exploitation of the poor low-caste people by the rich. She also highlights the failure of the system in giving justice to the marginalized as per the provisions of our constitutions. She criticizes the police-landlord nexus, the violence in front of Gandhi’s statue and in places named after him, the money mania of the heartless society and so on. The problems of the parents in Calcutta whose educated young children had become victims of the socio-political changes during 1960's and 1970's are also revealed in these stories. In her inimitable manner, Mahashweta Devi brings us face to face with the reality of oppression and repression that haunts our country.

"Wrong Number" is the story of a middle-class father who lived in Calcutta. But he found himself in a wrong place, cherishing wrong hopes, as the things went on too fast to cope up with. This was the experience of many parents of middle-class families in Calcutta during 1960s and 1970s. Their educated young boys were being attracted more and more towards the radical movements like Naxalism. They used to keep their parents in darkness about their activities. Hence, their death would bring their parents anguish and shock, as they would not be prepared mentally to receive such unexpected and painful news.

Dipankar, the only child of Tirtha Babu and Sabita, did not keep them abreast with his activities. They had believed that their son Dipankar was in Lucknow with his cousin Niren. They thought that he was planning to get admission into a Delhi College. At the same time there had been a fearful doubt that disturbed them. They did not know why neither of them had not written to them. They stayed away without informing the parents about their
whereabouts. They knew that the place was not safe and the time was not good. ‘Calcutta was missing Calcutta’. The spirit of Calcutta vanished after leaving behind only the buildings, houses, maidan, the monuments and other external trappings to the city. Everyone welcomed death with sheer indifference and unclaimed bodies used to pile up in the morgue.

Tirtha Babu had a natural hope that his son would stay with him and share his miseries and pains. People like him found it very difficult to come out of the strong and deep-rooted impression of the traditional Calcutta and accept the hard realities which the city became witness to. Hence, the shrill ring of the telephone in the depths of night increased the anxiety of Tirtha Babu, leading to his nervous disorder. He refused to face the fear that his son might have been killed. When he received the message of his son’s death, through the telephone, he defied it by saying that it was a ‘wrong number’. He experienced hallucination about his son.

Mahashweta Devi very effectively brings out the agony and uneasiness of the parents whose mind is caught between love, affection and hope for the only child on the one hand and the hard reality of educated young men getting attracted towards Naxalism, and being killed in the process. Allusion to Tagore’s historical novel Rajarshi and Girish Chandra Ghosh’s mythological play Jana shows the intensity of the mental conflict. The experience of Tirtha Babu reminds us of Sujata’s experience in The Mother of 1894 (1974).

The story Fundamental Rights And Bhikari Dusad shows how the fundamental rights guaranteed in the constitution have remained beyond the reach of the poor people like Bhikari Dusad. They are being enjoyed by the rich and the powerful. Mahashweta Devi exposes the system that has failed to implement the provisions of the constitution in their true spirit without which independence has no meaning. Nothing seems to have been done to bridge the void.
between the rich and the poor. Instead, it has been growing wider and wider. The most tragic aspect of the story is that being unable to defend the seventh fundamental right, the right to property, Bikari Dusad was forced to rescue himself in the third fundamental right, the right to freedom; the right to pursue any occupation. He pursued the occupation of begging.

Bikari Dusad, an extremely timid and harmless shepherd had nothing else to call his own but the goats whom he used to tend with great care. He had a simple hope of buying a small dhoti to wear like a loin cloth and a new gamchha (towel). He also dreamt of setting his own family in a jhopdi, somewhere with some utensils and household things. But no dream ever came true in Bhikari’s life. The wolves and jackals are the natural enemies of goats. It was not a problem for Bikari to protect his goats from them. But the only enemy from whom he strived hard to protect his goats was the police. He was forced to flee from Noagarh to Nada and again to Noagarh to protect his goats from the police. Whenever the police setup a camp or posted on duty, they usually robbed Bhikari Dusad of his grown up goats. With that they used to destroy the very method of his survival every time.

At last Bhikari, returned to his place Noagarh, thinking that the police had left. But Rajasahib, the landlord invited the whole thana for dinner. The police took away all the grownup goats after beating and injuring Bhikari. He desperately pleaded them to respect his ‘fundamental right’ over his property of the goats as they respected Rajasahib’s right over his property. After getting all his dreams shattered, Bhikari became a new member of the large society of beggars.

The irony and paradox that prevail in the system are exposed in the story. The claim of the betaidars (share croppers) of their rights over the sharecrop was considered a law
and order problem. Whereas Rajasahib getting six lakh rupees compensation was considered a constitutional right. The police who should have been the protectors of the constitutional rights, deprived Bhikari Dusad of his rights. They protect the rights of only the rich and the powerful like Rajasahib and Ganeshi Singh. Sukhchandji, who talks on constitution, fundamental rights, equality and so on, does not eat the food served by Bhikari. The question that Bhikari asks himself is the question that Mahashweta Devi poses to the protectors of the constitutional provisions in Independent India. Bhikari says, “The police never loot Lalaji’s shop, never grab the milkmen’s cows. The police let everyone else keep their own. Then why rob my goats?”(17). Bhikari continues to ask, “Has the Government forgotten to remind the policemen of our fundamental rights?”(25).

Thus, Mahashweta Devi reflects on the harsh reality of life in Independent India. If the poor people like Dusad want to live in this motherland, the only way to do so is to become beggars. The anger and concern of her over the present state of affair and the mockery of the system are expressed in the following words:

“Surely the Indian Constitution will guarantee that he stays that way, stays a beggar all this life and even the next? And if anyone strives to raise him to a better standard of living, to a better occupation? The Constitution will never tolerate such a blatant violation of fundamental right. No matter where in India such an injustice occurs, the constitutional machinery will at once deploy the police, reserve police, military police, the military, tanks and combat aircraft, everything.”(31-32)

The story “Gandhi Maidan And Raghu Dusad” reflects on the prevailing class persecution, tyranny and exploitation in the state of Bihar. It is the result of caste system and big land holdings. The existence of landlord–police–administration nexus has made it impossible
for the poor low-caste people to get justice. Their efforts to get justice would result in the scenes of drama enacted after regular stage rehearsals, where the poor, innocuous people are not merely the mute spectators but the worst sufferers. The great irony we face in the story is that many carnages and atrocities take place in the presence of Gandhi’s statue and in places associated with his names. Bihar, the land of Buddha and Ashoka is ‘sown with so many seeds of violence, so much hatred, casteist repression’.

Seven Dusads families lived on the outskirts of Kanera. There was an open sewage drain. All the refuse and excrement from the service-latrines of Kanera flowed into it. It separated the Dusad toli (the Dusad area) from the rest of the town. The primary school and the Balwari centre were on the other side of the drain. They used to cross the drain on the planks that were laid over it. The efforts of Charan, the primary school teacher and other Dusads to get the entire drain covered with cement failed. But Moharchand, the upper-caste landlord got it done easily to the surprise of everyone. The Dusads thought that their ‘stigma’ of ostracism had ended at last. As some Dusads had doubted, Moharchand had a selfish motive behind the whole effort. He started to build a shopping complex on the drainage. The Dusads protested it and complained to the police in vain. The police who advised the Dusads not to take law into their hands, remained silent spectators when Moharchand’s hoodlums involved in atrocities on the poor Dusads. At last, when the Dusads were forced to protect themselves, the police became ‘alert’ and fired at them killing the two and injuring the several. Some miscreants burnt the residences of the Dusads and made them virtually homeless.

