Chapter II
Short Fictional Narratives:
*Down, But Not Out*

“Most of the greatest evils that man inflicted upon man have come through people feeling quite certain about something which, in fact, was false.”

— Bertrand Russell
*Unpopular Essays*
CHAPTER – II
SHORT FICTIONAL NARRATIVES:

DOWN, BUT NOT OUT

Mahashweta Devi in her short fictions very strongly pursues her object of exposing the prevailing evils in our society and in the system. It is difficult to separate her short fictions from her stories. Most of her stories run about 30-40 pages. The division made here is only for the sake of convenience.

In this chapter, an attempt is made to examine Mahaswheta Devi’s short fictional narratives, with a view to probe deep into her ideology as a writer of fiction. Her themes here are various. This chapter includes, Bashai Tudu a novelette, which was a part of Agnigarbha, a collection of Mahaswheta Devi’s stories, published in 1978. The English version, translated by Samik Bandhyopadhyay along with her famous story Draupadi, appeared in 1990. It is a brilliant work of art with an original mix of documentary realism and revolutionary fantasy, history and fiction so characteristic of Mahashweta Devi.¹

Protest against the exploitation and oppression of all sorts at different levels of social and political dispensation are the hallmark of her writings. About this Samik Bandyopadhyay remarks, “Mahaswheta Devi here exposes yet another area of exploitation, more vicious and horrible, in the agrarian system: it concerned landless agricultural labourers, a large proportion of whom came from the tribal communities.”²

In her earlier work, Aranyer Adhikar (1976), Mahaswheta Devi makes fiction out of history. Whereas in Bashai Tudu (1978) she weaves a myth out of real life. Here she continues her task of the authentic documentation of the life she knows best. It is also a critique on the
modern political system which is dominated by the leaders who are after money and power, and of the people who are indifferent and callous.

One need not look for any definite politics in the writings of Mahasweta Devi. As she claims, “Sensitive persons committed to the cause of the exploited and the persecuted stand at the centre of my works.”(Bashai XX)³

The setting of the novel is rural West Bengal. Bashai Tudu, in whom sensitivity and commitment are the inbom qualities, naturally becomes the central character of the novelette, emerges and grows into a larger than life size, necessitated by the state of affair that prevailed in the rural West Bengal after independence. Bashai Tudu is not an isolated phenomenon. It is an extension of various uprisings like the Sanyasi Revolt (1760-1800), the Wahabi Movement (1863-65), the Indigo Revolt (1780-1917) and the Naxalbari Rebellion (1967). As Mahasweta Devi herself feels, the peasant movement in the Naxalbari region in North Bengal in May-June 1967 and its background would explain something of the spirit that has gone into the making of Bashai Tudu. Exploitation of the sharecroppers, who were mostly adivasi landless labourers, by the jotedars (landlords) and the problem of migrated and landless labourers who were living ‘almost in a state of slavery’, led to the eruption of violent Naxalbari Movement. This movement had been crushed by brutal repression. Mahashweta Devi writes:

“The happenings in Naxalbari and their background constitute the most significant and inspiring events in the life of the country over the last few decades. Bashai Tudu is the product of these events and their maker as well; for it is they who change society and come to symbolize the time and the place, transcending their names and the local situations.”(Bashai XVII)⁴

Unfortunately, all those factors that led to the eruption of violent Naxalbari Movement remained unchanged long after it had been crushed. The exploitation of the
starving peasant continued. The *jotedars* (landlords) had cornered almost all the cultivable land in the country. Thus a few thousand families used to own all the agricultural land. The extortion of interest on loans at a compound rate and forced labour in payment of debts had become an established system, the ‘red account books’ of the *jotedars* were their ‘goddess of wealth’. They thrived on it and amassed huge wealth at the cost of the poor and hungry landless labourers. The *jotedars* had the ‘supernatural’ capacity to keep stored in their memories the calculations for hundreds of loans drawn by hundreds of people over several generations. Once a plot of land has got into the book of accounts there was never a chance of it coming out again.

The *jotedars* wangled all the benefits from the Government that were meant for the poor. They got some wells sanctioned by the Government in the name of the poor, low-caste people and got them dug in their own compounds. The poor low-caste people remained deprived of all the basic facilities. In summer and in times of drought, they had to dig into the dry riverbeds in search of water. Rural India had the appearance of an enormous graveyard. The agricultural labourers simply ‘existed’. That they ‘existed’ itself was a miracle. Their ‘urge to survive’ was a force in itself. It served as the food that kept Indians alive. Fermented rice water was on sale in rural West Bengal. The narrator points out, “Condition of men did not depend either on the bounty or miserliness of nature. People could be as poor in East Bengal, a land of plenty, as in Jagula, the cradle land of drought, for poverty was created by man.” (Devi, *Bashai 20*)

The poor in India were a subject for research—research on the minimum on which a man could survive, on the maximum that the Government could very well afford to give the people. The sharecroppers and agricultural labourers of Western Bengal had been reduced to a
"wandering zoo". Even after so many years of freedom and enlightenment, nothing had been done to address the grievances of these people in rural India. A large part of rural India was still sunk in ignorance. Though the Government, forced by the circumstances, introduced new laws regarding minimum wages, never tried to enforce them. Everything in rural India remained "static" and "immovable". "Copernicus's notion of solar system was a heresy. Aristotle's notion still ruled." (Devi, Bashai 63)

Some of the agricultural labourers did not know that India was independent! They thought that the Englishmen had been given a new name, the Indian Government. Most of them had never heard of the minimum wages for the agricultural labourers. The age-old feudal values, represented by Bhuinya, Sau and Barari who were moneylenders and jotedars, exacerbated the situation further by cashing in on the gullibility of the landless labourers. A large portion of them hailed from the tribal communities and made a precarious living, relying totally on the mercies of the landlords. Agricultural labourers failed to take advantage of whatever little relief they had been granted in the form of minimum wages and no organization or the party came forward to uphold and fight for their rights. Even the Peasant Front of the Communist Party never upheld the rights of the agricultural labourers. The middle peasantry remained the mainstay of the Communist Kisan Sabha. Middle peasants employed agricultural labourers on their lands. So it could affect their political interests. And all that really mattered to the Communists was vote. It was middle peasantry that controlled the vote. Jotedars, with their political clout, could make and unmake anything. They actually ruled the roost in rural India. The police-Government-jotedar nexus was a hard nut for the hapless land labourers to crack at. Jotedars were the favorite younger spouse of the administration", whereas, the "poloosce (sic) and the Jotedars were lovely dovey's". If anyone raised his voice against this
state of affair, he was to be killed and eliminated in an ‘encounter’. The administration used to hide its inhuman and brutal repressions under these catchy phrases. The dead bodies of the children were also explained away by the ‘theory of frontal encounter’. Even the demand for the rightful wages was an unpardonable offence. If at all any honest and sincere police officers were found, like oasis in a desert, they were discreetly transferred to the police training institutes and were made to wear away their service in training the police ‘to shoot at stationary targets’.

The attitude of the representatives was equally discouraging. It was only the elections that brought them to rural India. Rest of the time they had only excuses to offer for their inability to appear before their voters. They set out to ‘discover the charms of the world abroad as they had seen enough of the face of India’. For all those who involved in party politics, the human issues tended to reduce themselves to faceless abstraction. The problem of caste remained as great a menace as ever. Water for the thirsty and food for the hungry remained ‘fairytale dream’. The army of the poor and the hungry had been increasing every year as the ‘procreation was the sole recreation of the poor’.

‘The iron was hot, red hot’. Diabolical indifference of the administration, hypocracy of the Communists, enigmatic apathy of the peasant organizations and the unbridled exploitation by the jotedars made the situation tense and added fuel to the fire. Bashai Tudu was the result. It was quite natural that people who rarely saw their elected representatives found their Messiah in Bashai for he was with them during draughts, floods, epidemics and in their fight against the moneylenders. He had become one of them by ‘the inescapable logic of circumstances’. Bashai Tudu was a Santhali. He was born an agricultural labourer, educated at a Mission School and an agricultural labourer again. He was an active member of the Communist Party for some time. Disappointed and disillusioned by the indifference of the party towards
the cause of the landless labourers, Bashai Tudu distanced himself from the party. The vote
bank politics and the ‘class loyalties of the professed believers in a classless society’ completely
shattered the dream of Bashai Tudu in the party politics. His disillusionment had begun from
his sense of injustice. He had a firm belief that any politics confined to promoting a party’s
interest could never bring about a change. People joining the party to make capital out of
politics had broken Bashai’s heart for ever. The Communist Party in India had embraced all
the stigma of the Indian society. Bashai Tudu tells:

“The Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party acquired a special Indian
character on Indian soil, and came to follow the law of the ladder. A
law that taught you to forget the lower rung with every rung you rose
on the ladder. Rise-a-rung - and -forget - the lower - rung was the
single law of climbing that persisted in every field of Indian experience...
This was the Indian tradition. It was tradition that saw to it that the
ordinary cadre got shot to bring glory to the leader, who would be in
prison at the time, safe and secure and comfortable as a Class I
prisoner.”(31)"

The young party cadres had no better future in the party. In the politics of the Left,
once a leader, you remained a leader forever. The senior leaders were reluctant to be away
from the power like leeches, in spite of ‘high blood pressure, heart trouble, diabetes,
false teeth and loosing skin’. They never thought of paving a way for the new blood. Though
they called him a comrade, they did not hesitate to kick him out, once they realised that he was
an agricultural labourer. The political game they played at the cost of the hungry was very
unfair. They had developed around themselves a wall of immunity against thinking. It was a
wall more formidable than the Great Wall of China. All such experiences shattered his faith in
the politics of the party and distanced him further from the ways of the Left.
Bashai was not contented with the Naxalite ways of fighting either. He firmly believed that carried away by the emotional fervour, the Naxalites committed many mistakes. He says, "They only know how to die for their cause. I haven’t even seen anyone else die the way they do. You simply won’t understand."(46). Disillusioned by both the ways - the Communist way and the Naxalite way - Bashai Tudu had come out with his own way, the Bashai Tudu way. That was the strategy born of his Santhal wisdom to deal with problems of his people. That was a strategy to conduct a movement and coming out of it without a scratch.