The ‘true Harijan tale’ concluded with the decision that any construction by the Dusads in the Dusad toli would be illegal and they could build new houses only on the scorched land.
The violence against them continued uninterrupted. The relentless violence of the upper-caste against his kith and kin at Aarowal, Kansara and Kanera left the little boy Raghu terror struck. Incidentally, the violence took place either in the very presence of Gandhi's statue or in the places named after Gandhi. Paradoxically, the name 'Gandhi' came to denote violence and horror. After the funeral of his father, Harao along with Charan and other Dusads would like to sleep under a tree at the Gandhi Maidan in Patna. But the name Gandhi made the six-year-old Raghu restless. He expresses his shock and fear in the following words:

“No, not Gandhi Maidan, not Gandhi Maidan. Dadoa! Didn’t you tell me there was a Gandhi school, yet at Aarowal ... and ... there’s a statue of Gandhi in front of our school too ... no, not Gandhi Maidan ... please don’t go Dadoa ... If they kill you too where will I go? Don’t say Gandhi.” (51)³

Thus, mindless violence against his kith and kin inextricably linked in his mind to the name Gandhi after whom public places are so often named. For children like Raghu, Gandhi is going to be another word for terror. It is a critique on the way in which the meaning that the word ‘Gandhi’ assumes in the course of time under a changed socio-political milieu. It also reflects on how the society has departed from the Gandhian ideologies.

The story “Ram And Rahim” draws our attention to the cruelty, immorality and blind belief that are being practiced in the name of religion. The poor and innocent people always remain at the receiving end. It also shows how a common grief brings two hearts together, though separated by religion.

This story is set in West Bengal. Sajumoni, a midwife, whose knowledge of the country was limited only to her place, Hetompur, was the mother of Ramlal. When Ramlal was ill, she
had been to the Siddha Kali temple that was situated halfway between Hetompur and Kejokhali to pray for his recovery. Baidyanath Ghosal was the priest whose sons Adyanath and Saktinath had succeeded in establishing satta dens for gambling, chullu dens for selling country liquor and many other such ‘welfare’ institutions. Once, when Sajumoni visited the temple, the two sons of the priest who used to receive ‘divine instruction’ of the Goddess Kali, at once started brandishing scimitars as they billowed, “Kali! Kali!” and beheaded all those who were getting shelter in the temple. Panchubibi’s son, Rahim was one among them. Ramlal who had been to Dashehra fair to sell muri and batasha had not returned home. Panchubibi, who expressed all her grief on the death of her son, could bear the loss but Sajumoni, whose son did not return even after two months, nor his dead body found, could not bear the loss. Life became unbearable for her. At last, his decomposed body was found along with the bodies of Nasib Molla and Rupendra Gope.

The more interesting thing in the story is that Ramlal’s two brothers who had always lived away, attended the funeral only to know if they could get the compensation. People became jealous and started showing enmity towards Sajumony and Panchubibi after knowing that both would get huge amount of money as compensation. The heartless society could not feel the irretrievable loss suffered by these two mothers. Only the two mothers could understand each other’s grief as both ‘sailed in the same boat’. Bipul Dhal received a loan of rupees fifteen hundred from a bank but was forced to sign for the receipt of rupees two thousand. This incident exposes the corruption that has taken its roots in every corner of our society.

After Kurukshetra (2005) is a collection of three stories. In these stories Mahashweta Devi, keeping the Kurukshetra battle of the epic Mahabharata in the background, takes us through the unexpected lanes and by-lanes of the traditional epic saga.
She looks at this epic event through the eyes of women, the marginalized and the dispossessed. She throws light on the futility, inhumanity and wanton waste of war. The untold miseries and the trauma that follow the war are stressed here. Mahashweta Devi says, “This Kurukshetra is not the legendary dharmayuddha of the popular imagination but rather a cold-blooded power game sacrificing countless human lives.”(Blurb)4. The life as it is lived in lokavritta is foregrounded here by contrasting it with that of the life in rajavritta. Their proximity to nature makes the janavritta more human and stronger, enabling them to face the challenges of life in a robust manner. Whereas, the rajavritta crumbles at the face of challenges with its pretentious glory, unnatural arrogance and the absence of warm human feelings.

“The Five Women” (2000) is the story where an attempt is made to look at the Kurukshetra battle of the Mahabharatha through the eyes of five marginalized peasant women, whose lives have been shattered by the war. Here we find the life of the janavritta – the ‘common humanity and the life of the rajavritta – the royalty that are being contrasted. A contrasting view of the Kurukshetra battle is also presented here. It is no more a legendary dharmayuddha for the establishment of the virtue and the punishment of the vice. But it is considered a fratricidal, savage and a cold-blooded power game that caused the death of countless human beings.

Godhumi, Gomati, Yamvma, Stasta and Vasha were the five peasant women from the Kurujangal region whose husbands were farmers and had to fight as foot soldiers – padatis – in the Kurukshetra war and died in the course. Madraja, the head dasi of the royal women’s quarters, was looking for recruits to look after the young Uttara, the widowed daughter-in-law of the Queen Subhadra. Madraja accidentally caught sight of them. As they refused to serve
as dasis, they were allowed to remain Uttara's companions. The earth of Kurukshetra that was scorched rock-hard by the funeral fires and sent waves of angry heat everywhere prevented them from going back to their places. They would return when the earth would become cool.

Uttara, who had experienced just six months of married life and cherished natural dreams of a young bride, was everyone's darling. The untimely death of Abhimanyu had left her in an immeasurable grief. The death of many warriors on both sides had left the inner quarters teeming with countless young widows. Stunned with grief, they were silently performing the last rites of their husbands and preparing themselves for the rigorous lives of widowhood. Uttara’s grief-stricken heavy heart became lighter in the company of the five women. She became lively and developed a deep intimacy with them. The curse of widowhood that had weighed down the spirit of the women folk in the rajavritta had nothing to do with the women in the lokavritta. They too had lost their husbands, near and dear ones but the robust way they face the grief and trauma was eye opening to the rajavritta — the royalty. They worried nothing and spent their time solving riddles, singing mourning songs, telling stories and fulfilling the life demands. Their positive outlook was amazing. They would like to go back and marry their brothers-in-law as per their customs, get children, create life and make the village resound with chatters and laughter. That was what the nature had taught them. Unlike the rajavritta they did not take an illusion of the war. They knew that there was no divyalok for their husbands. They fought and died for the King’s war and crying wouldn’t bring them back. They believed in the continuity of life. Everything goes on as usual even after deadly calamities and wars. They worshipped the earth. The marriage and naming ceremonies were performed as per their customs. The grand parents, elders, maternal uncles, the women and musicians had major roles ‘unlike the rajavritta, where the priests, acharyas, pujas, yajnas, offerings
to Agni dominated their ceremonies.