He was very much aware of his own limitations as well as the inhumanity of the establishment, which used brutal forces to torture the rebels. Therefore, he evolved a new method of fighting. 'It was new because it was old'. Bashai was very flexible in his approach. If the opponents were within the law, he would go for the law. If they defied it, he would go beyond. Bashai, as a fighter, had gone far from the ambit of both Communism and Naxalism. But he was ready to take support from both, only if such supports would further his cause and his movement permitted it. He would stand by any one who stood by him. He took up cudgels against all those who were responsible for the untold misery of the labour folk who were impelled to live on the water drained from cooked rice and flowing down the mud drains near cheap hotels. He formed his own army of the landless tribal agricultural labourers following the guerilla war strategy with an Indian orientation. Soon Bashai won over the hearts of the masses and grew into a formidable pervasive force, sweeping over the rural Bengal. The mere mention of his name would send a wave of tremour in the hearts of the exploiters.

Bashai Tudu was a man of action, so much so that the masses who followed him made him a mythical Phoenix sort of a person. He died five times in five different encounters with the police. The police killed Bashai but before the 'file' was closed he started fighting
again and made everything look mysterious. The mystery of consecutive death and birth of the protagonist and his act of embracing martyrdom several times plunged the whole administration into a confusion. After each ‘encounter’, the administration arranged an ‘identification parade’, ironically to identify the face, which was too badly mangled. A myth of reincarnation developed around the image of Bashai Tudu. It was said that real Bashai died in the second encounter itself. Since his name had become so well-known and signified terror to the exploiters, it was tacitly agreed upon to keep the name alive. Someone impersonated Bashai, dying willingly every time in the hands of the police. Thus, the name ‘Bashai Tudu’ became ‘a legend, death defying legend’. The repeated resurrection left the message of impossibility of crushing down the human spirit, which had been waging an eternal war against injustice.

Mahashweta Devi, who is against the romanticization of human reality, here attempts to idealize her protagonist who is a throbbingly alive human being and also a legendary creature. She is aware of the fact that the impregnable brutality of the system needs a person of Herculean stature to counter it. Hence, Bashai Tudu’s character becomes relevant. The identification marks given by the police were very abstract: age fifty five, height five-feet seven, complex dark, a scar on the forehead and in moments of frenzy or when he was upset, he would make a strange motion with his hands that seemed to suggest someone trying to wring the neck of the wind. This unusual behaviour which made it obligatory for every successor to Bashai’s image to take the place of the dead man, adds a metaphorical dimension to an otherwise a simple story of an artless and committed man, fighting for justice.

Kali Santra, one time co-activist of Bashai in the Communist Party came handy for the police to identify him on all the four times and he went on his own to see the fifth corpse. Hated
by his own son and wife for not being corrupt, Kali Santra was a typical middle class gentleman; a Communist and a journalist, but simple and sincere. He was utilized by the party to prop up its image only during the elections and by the administration only to identify Bashai. But he was oblivious of the fact that he was marked for liquidation the day he outlived his utility. Rest of the time he was a misfit and expendable. These two characters represented two diametrically opposite views in the same party. As Samik Bandhyopadhyay opines:

"Bashai Tudu’s Militancy – significantly, outside the programme of the organized Left – and Kali Santra’s helplessness – significantly again, inside the organized Left – are the two poles between which the Bashai Tudu experience is laid out." (Devi, Bashai XI) 

Kali Santra had been a helpless and a mute spectator. His conviction did not let him dissociate himself from the party and his timidity did not allow him to fight things out while remaining inside. His interactions with Bashai Tudu exposed the Communists in India; the void between their ideology and practice, their class loyalty, vote bank politics, their social hypocrisy, their hunger for power and their tacit support to the exploiters. His frequent visit to Bashai led him to ‘realization’. He came to know that he had to pay a price for being too good and his relation with Bashai might lead him to death.

Though both of them were from the same party, Bashai had gone miles ahead. "He is now a strange continent. But a continent that one could not attack, explore or colonize.” (Devi, Bashai 29). The whole struggle of Bashai Tudu was around the crucial question of land and minimum wages. The struggle would go on in spite of the police oppressions and death of activists, unless the causes leading to the same were identified, analysed and removed. The theoretical redressal of grievances on paper would, in turn, only aggravate the situation.
Thus, in *Bashai Tudu* (1978), as R.K. Dhawan observes:

“We find Mahashweta Devi at her toughest. Here is a fearless exposure of reality and the author sheds all weakness and sentimentality as she moves into her clear, precise narration. Austerity of style has always been her speciality, but here she is finally successful in stripping language of all its unessential elements, clipping it almost to bareness. The characters are drawn in sharp, precise colours, and they are delineated with an objectivity that comes only to a master artist. It is the deliberate exclusion of sentimentality and emotionalism, the conscious adherence of realistic details, and a clear-headed analysis of the historical movement that makes for the tremendous effect of the novel. With the minimum of deft strokes Mahashweta Devi allows the incidents and the character to appear before us in sharp outline and the readers are staggered by the direct encounter with truth.” (172)!

Apparently Bashai is the alter ego of the writer herself. She too has no illusions about the Left parties like her protagonist. She is convinced that, “All parties, those to the Left and those to the Right alike, have failed to keep their promise to the common people.” (Devi, *Bashai XX*)

Mahashweta Devi feels that the sacrifices have to be made to uphold the human values and Bashai Tudu is the result of such human endeavour.

Now, let us examine *Titu Mir* (2000), an interesting and an important novella by Mahashweta Devi that deals with the life and struggle of Titu Mir (1782-1831), a Muslim peasant boy who becomes a Wahabi* and emerges as a natural but a formidable leader of the poor Hindus and Muslims, who raised a banner of revolt against the Zamindars, Planters and the Company (The East India Company), in 1830-31 and later dies fighting against the British.

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* The Wahabi Movement was a part of the Indian Freedom Struggle as it offered a serious threat to British supremacy in India in the 19th century. The movement was led by Syed Ahmed (1786-1831) from Rae Bareli who was greatly influenced by Abdul Wahab of Arabia.
Force. Mahashweta Devi says, “In all my writings I have tried to present the subaltern point of view… I have always been driven by a strong sense of history.” (Devi, *The Queen* 275). Both ‘the subaltern point of view’ and ‘the sense of history’ find an effective expression in this work. No incident of exploitation and oppression has ever gone unopposed and unchallenged in history. The spirit of protest has always been there. But it finds expression only at certain point of time in history, through certain unusual human beings.

Titu Mir (1782-1831), who was born to a Muslim parents—Nisar and Rokeya—peasants by profession, was derided as a regular ‘scamp’ and a ‘wastrel’ in the beginning. But he grows into a voice to the voiceless and a devil incarnate to the exploiters. The evolution of an impish boy growing into a formidable force against the oppressive system goes into the making of the story more interesting. The story of the novella is the conflict between two classes of people—the Zamindars, the Planters and the Company (The East India Company) on the one hand, the labourers, the potters, weavers, vendors and the poor Hindus and Muslims on the other.

It was a period of transition in agricultural Bengal. The evil effects of the *Permanent Settlement Act* (1793)* were beginning to be felt by the rural population. The Planters and the Zamindars were the ‘two wives’ of the Company, either of whom the company couldn’t afford to anger. It always tried to keep them in good humour to realize its political ambition. The company gave the seventh section of the *Settlement Act* to the Zamindars and the fifth section for the Planters with which they could tyrannize and oppress the poor peasants. The traditional Zamindars were being replaced by absentee landlords leading to the conflict between them. Indigo plantations were eating up fertile agricultural land and poured poison into good rice-bearing lands. The poor peasants working in the fields during the drought felt ‘murder in

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*This Act was concluded by Lord Cornwallis (1738-1805). Under this Act the landholders and zamindars were admitted as the absolute owners of landed property.*
the fields’ but the Zamindars did ‘the Zamindars’ business’. The poor vendors in the market were extorted by the police and the plantation staff. Zamindars’ elephants trampling the villagers’ huts or eating their grain was a common practice. The absentee landlords used to buy lands under assumed names or in the names of their servants, porters or labourers, themselves remaining in places like Calcutta. Their luxury and lavishness knew no bounds.

They wasted away their fortunes on gamblings, funerals and weddings. Kaliprasanna Mukhopadhyay’s lavishness during his mother’s funeral was so much that the people in Calcutta wished their mothers dead so they could get a chance to outdo Kaliprasanna’s extravagance. The emergence of Titu Mir assumes significance against this background. Though he hails from a rural, peasant background, ‘harvesting and husbanding would not hold his heart’. He was made of a different stuff. Impishness in him was accompanied by fearlessness, sense of freedom and anger for the exploiters. No one can stand against him if he has a stick, a spear or a bow in his hand. His passion for the leopard cub is known to all. He used to rush to help the people in trouble. The way he taught a lesson to the police who extorted the poor vendors in the market is a point to be noted.

The chance meeting with Mishkin Shah, Mishirat Shah, a run away rebel of the Sanyasi Revolt (1760-1800), leaves a lasting impression on him. The emergence of Titu Mir is not accidental and an isolated phenomenon. The spirit that prompted Sanyasi revolt of 1760-1800 is conveyed to Titu Mir through the run away fakir. He would join the army of Mujahids later. Thus, Mahashweta Devi provides an historical perspective to the incident of Titu Mir’s revolt, which is a very significant aspect of the story. Titu’s stay at Calcutta, though it was very brief, was very significant in shaping his personality. He got a chance to see the
nouveaux riches of Calcutta. His experience throws a light on the rural-urban divide and raise some relevant questions regarding how the big cities 'suck the substance out of the rest of the country' and how the 'people in the cities manage to put away tons of food' without doing any physical work. Being a hot headed, headstrong young man, Titu had to take side with the traditional Zamindar Bhudeb Pal Choudhury, a peace-loving pious man, in his conflict with the plantation staff which resulted in three years jail sentence for Titu.

Jails are the places where the great revolutionaries are made. Titu Mir came to hear of Sayed Ahmed while he was in jail. He restlessly longed to meet him. Sayed Ahmed propagated *Wahabi Movement* in India. Titu's encounter with him at Mecca is a crucial moment in the story. The personality of Titu Mir, the revolutionary, got a finishing touch with this interaction. He found himself in the *Wahabi* doctrine. He felt at home with this newfound movement. It propagated brotherhood, fearlessness and simple life. It opposed lavish spending on building dargahs and tombstones. It forbids usury and money lending business. There is no place for blind belief and supernatural men. All those who work for this faith were *Mujahids*. They were very close to his heart. He became a *Wahabi* through and through. He 'found his way' at last in the *Wahabi Movement*. He vowed to organize an army of *Mujahids* and to wage a *Jihad* against the evils in the society.