The women in lokavritta had a strong physic. They lived on hard work. Even the pregnant women did not indulge in pampering their bodies. They knew that the childbirth would be easier if they remained active during pregnancy. They always lived together. The women too knew the art of using weapons. Kurukshetra war could not be a dharmayuddha – a righteous war – for the lokavritta. Brothers killed brothers, uncle killed nephew, shishya killed guru and so many mothers had lost their sons leaving countless widows behind. Thus, Mahashweta Devi very effectively projects the views of the marginalized on war and life. This is optimistic in nature. This view stands in direct contrast with that of the view of the elite which is pessimistic, traditional and illusionary. Thereby she exposes the hollowness of the rajavritta.

The authenticity of Mahashweta Devi’s reference to the farmers taking part in the battle as the foot soldiers is doubtful. It is opined by Dr. Ambedkar in his book Pakistan or the Partition of India (Thackers Publishers, Bombay, 1946) that the ancient battles were fought only between the two forces. When the wars were waged the remaining people had dispassionately engaged in their respective activities. Only the trained soldiers took part in the battles. Against this background Mahashweta Devi’s idea of farmers taking part in The Kurukshetra Battle is difficult to accept. It is obvious that the concept of ‘war’ has undergone a sea change over the years. How one can justify the act of looking at the ancient battles based on the contemporary experiences, is a question.

In the story “Kunti And The Nishadin” (1999), we come across ageing Kunti, living out her last years in the forest after the Kurukshetra battle. She was being haunted by two severe guilts of her life – one was over her unacknowledged son Kama
and the other one was regarding the ghastly killing of the family of the forest dwelling Nishads in the house of lac, Jatugriha, which she had long forgotten. The first guilt had haunted her throughout and she had come to terms with it by voicing her shame aloud. But she became a helpless victim to the latter. Kunti was torn apart by the life in rajavritta and by her guilt over Karna. This character is presented in contrast with the character of Gandhari who was stately fearless and upright and with the Nishadins who happily lived by the law of nature.

The ageing Kunti had to retreat into the forest in order to tend Dhritarashtra and Gandhari. They were in a forest ashram in the final chapter of their life. Inspite of the victory of the Pandavas, Kunti felt exhausted and weak. She was torn into pieces by the suffocating life in the rajavritta. She was heavy with deepest thoughts. ‘The Kama episode’ had weighed her down completely. On the other hand, Gandhari had remained calm, fearless and unperturbed. Even the loss of a hundred sons had not succeeded in shattering her composure. It was she who consoled Draupadi and Uttara who were devastated by the death of their sons. She displayed the magnanimity of her heart by mourning for Abhimanyu. She raised her voice against war and bloodshed on behalf of all the women in this world. Her piercing cry at the death of Kama struck Kunti like a whip.

Kunti’s proximity to nature gave an opportunity to express a long suppressed thoughts and got herself ‘purged’ and ‘cleansed’ which her life in rajavritta prevented so far. She confessed her crime over Kama and expressed heartfelt appreciation of Gandhari for her moral courage, purity of thought, innocence, magnanimity of heart and her unshakable and upright nature. Kunti used to confess regularly for her crimes. The Mother Earth, hills, water, all living things and the Nishadins remained witness to her confession. The confession made
Kunti warm, lively and fearless. She felt a sense of relief. But a Nishadin who had observed Kunti for many days, wondered that she had confessed all the crimes except the greater one which was related to her. One day she reminded Kunti of the greatest sin she had forgotten; the sin of killing a Nishadin mother along with her five sons in the house of lac at Varanavata. Kunti begged forgiveness from the Nishadin. The idea of 'forgiveness' was typical of the rajaswritta which the Nishadins did not understand.

The values of the lokavritta are different from that of the rajaswritta. If a Nishad girl loves a boy of her choice and gets impregnated, they celebrate it with a wedding. The widow marriage was an accepted social practice. Hence, the episode of Karna which burnt Kunti to the core was not a sin for the Nishads. Their intimacy with nature had made them strong and could easily predict the calamities like forest fire and soon protect themselves from them. The story ends with the incident of Gandhari, Dhritarashtra and Kunti welcoming death with patient resignation. Mahashweta Devi's statement that 'Life outside the rajaswritta had not touched Kunti at all' is difficult to accept. Kunti was with her sons during their exile in the forest for twelve years and had lived through the thick and thin in her life. Hence, it is not possible to believe that she had no idea of the life outside rajaswritta.

"Souvali" (2000) is a story of Souvali, a low-caste serving woman. She was a dasi for Dhritarashtra by whom she got her son Souvalya. He was called a dasiputra. Here Mahashweta Devi takes up the issue of the marginalized and shows how they are exploited by the elite. The interesting thing in the story is the way the marginalized develop resistance against the elite exploitation. Souvali, who was born into a vaishya family was taken by Dhritarashtra to serve as dasi. When Gandhari was carrying, Dhritarashtra impregnated her and thus, Souvalya, the half-royal offspring was born. He was named Yuyutsu. Souvali recollects all the
incidents and the treatments meted out to Souvalya since his birth till the Mahatarpan; the
practice of offering water to the spirits of the dead. She exposes the hypocrisy, greed
and arrogance of the rajavritta. Dhritarashtra gave the boy the name and that was the end of
his responsibility and emotional attachment.

As a protest to the ways of the rajavritta, Souvali never mentioned the name given by
Dhritarashtra to her son. She named the boy as Souvalya. As per the typical tradition of the
rajavritta, he was sent to the gurugriha at the very young age. But it was a separate
gurugriha for him and he had to merely do the work of retrieving the arrows and fetching the
birds the Kauravas shot down. Souvali lived separately out side the rajavritta, cherishing the
sweet memories of her child and was eager to meet him. Though Souvalya was their flesh and
blood, the Kauravas never treated him so. He never tasted the paternal love. He was merely
treated as dasiputra which he detested. Hence, he sided with the Pandavas during the
Kurukshetra battle. He was never allowed to mingle with his mother nor to express his
emotions freely. It was considered unmanly by the rajavritta.

Souvalya offered tarpan for his father as his duty, though the Kauravas never treated
him as their flesh and blood and he was never allowed near Dhritarashtra and he never called
him ‘father’. He refused to offer tarpan to Kunti and Gandhari, as they never accepted him.
Thus, Souvalya expressed his protest for the discrimination meted out to him. At last, the
mother and the son come together. The mother became extremely happy. She would like to
feast on delicious food and sleep peacefully holding her son in her arms. She rejected
Dhritarashtra completely and refused to observe mourning for his death. She had left the
palace on her own free will and would like to follow her own dharma, even after Dritarashtra’s
death. She considered her son foolish for following the norms and rituals of the royalty.

Thus, Souvali protests the arrogance of the rajavitta, challenges their superiority and asserts the sense of freedom and the natural human emotions of the lokavitta. The story is a criticism of the sense of arrogance, discrimination and sheer indifference of the rajavitta. This inherent feature of the royalty is in contrast to the life of the common people.