This doctrine 'struck a deep chord in the hearts' of all the common people—the poor weavers, both Hindu and Muslim—the farmers, cotton ginners, fabric dyers, black smiths, gold smiths, potters, cobblers labourers and vendors. *Wahabi Movement* spread like a wild fire. Young Wahabis with beard and tonsured head in a folded piece of cloth round their waist started roaming in the nook and corner of the country. They did not hate any religion but loved
freedom. Even the brother in law of the Scindia King of Gwalior stood behind them. It naturally enraged the Zamindars and the planters like Krishnadeb Ray, Kaliprasanna, Latubabu Chhatubabu, Debnath Ray, Piron and others. They contemplated various ways and means to suppress the new movement. They imposed a new tax on the Wahabis and use armed guards, lathials and Abyssinian warriors to suppress them. But every such attempt was defeated and were humiliated by the determined army of Mujahids. Titu encouraged his followers by saying, “They are hired men! They fight for money. You are free! You are fighting to win a country. You are stronger than them.”(90)

Emboldened and overjoyed by the success, Titu Mir formed his own Government, built a formidable bamboo fort, killed the cruel Zamindar Debnath Ray and the corrupt inspector Ramram Chakraborty and imposed taxes on the Zamindars and the Planters. It was a great challenge to the system. When the Zamindars and the planters, ‘the two pillars of the company’s rule’ were threatened, the company could not remain a mute spectator. “The cogs of administration clicked into action”. The Governor General Bentink sent a huge force with latest weapons to deal with Titu. Titu’s bamboo fort was pounded, the Mujahids were suppressed and Titu Mir was killed. The life of Titu, a son of an humble peasant, posing a formidable challenge to the entire system is a matter to be pondered upon. Titu knew that the lathis, spears, unripe fruits, bricks, bamboo forts could not match the shells, canons and the sophisticated guns of the British. At the same time, Titu was aware of the fact that only those who had suffered in the hands of the Zamindars, Planters and the Government officers had the courage and strength to stand the brutal force of the British. This strength had always been within them, only they had not known it. They needed Titu Mir to inspire them. The enemies think that he can be destroyed by burning. Hence, they decide to burn his dead body though
he is a Muslim by birth. They feel, “If we do not burn his body, Titu Mir will not be totally destroyed. If his followers get hold of his dead body they will start another rebellion. Even his corpse is dangerous.” (Devi, *Titu* 117)  

He might be killed but could not be defeated and the distraction is only at the level of matter. A Mujahid lives on in all the other Mujahids who are alive. The spirit, the principle behind the movement remains irrepressible. Titu remains an indomitable voice of the suppressed. He is an extended spirit of the *Sanyasi Revolt* (1760-1800) and remains an inspiration for all the revolts in the future to come. In this warmly told historical adventure tale, Mahashweta Devi brings history alive in the person of a charismatic hero, all the time, as is typical of her, embedding him in the larger socio-economic situation of the times. We get to know Titu as a young boy, fearless and restless, always standing up for victims of injustice, and then trace his gradual development into a rebel leader after his conversion to the Wahabi sect.  

In Mahashweta Devi’s fictional world the superb human qualities are found only in the down trodden and the poor. Titu Mir, though is a ‘Badshah’ for the Mujahids and a great challenge to the exploiters, remains a humble and lovable member of Nisar – Rokeya family. ‘Fame has not spoilt him’. He signs as, ‘son of Nisar Ali’ in his address. He visits his house whenever he finds time. During one such visit his wife Mainuna displays a nobility of the highest order by saying, “You have brought me great honour, great glory. I am your wife, and that is my pride. I have given you my three sons, to be three Mujahids ... Once in a while I will get to hear news of you ... You need not concern yourself about me.” (Devi, *Titu* 78)  

Jewellery and cloths are the common expectations of the average individuals. But neither could Titu give them to Mainuna nor does she expect them from him. She is happy and
contented with what she has; an exemplary trait in a humble human being. She says that she has Titu and the boys that is good enough for her.

In *The Armenian Champa Tree* (1998), a tender and a charming tale written primarily for young readers, Mahashweta Devi reveals another face of exploitation to the readers. Here she exposes the manner in which the superstitions and ignorance of the people are exploited by certain vested interests in the name of religion. The tantrik saints, who pose themselves as the direct representatives of the God, create unnecessary fear among the superstitious people for their own ends. Mahashweta Devi brings home the fact that innocence and pure love are the noble virtues that are inaccessible to the selfish and the ignorant.

The setting of the novella is Orissa. Mato the central character of the tale, is a young boy of ten and he belongs to the Buno tribe. He is despised by his mother for spending away all his time in daydreaming instead of doing any useful thing like other boys of the Buno quarters. Mato devotes himself completely to his pet baby goat, Arjun. His mother is sad that Mato looks odd among the Buno boys, as he is frightened of the hunt and trembles at the sight of blood. He is the kind of boy who won't even look at the sacrificial animal offered during a puja. Like the other Buno boys, he is not adept in any of the traditional skills such as, weaving bamboo mats or weeding grass. The tastes he displays are unusual among the Buno tribe. He makes dolls with clay and presents them in unusual colours like the son of a potter or a painter. Mato’s peculiar attachment with the naughty black baby goat with brown patches, which is called Arjun, is a very significant thing in the tale. The goat is named after a tree under which it was born. Mato’s mother attributes his abnormal attitude to some Sanyasi’s curse and prays the ‘Mother Manasa’ (the snake), with folded hands, to bestow some good sense on Mato.
The tantrik saint enjoys a great respect among the people. They offer pots full of ghee and baskets full of clusters of Bananas. The tantrik saint’s words are the ‘revelations’ for all those people including the landlord Janakinath. Once Mato’s pet Arjun butted the tantrik saint and when he tried to hit the goat, Mato had tripped him. Mato cannot tolerate anybody doing anything against his pet. Being humiliated in the hands of Mato, the tantrik saint made a pronouncement that the river Ganga will overflow as one goat spotted all over in black and brown has brought ‘a terrible sin’ to their village. The sin can be ‘washed away’ by performing a yagna for three days and three nights, ending with the sacrifice of that animal which has brought the ‘terrible sin’.

The Mother Goddess, Kali had appeared in the dream of the tantrik saint and told him, “Worship me with one hundred and eight silver hibiscus flowers, and offer me a good animal sacrifice.” (Devi, The Armenian 17). The tantrik saint had offered to sacrifice his own head but the Goddess wanted nothing else but the Mato’s goat. Before that the tantrik saint had worried for three days without food and sleep. But Mato could not understand how such a tiny goat actually would cause floods in the village. His mother knows how he had brought up the goat and how he had fed him with milk. His worry is that even his mother who knows every thing has joined ‘the wicked Sanyasi and his gang’. Above all, the Mother Kali mentioning Arjun as a solution to the supposed flood, in the dream is a wonder for him. Mato has a congenital defect in his chest and too much exertion may lead to his doom. Unmindful of his physical condition, Mato runs away with his pet, desperately from the village to the sanctuary of the Armenian Church at Berhampur (Orissa’s), which is four miles away. An announcement is made in the village about this escape of the boy with the goat and Janaki Singh has promised to give ‘a gold mohur’ to whoever captures the boy.
Mato running desperately for his life and for the life of his pet, tying Arjun up tightly in his big gamcha (towel) and clasping him to his bosom, is a touching incident in the story. Being hunted by all the villagers, Mato struggled hard in the darkness of the night to evade capture and to reach safety. It is the most pathetic experience in the story. The innocent boy runs across the waterways, marshes, canals and ponds under the rainy sky in the night. The goat plays pranks with the boy and they fall asleep clasping each other. This is the most moving aspect in the tale. It shows how innocence and pure love give strength to withstand untold miseries and hardship.

Mahashweta Devi tries to show how the poor and innocent are selectively victimized by the blind religious practices. The rich landlords like Janaki Singh, who are ‘small minded’ and do not fulfil the promises made to the Goddess and ‘swallow up’ the lands of the poor are safe from the fear of sin. Paradoxically, such anti social elements are placed comfortably at the place of judgment whereas the poor innocent Mato is placed at the receiving end. The mass mania of the villagers, clamouring and shouting for the boy and the goat is prompted more by the desire for ‘a gold Mohur’ of Janaki Singh than any serious religious purposes. The evil designs of the ‘wicked Sanyasi and his gang’ are exposed at the end. The prediction of the tantrik saint proved false. The tantrik is punished at last. The justice is given though it was delayed, but at the cost of the innocent poor boy. This is an example for the saying, ‘the justice delayed is justice denied’.

The boy, who is despised by everyone and is chased and hunted along with his pet goat by the band of villagers, at last, enters the Armenian Church yard, exhausted and emaciated, only to breathe his last. The goat and the boy, who were considered ominous by the villagers, are embraced by the Jesus. He receives them whole-heartedly. The people who are carried
away by the blind belief and the desire for money cannot understand the innocence and the
pure love. Mato’s Mother says, “Mato, you are my son, but I never understood you.” (51)
The mother understands him but it is too late. The late realization yields nothing. The champa
tree has grown on the grave of the boy, the flowers of which are blooming and spreading the
fragrance of innocence and love everywhere.

Thus, deviating slightly from the hard-hitting fictions, Mahashweta Devi touches upon
the values of innocence and love and shows how these values suffer in the hands of the selfish
and the ignorant.

ROMTHA, written in 1964, is one of the important novelettes of Mahashweta Devi.
This is a tragic story of a beautiful and an attractive young man condemned to death for a
passionate killing of his lover, a beautiful courtesan. He was made Romtha, and he ventures
into a desperate and violent bid with a burning desire for life. This is a tale of triangle love—
Chandrabali–Sharan–Subhadra—set in twelfth century Bengal, when the cruel and inhuman
romtha practice was in vogue, in the pretence of furthering ‘the noble cause’ of Ayurveda.
This tale deals with the fate of Sharan, the branded criminal who is made romtha and awaits
his death. This tale takes us around the royal city of Gaur (political and cultural centre of
Bengal from 1000 to 1500 AD) and the forests and rivers of rural Bengal. This tale of passion,
vengeance and the overwhelming hunger for life is reminiscent of Shakespearean romantic
tragedies.