Mahashweta Devi is known to the outer world mainly as an activist and a writer who protests and condemns all sorts of hypocracy that pervade our life. She fights against exploitation and oppression with her volcanic eruption. The stories that appear in “Our Non-Veg Cow” And Other Stories (1998) show another face of Mahashweta Devi. They are lighter and playful, equipped with fun and fantasy to catch the imagination of the children. She seems to have taken leave from her programme of awareness creation. In this regard her translator Paramita Banerjee remarks “Here Mahashweta Devi has taken a break from her awareness-raising programme to play with children, to swing with their fantasies, to give their imagination a nudge.”(IX)

Mahashweta Devi was familiar to the young readers of Bengali Children’s magazines like Mouchak and Sandesh. She started writing for children in Mouchak from 1965 and in Sandesh from 1975. All the stories in this collection were first published in Sandesh between 1976 and 1992.

In these stories Mahashweta Devi is recalling and reliving her childhood days. She is didi, the eldest of the nine children in an intimate family atmosphere, recording all the minute, funny and incredible but harmless behaviours of all the members of her family, including her
parents. There is no room for intellectual calculations and logical arguments or the sense of reality. Only the child-like innocence and belief rule these stories. Even the elders like the father, mother and aunts would also become a part of this eternal world of innocence.

"Those Boys" (1982), "Nyadosh", "The Incredible Cow" (1976), "Not a Cock and Bull Story" (1982), "Phalgu’s Story" (1992), "Phalgu and The Cheetah-Man" (1982), "The Seven Ghosts" (1985), "Khudey The Dacoit" (1978), "Shivaji’s Horse" (1979), "All Alone" (1982), "Chittu" (1987), all these stories in this collection sound like cock and bull stories. But in reality they are not so. In most of the instances, she is simply narrating her family anecdotes which invariably sound fictitious. It is hardly possible for anybody to believe Nyadosh as a real cow. It was a pet belonged to her mother. Though it lived during Gandhiji’s time, it had no faith in non-violence. It was a fish eating, anti-establishment cow. It had a special taste for schoolbooks, hilsa pieces, lobsters, meat and date-palm juice. It had a selective hatredness for the police and the bondage. It was revolutionary and was recorded in the police file as an ‘anti-police cow’. Possibly, it was the only cow in British India to have police cases lodged against her.

Once Mahashweta Devi’s father, who went down to the ground floor to see off a friend in just a lungi, punjabi and bedroom slippers, carried on chatting all the way to Howrah station, boarded a train and went to her aunts place in Gaya. One of her paternal aunts who had come to Calcutta from a densely forested regions of Madhya Pradesh, purchased twenty-six-thousand cow dung cakes for they were cheap. But after counting it was found that there were only fifteen hundred cakes. Once a chef had cooked, to the surprise, mounds of venison with just one clove of a ‘royal garlic’. All the members of Mahashweta Devi’s family had gone
away during a holiday. Her father, who had been to the market, came home with a procession of rickshaws carrying four hundred cauliflowers and twentytwo mounds of rice. It was too much just for two members. Even the free distribution in the neighbourhood failed to exhaust the stocks. Cows too got fed up with eating them.

Phalgu, the most mischievous person of the family, got an opportunity to teach in a school in which he himself had studied. He used to slap a student on a regular basis. The boy was his ex-teacher’s son. Asked for the reason, Phalgu replied that he had learnt it from the boy’s father who as a teacher used to slap him just like that without any reason. Phalgu’s craze for pets used to cause a great embarrassment to others in the family. His pet hens laid eggs all over the place — inside hats, in the folds of mosquito nets — and made the house dirty. Phalgu got blessed with a ‘wishing stone’, which enabled him to meet a compassionate Cheetah–man of Garhwal who narrated his story to Phalgu. The Cheeta-man was so compassionate that he volunteered to be shot at by Jim Corbett. He did so in order to save Jim Corbett!

Here we are taken through the wonderful experience of a person called Awadhlal who knew a subtle difference between gitgitas, pichpichas, kir kichas, bilbilas and seven types of such ghosts. It is wonderful to see a boy coming out of the television set and play with the lonely Tilak. He plays wonders even on Tilak’s teacher. He makes it possible to have a flowering rose garden in the backyard of the house. Overnight, incessant Bachi gets an opportunity to ride on Shivaji’s ultra special horse, holding his waist, tickling him and talking with him. It is very interesting to see Khudiram, a singer of gowalia songs turning into a robber and helping the police to seek the so-called robber. The only serious thing in the entire collection is the warning coming from Chittu, a
helpful little creature. It can change its shape from man to stone to animal. It serves and protects man. He warns, “Before you people came, we lived happily. You came, and we lost our rivers, our forests — everything. God will punish you terribly. It will rain fire like in ancient times. Everything will be burnt down.”(108)

Thus, in these stories, Mahashweta Devi takes us through a different world and makes us look at children with great deal of love and respect. They are enjoyable even for the grown ups.

The collection Old Women (1999) includes two stories — “Statue” and “The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur”. This collection is named Old Women, as the protagonists in both the stories are old women who become helpless victims of the socio-political milieu in which they are living. It is both oppressive and reactionary. The society which is infected with taboos, selfish political motives and gender discriminations is bound to become heartless and inhuman. They are deeply moving and poignant tales of two old women — Doulati and Andi. They remain a witness to the society which bogs itself down deep into the quagmire of ignorance and indifference.

In “Statue”, Brajadulali, who is known as Dulali, got married at four and became a widow at six. Haunted by a tragic, forbidden, unrequited love, Dulali at seventy-eight came to feel unappeased hunger as more real and immediate in life than anything else. The Bhunya girl Dulali and the Brahmin boy Dindayal Thakur were of the same age. Dinu fell in love with Dulali who was very beautiful and looked like the daughter of a divine house. But Dulali could not express her love though she loved him very much. The taboo of widowhood, caste barriers and social customs prevented her from expressing her natural instinct. Since childhood, she had learnt only to fear the word ‘love’. She was not allowed to participate in any auspicious
events. She was made to accept all the humiliations, hardships and social falsities with a stoic resignation.

The elders arranged Dinu’s marriage with another girl. But Dinu denounced and rejected it and left home to join the militant struggle against the British. At last, he was arrested and executed at the age of twenty-four, in 1924. All these things were a distant memory by the time the decision to install a statue of Dindayal Thakur in Chhatim village was taken. The decision was taken fifty four years after his execution. Dulali who was 78 by that time was preoccupied only with filling her stomach and surviving from day-to-day. Sense of love remained a memory and accepted defeat in the hands of hunger, oppression and inhuman society. Nabin, Dulali’s nephew was the only human face she knew. He welcomed the decision to set the statue with the hope of getting road, school and health centre to Chatim village.

The political decision to establish the statue was taken on the basis of a researcher’s findings on Dinu’s role in the armed revolutionary struggle against the British. It did not materialize the expectations of Nabin, but it provided an opportunity to Dulali to recollect her distant memories and experiences. The greatest paradox is that Badan Khan had helped the British to capture Dinu for the sake of money. His offsprings were honoured as great patriots on the occasion of installing Dinu’s statue. They had spent Rs.74,851 only on the statue. The village remained with no roads, school and hospital. They could have gold plated the entire village with that much of money. These incidents in the story are the critique on the Post-Independent Indian reality, with hypocrisy, corruption and selfishness as its features.

“The Fairy Tale Of Mohanpur” is a story of Andi, a poor innocent and a low-caste woman who finds a happy and comfortable life only in the fairy tales, contrary to the miserable and painful reality. Crushing poverty, societal indifference and Governmental apathy together
contributed to the loss of Andi’s eyes. For Andi, the old low-caste woman from Mohanpur, poverty was a born companion. Though her four sons used to work under the despotic landlord, Hedo Naskar, she had to sweat herself hard for belly’s sake. In the course of her search for food, she fell into a mossy pond mistaking it for a meadow and caught water snake mistaking it for a fish. It happened naturally as she was going blind.

She was taken to a badly equipped and poorly managed Government hospital where there was no arrangement for eye treatment. The doctor gave some eye drops and multivitamin tablets for her satisfaction on her persistence. She was told that her eyes had cataracts. They would be operated when they would become ripe. When a severe pain developed in her eyes, she was treated by a quack in Jabadpur market, which in turn increased her pain and also caused an irreparable damage to her eyes.

At last, she was taken to Naskar’s hospital where the doctor advised to take her to Tamli. ‘The screw-loose body’ of Andi could not be taken out there. Gobindo, a sincere party activist and a social worker, was able to persuade an ophthalmologist at the district town who agreed to go to Naskar’s hospital to treat Andi. But the ophthalmologist did not turn up as promised. It was found that he had been to the pond to fish along with Hedo Naskar. Later, he was forced by Gobindo to undertake the treatment of her infected eyes. Here Gobindo tried his best to give her the treatment, but not with expected result.

Hedo Naskar is a typical landlord in Independent India who turns the concept of ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’ and ‘equality’ to a ridiculous shape. The transfer of doctors, the supply of groceries and medicines to the hospital are manipulated by Hedo Naskar. The ophthalmologist from the district town fishing in the pond with the landlord instead of attending
the serious patient in the hospital is a critique on the rotten system in the Post-Colonial India.

The close reading of these stories reveal us more and more hidden meaning. They provide a strong critique on the gender discrimination, failure of male centred nationalism, the failure of decolonization and the hard earned independence. Thus, in these stories, Mahashweta Devi gives us most sensitively and delicately drawn portraits of Dulali and Andi, the old women along with a strong and ruthless critique on the socio-economic oppression within which they are forced to survive.

*Outcast* (2002) is the collection of four stories which deal with four characters — Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina and Chinta— who hail from the most oppressed and marginalized segment of society. It is shown how they become the victims of unending class, caste and gender exploitation that prevail in post-independent India. With their victimization and the relentless struggle for survival, they force their society to rethink their societal norms.

Mahashweta Devi is highly critical of the societal norms that make them helpless, exploit them and at last, brand them sinners. The people, who entice them with false promises, enjoy them to their content and at last throw them away, remain respectful individuals in the society. The agents who sell the poor women to the landlords and the pimps who involve in the racket of flesh trade are left scot free. Such hypocrisies, dual standards, the caste, class and gender arrogance of the privileged segments of society are exposed.

“Dhouli” (1979) is a touching story of a young untouchable Dusad woman, Dhouli, who found herself an outcast in her own community, in the village Taharr. The saga of unending caste and gender exploitation which made her life miserable and a relentless struggle for survival. Dhouli, a widow left her in-laws to escape from the eyes of her husband's elder brother and
joined her mother at Taharr. She was unusually beautiful and attractive but had not encouraged any of the young dusad men. She was made to observe all the taboos of the widowhood. The life continued struggling with poverty and hunger. Misrilal, a Brahmin boy fell in love with her. She had taken utmost care to guard herself, for she knew what had happened to Jhalo and Shanichari. In the course of time, all her caution was swept away in a flood of passion and as a result Misrilal impregnated her.

Dhouli did not heed the mother’s suggestion to take medicine for abortion as Misrilal had promised her to marry. The caste barrier and the family honour did not allow him to fulfil his own promise. He washed away his hands by paying a hundred rupees to Dhouli. He got married with somebody else and never turned up. Dhouli, who had to take up prostitution to quench her hunger for food, became an object of ire of her community and also of Misrilal’s brother Kundan. She was forced to leave Taharr along with the aged mother and the child. Mahashweta Devi lambastes at the upper-caste arrogance and their pseudo sense of honour. They treat the low-caste women as puppets, use them for their sensual pleasure, give false promises and desert them later.

“Shanichari” (1982)

It is another important story in the collection. Let us go through the following dialogue between two characters.

‘Remember the four girls who never returned from the brick kiln?"

Of course I do
They were sold off
Who sold them?
Malik
Sold them?
Of course, they were sold off, turned into whores, made pregnant like me.

It’s our destiny.’

These lines from the story tell a lot about the Post-Independent Indian reality of all pervading class, caste and gender exploitation. It is a tragic story of Shanichari, the Oraon girl who was forced to work in the brick kilns outside Calcutta. Pressing poverty and draught came in handy for Gohuman Bibi, the agent of the brick kiln owners in Calcutta to cast her net to fish in the helpless girls from the poor marginalized communities.

Shanichari could not help being an easy victim to ‘Gohuman’s fangs’ though she was aware of Gohuman’s designs. Harilal, the beggar singer, had warned her about Gohuman. The terror and oppression that the Government unleashed to suppress The Adi Jati Raksha Morcha Movement, forced the marginalized to take shelter in hills and forest caves without food and cloths. Gohuman could easily entice them and supply them to the brick kiln owner, Rahmat at Calcutta. After undergoing tortuous, inhuman and nightmarish experiences, Shanichari returned home with Rahmat’s ‘seed’ planted in her womb. It made her an outcast in her own community.

Gohuman bibi and many such agents enticed poor helpless girls and supplied them to the brick kiln owners at Calcutta. They were sold off, turned into whores and made pregnant like Shanichari. The tragic story did not end with Shanichari alone. It is an endless tale. The narrator tells:

“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.”

(Outcaste 55)"
Shanichari’s fingers point at every one of us who remain mute spectators at these goings on.

“The Fairy Tale Of Rajabasha” (1982) is a significant story in the collection. “Fairytales are stories which have a beginning but no end,”(77) writes Mahashweta Devi in the story. It is one such never ending tragic story of Josmina, a Ho tribal woman who with her husband got sucked into the racket of trade in cheap labour and became an object of run-on stories.