“Life is very interesting. There’s just no end to this kind of interesting stuff,”
(Romtha XX) says Mahashweta Devi who delves deep into various peculiarities practiced
by human beings at different phases of human history. Romtha refers to one such peculiar
but inhuman practice of branding the word romtha on the bodies of the criminals who are
condemned to death and thrown alive into a cauldron oil, an Ayurvedic medicine. Mahashweta Devi found reference to this practice in a book on social history by Durgacharan Sanyal, mentioned in the context of Lakshman Sen's (the last Hindu ruler of Bengal ruled from 1178-1205 AD) enthusiasm regarding the dissemination of Ayurveda.

Sharan is a good-looking young man with a virile body that is unmarred and whole. He is free from disease and infection. The golden hair and remind us of the typical romantic heroes of the middle age. The incredible, alluring and undiminished beauty that his body possessed would bewitch and mesmerize the young girls. It is not a wonder if Chandrabali, the city's finest whore, an accomplished dancer, painter and a leading courtesan of Gaur, got her spirit invigorated and grace renewed with her middle aged love for Sharan.

Gopal, the chief of the city guards was a rogue and a barbarian. Chandrabali had truly loved Sharan but she could not provoke the chief of the city guard. Being caught in a dilemma, she had to receive Gopal unwillingly, which in turn invited severe vengeance of Sharan whose love was ferocious and blind. On seeing the chief of the guards with Chandra, Sharan's love exploded into fury and he throttled Chandrabali to death. Sharan, 'the impenitent criminal' was punished with death sentence for killing Chandrabali, 'the jewel in the crown of Lakshmanabati'. Sharan, the slave to emotions, neither did run away nor did defend himself. After killing Chandra he kept running his fingers through her hair and was trying to rub out the marks of his fingers around her throat. He realized his crime and wanted to be punished. He had not been afraid of dying, let apart a mere punishment. The King Lakshman Sen, in his eagerness to further the cause of medicine and to disseminate Ayurveda, granted the demands of the baidyas (practitioners of Ayurveda) to use the condemned criminals as romthas. The
unusual physic of Sharan that mesmerized Chandrabali and would stir ‘the unrequited desire’ in Subhadra had naturally made the Kobiraj Chandrasen to find an excellent ingredient for his Mahamash oil in it. Hence, the Kobiraj made Sharan his romtha. Mahashweta Devi draws our attention towards the cruelty, heartlessness and inhuman brutality that underlie the practice of romtha in the following words:

A man’s heart was the seat of godliness ... The only spark of divinity man possessed rested in the centre of his being, in his heart. If, across that very spot, a man – bound with ropes of jute from the fields of Bengal, held to the ground, the hot iron, glowing, burned into his skin until he could smell his own flesh roasting ... then that man remained a man no more. Thus, Sharan had ceased to be a man.”(Romtha 3)

With chains on his hands, shackles around his feet and the word romtha branded on his chest, Sharan turns fiery with a burning desire for life. He runs away after killing his guard Gaurgo. Subhadra, the widowed daughter of Chandrasen wanted to elope with him. But in a reckless and desperate bid to save his life, Sharan forgets Subhadra and in the process he was killed by the people while moving along the river Bhagirathi on a boat. Ironically, the protagonist who is named Sharan – refuge – finds no refuge in life. There would be no sanctuary for him in the kingdom of Gaur.

Apart from bringing out the horror and barbarity of the romtha practice, Mahashweta Devi reveals the psychological condition of the person who is branded romtha and who will be thrown into the boiling cauldron of oil. Ever since he had been branded romtha, he had lost all faith in human beings. His desperate bid to live and the inhuman treatment by the people around is really heartrending and excruciating. Chandrasen had been waiting for an auspicious time, that would fall on the next full moon to throw Sharan into a boiling, gurgling cauldron. It
really makes one’s blood run cold.

Mahashweta Devi throws light on the miserable life of the prostitutes in the kingdom of Gaur. Each year, hunger, famine and drought drove many poor girls to the city with a dream of a little food and some clothes but ended up with the whorehouses. They were tortured and some of them were killed by the guard and his henchmen. The whores poured away their lives serving the public, entertaining the people, with negligible rewards. The punishments given to them were very harsh. Even the scriptures are not fair in their attitudes to whores (*Ramsa 45*). They mention no penalty for the killers of the whores. Their offspring were doomed and born to be the slaves for the king. The property of the whores passed into the king’s hands after their death. Under all-pervading king Lakshman Sen, justice and injustice were merely two sides of the same coin. There was no protection to the poor, helpless and the weak against the corrupt and the powerful, especially the brute power.

The life of the widow like Subhadra is equally miserable under the ‘cruel father and the indifferent mother’. She was forced to spend away her life without discovering what ‘happiness’ means. If she misbehaved, the father would have poisoned her as if no other being has ever misbehaved. There is no sense of human feeling and the moral concern. Everything is ritualistic and dogmatic based on the oppression of the weak by the brute force of the powerful in the society.