Josmina who was bubbling and lively as the river Koyena in the monsoons had been leading an impoverished but happy and peaceful life with her husband Sarjom Purти and the Child Masidas. The beginning of her tragedy was marked with Nandlal Shahu, the landlord slithering like a snake into their peaceful home, through the crack caused by hunger. Enticed by Nandlal’s promise of attractive salary and clothes, both Josmina and Sarjom left Rajabasha and went to Punjab, the irresistible virbhumi. There she had to bear the sexual assaults and the sensual greed’s of the landlords, one after another. In their attempt to escape from the lusts of one landlord they would fall into the hands of another more heartless and inhuman one. They were; Niranjan Singh of Haripur village, Pritam Singh of Kosa village, Sardar Gyan Singh of Hoshiarpur, Dileep Singh, the son of Sarban Singh of Badala village.

At last Josmina returned to Rajabasha along with her family, after being exploited thoroughly. They became outcasts in their own place. Eventually, Josmina committed suicide by drowning herself in the river Koyena. This is a stricture on the inhuman exploitation and oppression of women in the society that lead to the tragic end of innumerable innocent and helpless women like Josmina.

“Chinta” (1959) is an example of gender exploitation where even the caste privileges

241
do not come to protect against the harsh social strictures. Even the ownership of four bighas of land, two rooms, a couple of goats and a cow do not help Chinta, a Brahmin widow, from being exploited by the cheats and the prevailing social taboos.

Chinta, the widow who found it hard to protect herself from the prowling men, was easily enticed by the handsome young man, Utsab who promised to marry her in Calcutta. She followed him to Calcutta leaving her son Gopal and the property behind. But Utsab cheated her. He would beat her, take all her money and absconded after giving two daughters to her. Thus, Chinta was forced into working as a part-time maid in Calcutta. Society came to consider her a sinner. Then she had to spend two hundred rupees, feast the people of her village on rice and pithay and forsake her two girls as a penance for having sinned. She had to pass all these tests in order to get herself accepted back by the community. Chinta’s late husband’s uncle and his son who came to Calcutta created a scene and forced her to sell her two daughters for ten and eight rupees each.

Thus, the story is a critique on the social circumstances that made Chinta to sell her daughters, Giri and Gouri. It is a shame on any civilized society. The story also exposes the middleclass conscience of ‘being benevolent to her at no cost to themselves’. The postscript of the story collection reads:

“Mahashweta Devi’s acute and perceptive pen brings to life with a deep empathy and sensitivity which makes these women step out of the margins of society to live in our minds, impressive in their quiet courage and tenacity, their will to survive.” (Postscript)

_Bitter Soil_ (1998) is the collection that includes four stories – “Little Ones”, “Seeds”, “The Witch” and “Salt”. They reflect on the contemporary realities of the Indian society. As
Mahashweta Devi herself admits, her reputation as a writer stands largely on some of her works of which the four stories in this collection form a major part.

Set in Palamau district of Bihar State (now it comes under Jharkhand), these stories draw our attention towards the prevailing caste and class exploitation which according to Mahashweta Devi is rooted in our land system. What is true of Palamau is true of India. She says, “Palamau is a mirror of India.” (Bittersoil VII). The failure of the successive Governments since independence to redistribute rural and urban land above the land ceiling to the landless had contributed to the continuation of the feudal system. It has lead in turn to the exploitation of and the oppression and the brutalities on the poor and the marginalized. This is really a blot on the Independent India. So Mahashweta Devi writes these stories with a sole purpose of sensitizing the people towards the state of affair and also to make them feel ashamed of the true face of India. Hence, she uses the language here which is brutal and lethal at time.

“Little Ones” is one of the serious stories of Mahashweta Devi. She says that this story was born of her tribal experience (Bitter Soil IX). Set in Palamau, it expresses the savage anger of the tribals, Aagarias at the system which forces them to starve, whereas allows some people to eat three meals a day. She found her idea expressed in this story being corroborated by the founder of the Nutrition Institute of Brazil, D. Castro in his book The Geography of Hunger, published in 1952. It was said that the chronic malnutrition hinders the growth of human and animal bodies. Even the dwarf horses grow big and strong if provided with nutritious fodder. The little ones we find in the story have been reduced to that distorted human shape due to the lack of nutritious food.

About fourteen years back the Aagarias of Kubha village in Lohri area of Palamau
District had put a violent opposition to the efforts of the Government to get iron from the area. They believed that their three Demon Gods live in the area. They had killed the Government officers and the geologists who visited the area. After the incident, they took shelter in the forest to escape from the cruel and oppressive measures the Government would take.

The barren land, continuous drought and the lack of food made these people suffer from malnutrition and lack of nourishment. It naturally hampered the growth of their body. So they used to steal the relief materials supplied by the Government in order to quench their hunger. The BDO and the Tehsildar who got used to the place warned the relief officer to be careful, as the materials would be stolen by the tiny, naked children, with long hair and strange limbs, who did not look like humans. Therefore, the relief officer took utmost care to protect the materials supplied by the Government. When he himself saw the materials being stolen, he followed them, and to his surprise, he came to know that they were neither ghosts nor children. They too were the adult Indian males and females, reduced to the ghostly appearance due to the lack of food and nourishment. They gathered around the relief officer, rubbing their sagging breasts, dry and shriveled penises. That strange experience panicked the officer for some time. The impact of realization exploded in his mind. He felt that the miserable appearance of the undernourished bodies and the laughable height of the ordinary Indian males and females was a heinous crime of civilization. It is a mockery of freedom and progress.

The relief officer was stunned by the sense of guilt. As the narrator in the story tells, he felt like, “A criminal condemned to death. Pronouncing his own death sentence for their stunted forms, he lifts his face up to the moon, his mouth gaping wide” (Bittersoil 20). Thus, Mahashweta Devi expresses a ruthless anger against the exploiters and the system that helps
them. She exposes the naked brutality, savagery, caste and class exploitation by unmasking
the face of India as being projected by the successive Governments.

In the story "Seeds", Mahashweta Devi exposes the feudal landlords, their henchmen
and the system and she shows how all these exploiting agencies are hand in hand in sucking the
low-caste blood. It is also revealed, how all these vested interests together make the Government
laws and constitutional decrees futile. This story is not a fiction based on the figment of
imagination. As Mahashweta Devi herself claims, it is based on her real life experiences (Bitter
Soil IX). It is only an attempt to unearth deeper roots for on going Harijan killings, class and
caste wars in Bihar, UP, MP and other places.

Lachman Singh, his brother and co-heir Daitari Singh were the typical landlords of
Tamadih in the Kuruda belt. They displayed all the traits of feudal heads. They were in
possession of hundred and thousands of acres of land. They never used to give more than
forty paise as wages to the labourers. Any demand for more wages or protest against injustice
would be replied with the guns or the Ganju Dushad, Dhobi quarters would go up in flames.

Persuaded by the Sarvodaya workers, Lacham Singh had given a piece of barren land
to Dulan, not without selfish motives. But Dulan with his natural guile and wit, managed to get
seeds, fertilizer and money from the B.D.O. He was able to feed his family without cultivating
the land. Karan Dusad, Asrafi and their brothers, Dulan’s son Datua protested the injustice of
the landlords. Hence, they had to become victims of Lachman Singh’s gun. All of them were
buried in Dulan’s field. Dulan knew everything but he maintained secrecy with fear of Lachman
Singh. He kept watch of his land though there was no crop.

At last, when Dulan’s tolerance exhausted, he killed the ‘invincible’ Lachman Singh and
buried him in the same field where he had buried Karan Dushad and others. Then Dulan cultivated paddy seeds in the fields and that grew copiously as the dead bodies buried in the field became a very precious fertilizer. Thus, Mahashweta Devi shows us how the heinous crimes of Lachman Singh go unpunished. She criticizes harshly the system which is corrupted to the core.

"The Witch" is a touching story of a low-caste woman, Somri. Mahashweta Devi’s anger is directed here towards the exploitation and the oppression of the low-caste, especially the low-caste women by the upper-caste. The exploitation becomes more poignant as the victim Somri is dumb and mentally retarded.

Somri is a slow-witted and voiceless daughter of Pahaan, the tribal Priest of Tura. Her body grew but not her mind. A year back, the father had sent her to the house hold of Hanuman Misra in Tahar to work in the cowshed. There had been no news of her for the next five months since then. The poor father had searched high and low for her without success. Later, he came to know that Misraji’s son had spoilt her. When Somri’s father had been to Misraji to enquire about his dumb daughter, he got a shoe in his face. Hanuman Misra had let the daini story loose to cover his son’s crime. He spread the rumour that she had become a daini (a witch). It sent a sense of nameless horror among the people.

Somri, who was considered a daini was chased away from place to place. Hunger, fear, exhaustion and the continuous wandering made her assume a strange appearance. People started to associate her with the ‘daini story’. With melted hair, distended stomach, near nakedness and the act of gnawing the raw flesh of a bird, Somri resembled the unnamed horror that Hanuman Misra had unleashed. People realized the fact when her father recognized her
and explained the fact behind the entire ‘daini business’. The role of Misraji’s son in the entire episode was made known to the people. The incident of Somri giving birth to a child inside a cave, at a time when the excited people were trying to hunt out her, mistaking her for a witch is the most excruciating incident in the story.

Thus, Mahashweta Devi exposes the hypocrisy and the tactics the upper-caste people use to cover up their unpardonable crimes. The way they capitalize on the ignorance and blind belief of the marginalized, is also highlighted.

In the story “Salt”, Mahashweta Devi focuses on the novel ways the upper-caste landlords follow to exploit the landless labourers and the sharecroppers. Once again she targets the system which leaves the perpetrators of crime free and makes the victims suffer. Uttam Chand Bania, who had declared, nimak se marega (I will kill you by salt) and virtually achieved his goal, remained a respectable gentleman in the society. Whereas, the elephant and the tribal youth were expendable.

All the seventy-six Adivasis belonging to seventeen families of Jhujhar village, that lay in the lap of the Palamau Reserve Forest, were bound in the shackles of Betbegari to the landlord, Uttam Chand Bania. Those Adivasis were too innocent and ignorant to understand the fact that the system of wageless labour was illegal. Purti Munda of Jhujhar village, who had seen the outside world, protested the bonded labour system that Uttam Chand Bania practiced in the village. With the help of the youth team from the city, Purti Munda enabled the Adivasis to get their due share in the crop. Enraged by the act of the Adivasis, Uttam Chand Bania felt defeated by them and vowed to avenge himself by killing them by salt.

All the grocery shops in the surrounding markets belonged to Uttam Chand and he
stopped selling salt in his shops. As a result, the Adivasis of Jhujhar village had to struggle hard to get a pinch of salt for their *ghato* (gruel, mash, poor man's food), though salt was supposed to be the cheapest commodity in India. Their proposal to work in the forest department for salt was turned down by the contractor. They were consigned to a saltless darkness. Purti Munda and his fellow Adivasis had no other way but to steal the salt from the salt licks that the forest department used to provide for the elephants and deer. Inspite of warning by the village elder, Purti and his friends continued to steal the salt from the salt lick. That act of them enraged the *ekoa*, an elephant which had become irresponsible after being exiled from the leadership and from the herd. Later Purti and two other Adivasi youths were killed by the *ekoa*. At last the *ekoa* was declared rogue and was shot down by the commissioned hunter.

Thus, Uttam Chand's refusal to sell salt led to the death of three Adivasis and an elephant. Mahashweta Devi is angry towards the society, the system and the law which do not count the act of Uttam Chand as a crime. These harsh and hard-hitting stories are the outcome of Mahashweta Devi's extensive travels in the tribal-intensive Palamau region. She witnessed various instances of exploitation and oppression. Therefore, these stories are abound with her anger against the exploitation she had witnessed herself and also against the complacent hypocrisy of the rich and the upper-caste.

The collection *Breast Stories* (1998) includes three stories: "Draupadi", "Breast Giver" and "Behind the Bodice". They are the well-known stories of Mahashweta Devi that are more often discussed and debated in the academic circles. They are known for their multi dimensional values and many layers of meaning. They provide a serious critique on the socio-economic values that prevail in our society. As the title suggests, 'Breast' is a common phenomenon in these stories. But they express different points of view and they differ in their treatment of the
subject. The three protagonists of the stories — Dopdi, Jashoda and Gangor — suggest the divergent views that are evident in the stories.

In “Draupadi”, ‘breast’ becomes an object of torture, revenge and oppression with class, caste and the gender overtones. It is a survival object transformed into a commodity in “Breast Giver”. ‘Breast’ which is a part of the body becomes a ‘symbol’ of the whole person in “Behind the Bodice”. Mahashweta Devi uses this part of human body as a means to indict the exploitative social system that is discriminatory and oppressive towards the weak, both physically and economically.

“Draupadi” (1990) first appeared in Agnigarbha (1990), a collection of short political narratives. “Draupadi” (1990) is a story of Dopdi Mejhen, she was the most wanted tribal revolutionary who went underground and instigated many tribal youth to fight against injustice. She was arrested at last and gang raped in the police custody. The climax of the story lies in the manner Dopdi Mejhen turns the terrible injuries, pain and humiliation into a means of counter offensive.

Dopdi Mejhen, the wife of Dulna Majhi, was a most notorious female and long wanted in many crimes, as per the records of the police. She went underground along with Dulna for a long time after the famous ‘Operation Bakuli’ in which the landlord Surja Sahu was murdered. Captain Arjun Singh, the architect of the Operation Bakuli and who was sent once again on the ‘Operation Forest Jharkhani’, had to take premature and forced retirement due to the dreadful fear of the black skinned tribals.

The Senanayak, who took over the charge of the operation against the tribal insurgency, followed the hunter’s way rather than the soldier’s, to capture the tribal youth. He was able to
kill Dulna while he was drinking water from the river and used Dulna's corpse as a bait to capture Dopdi and other tribal youth, but without success. At last he was able to capture Dopdi, helped by the treacherous Shomai and Budhna. The subordinates of the Senanayak literally followed his instruction, 'make her do the needful'. She was undressed, gang raped, breasts and nipples were bitten and torn. When she was asked to put on the cloth, she told with an indomitable laughter that it was not as easy to clothe her as they had stripped her. She says:

“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 – come on, kounter me – ?” (Breast Stories 36-37)

While uttering these unexpected volley of words, Draupadi pushed the Senanayak with her mangled breasts. He was terribly afraid to stand before an unarmed target for the first time in his life. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says that this story insists on the fact that the male leadership stops at this point. This story, as she finds out, “is an allegory of the woman’s struggle within the revolution in a shifting historical moment.” (Breast Stories 12)

Thus, Mahashweta Devi presents Dopdi in contrast to the romanticized version of Draupadi in the epic Mahabharata. She had five husbands and was infinitely clothed by the Lord Krishna who rescued her from being stripped naked. Whereas, Dopdi in the story is easily stripped and gang raped by the police. When she has nobody to rescue her, she poses an unexpected and a novel way of resistance by refusing to be clothed by the men in office. When she questions, 'are you a man?' and says, 'there isn't a man here', she is questioning their manliness and making them to be ashamed of their own act. Oppression, taken to the
extreme end, forces the oppressed to express the extreme possible resistance which makes it impossible for the oppressors to face.

“Breast Giver” (1997) is a story of a woman, Jashoda who had taken motherhood as her profession to support her family. At last she died of painful breast cancer, betrayed by all those who got their needs fulfilled by her.

Jashoda, the wife of Kangalicharan, a Brahmin, was a typical traditional Indian wife. She was a mother of twenty children including both the living and the dead. Motherhood was always her way of living. There was no time when there was no child in her womb. She was a perennial source of pleasure and a Paradise for Kangalicharan. He was working for the landlord Haldar. He became handicapped in an accident caused by the whimsical Haldar son. He was unable to work and earn food for the family. Jashoda had to do the work of a wet nurse to the grand children of Haldar in order to support her own family. For that she had to see that there was always milk in her breast. It was possible only if she had a child in her belly. So Kangalicharan became a professional mother. The women of Haldar family worry much how to ‘keep their figure’ and how to keep their men folk in good humour. They found a great utilitarian value in Jashoda’s ever secreting breast. She suckled dozens of the grand children of the Haldar family. It enabled her to help her own family. But her fortune vanished with her inability to bear children. The most tragic experience in the story is Jashoda struggling with burning pain in her breast abandoned by her own sons, the sons she suckled and the husband. At last she died in the hospital, unwept, unhonoured and unsung by any one and was cremated by an untouchable.

This story shows how man uses woman’s body and how woman’s body is being abused by the system, particularly the system which is economically sound. Irony is that the
system comprises of women also. This story is situated within the framework of the economic position of the families. It shows how the mother-child relation too is controlled by the economic principles. It has a thematic relation with another Bengali story “Parasuram” by Subodh Ghosh and Premchand’s story “Dudh Ka Dam” (The price of the Milk). Premchand’s story has a sweeper (bhangi) woman, who acts as the foster mother of a landlord, neglecting her own son. When she dies, the landlord takes care of her orphan son. But the landlord’s son, fed on the Bhangi’s milk, treats the orphan contemptuously. This is the price of the ‘mother’s milk’.

The mother image in Indian literature represents the ideals and concepts sanctified by time and enforced by the society. Deification of mother and presenting her as a ‘noble mother’, representing the supreme power, has appeared in greater frequency in Indian literature. The mother-child relationship provides a basic link and the ultimate goal of the social relationships in India. For the Indian mother, male child is the most important medium of self-expression of hope, fulfilment and redemption, even more than the husband.

The contemporary literature abounds with another aspect of the motherhood which is nearer to the real life experiences. She is projected as the suffering woman neglected by the in-laws, husband and children.

In this story Mahashweta Devi tries to expose the treachery, a sense of exploitation and utter selfishness that lay behind the deification of mother and the mother-child relation. Her power to depict the degeneration and dehumanization brought in by poverty, socio-economic inequality is at its height in this story. The noted writer and critic Jaidev considers this story an allegory of the Post-Independent India. Endorsing this argument Mahashweta Devi herself says:

“Stanadayini is a parable of India after decolonization. Like the
protagonist Jashoda, India is a mother-by-hire. All classes of people, the post-war rich, the ideologues, the indigenous bureaucracy, the diasporics, the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her. If nothing is done to sustain her, nothing is given back to her, and if scientific help comes too late, she will die of a consuming cancer. *(Breast Stories 78)*

But Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak focuses on the subaltern as gendered subject rather than an allegorical seme for Mother India *(In Other Worlds 264)*.

"Behind The Bodice" *(Cholike Piche, 1997)* is a story of a migrant labourer Gangor, whose 'statuesque' breast makes a 'seismic upheaval' in the mind of the itinerant ace-photographer Upin Puri, who clicks the photo of Gangor and sells it for money which leads to a series of violence and to a tragedy at last.

Gangor’s crowd came to Jaroa looking for work during a semi famine condition. They worked on a piece wage basis in the kilns for light bricks and tiles. Gangor was healthy and her mammal projections were enticing. When Upin once saw Gangor suckling her baby, took a photo which she did not object. Instead, she demanded some money. Those artless people were not aware of the 'hidden agenda' of the men like Upin.

The copies of the photo taken thus, by Upin were sold and even appeared in the newspapers. 'The Half Naked Ample Breasted Female Figures of Orissa' received public attention. As a result, the innocent migrant labourer Gangor became a victim of the 'craze' of the police, the contractors and other exploiting agencies. She was raped and gang raped in the lock-up and out side, implicated in a court case and made to wander from Jaroa to Seopura.
and from Seopura to Jharia. Upin was shocked to see Gangor who had turned into a whore. Her statuesque breast was a thing of the past. There were no breast at all, only two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. 'The two raging volcanic craters' spew liquid lava at Upin.

Thus, Mahashweta Devi raises the question of ethics in aesthetics and responsibility in archivization. The story is a critique on the irresponsibility of the artist Upin. For the person like the caretaker, the destruction of Gangor's breast was a casual thing. The suffering, pain and the inhuman act that lay behind the entire episode, eludes the knowledge of the so-called intellectuals and the custodians of Indian culture who 'meet in a closed seminar in the capital city and make the (un)wise decision'. Mahashweta Devi is highly critical of this kind of intellectual bankruptcy and hypocrisy.

In this story, the 'part object' becomes a 'symbol' and represents the whole person. Hence, what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has said in this regard becomes very pertinent. She opines, Behind the Bodice is the rape of the people ... The archivist could not understand it, and died in the understanding. Let us call it archive-fever."(Breast Stories XV)²⁵

Thus Mahashweta Devi, the master story teller attacks the social evils that prevail in our society and castigates all those who are responsible for them. She exposes the failure of our system to bring justice to the marginalized sections of our society. It is clear that the number and variety of her stories enable us to peep into the vast web of Indian life with all its complexities and varieties.


4. Devi 49.


6. Devi 55.

7. Devi 77.


10. Devi 17.


18. Devi 77.


23. Devi 12.

24. Devi 78.

25. Devi XV.