Mahashweta Devi does not forget to show how the royal subjects remained unconcerned with the merciless rule of the King. She shows how the families of those serving death sentences were made to live under dreadful horror. Man’s greed for money and the
artificial city life are responsible for many strange and dramatic events. Fishes feed on the dead body in the water and men in their turn feed on the fish. Mangal’s brother sold him as a romtha for one Kahan of gold and in turn some more cruel and cunning people made Mangal’s brother a bloated body floating in the Bhagirathi. In this ‘man’s invented universe’ there are only ‘greater sinners’ committing ‘graver crimes’. The city that makes the village girls whores and the village farmers beggars, prompts Mahashweta Devi to ask, “Does a city have a soul?” (Romtha 62)

The poets and writers who are indifferent to the harsh realities of life often invite Mahashweta Devi’s ire. She is very angry towards the court poets who are very eager to compose verses of praise in ornate rhymes and intricate language on the inhuman killing of the whores. Literature, devoid of human concern and the social responsibility, has no place in the world of Mahashweta Devi. The incident of Sharan’s father eating paddy in burning hunger is not a matter to be praised in ‘ornate rhymes and intricate languages. Instead, it reflects the degradation of our society to which every one of us is responsible. Towards the end of the novella Sharan asks, “You want to trap me like an animal? All of you live your precious lives! Why kill only the romtha? Why trap him like a beast? Is this body not human too?” (68). These are the universal questions that this novelette, Romtha (1964) poses to the mankind, pinching the conscience of every sensitive human being.

Set in 18th century Bengal, Dewana Khoimala and The Holly Banyan Tree (1968) is a short fiction on the doomed love of Khoimala, the gentle Brahmin girl and her low-caste sweet heart, Golak, the young boatman. In this masterful and a deeply sensitive tale, Mahashweta Devi’s whip lashes at the rigid caste system and the harshly prescriptive customs which leave the young lovers in a state of neither expressing nor suppressing their love for each other. Once
again, Mahashweta Devi hits upon the gender discrimination, man’s greed for money, blind beliefs and the opportunism which are the root causes of innumerable problems that haunt our society. At the same time, there are references to the rural Bengal undergoing rapid changes, pacing with the urban developments and the growth in trade and commerce.

Golak, the protagonist of the tale was the son of a boatman, Ishwar Patni. He was an attraction for the young girls with his youthful body and dreamy eyes. On his father becoming old, Golak started plying his boat on the Ganga, ferrying passengers to and fro. His fellow boatmen used to think that the girl he married would be extremely fortunate and one could earn such a person only after the severest of penances. Adhar Das, a rich moneylender and the father of the prettiest girl Kusum, had already set his greedy eyes on Golak.

Khoimala, a young Brahmin girl living with her poor widowed mother, brimmed full with beauty. They were so poor that Khoimala’s mother made the parched rice at home and supplied it to Bhuban Mashi who trades in the weekly market (haat) on the bank of the Ganga. It was the only source of their livelihood. Once, Khoimala’s mother fell ill and was suffering from raging fever. Unable to go herself to collect payment from Bhuban Mashi for the parched rice, she had sent her daughter Khoimala for the purpose. But the torrential rain disturbed the entire market and Khoimala could not meet Bhuban Mashi. Accidentally, she met Golak with whom Bhuban Mashi had left her Koris (a cowrie, a shell used as currency of the smallest denomination).

Golak had an inexplicable inclination for Khoimala. He had observed Khoimala watching the flocks of pigeons. So he calls her by the nickname ‘Khaitari’, the corrupted form of Kaitar; means pigeon. Khoimala too had a propensity to love Golak. But shyness natural to
the girl of that age prevents her from expressing her love openly.

Khoimala collected her Kori (money) from Golak and ran towards her home under the cloudy, rainy, evening sky. Before that both Khoimala and Golak had got to hear one of Ascharya Fakir’s tales:

"The hero of our story, Dewana appears in the very first episode.

What does Dewana mean?

Someone who's mad."(Devi, Dewana 12)²³

This came as a surprise to Khoimala as well as to Golak. The image of this ‘love crazed hero’ haunts them as they live out their doomed love story. By the time Khoimala reached home, her mother’s ‘spiritual leader’ and the biological father, Gurubaba had already started his negotiation regarding Khoimala’s marriage. Her mother, who was scorched by fever and ravaged by poverty, felt herself as an animal marked for sacrifice. The climate was inclement. The flood caused by the torrential rain damaged the standing crop and made even the landlords suffer and not to mention, turned the sharecroppers into beggars. In the midst of all these, Khoimala was married off to the old and withered Nilmoni Ghoshal, though her mother was not willing. For the young and innocent Khoimala that marriage was nothing but a happy wearing of orange Sindurm in the parting of her hair and wearing red bangles around her wrists. The neighbours envied the marriage and considered Khoimala’s mother as fortunate for getting such a rich son-in-law. But Nilomni Ghoshal was old and decrepit. He was left nothing but greed in him. He substantially increased his property by obtaining dowries from his numerous marriages. Regarding this person the narrative voice ironically comments: “He was a man of many talents, varied virtues. He had killed a wife with a kick to her stomach and no one could tell how he had suddenly made his so-called niece disappear.”(50)²⁴
Khoimala’s stay with Nilomani Ghoshal was tormenting and nightmarish. He considered her youth and beauty to be his property. Being murky with vulgar suspicion, he did not leave her even an instant. His prolonged illness had not enfeebled his legs. Various marks on Khoimala’s body bore the proof. Once he had bitten her hand in a fit. When his illness became severe, his so-called niece and her brothers and his sons of earlier marriages landed up to establish their natural rights. They started tormenting Khoimala incessantly, keeping their eyes on Nilomini’s property. They wanted Khoimala only to look after Nilomini’s rotten body. When he breathed his last, all these rightful inheritors together conspired to make Khoimala a sati. After knowing that shocking news from the maid, Khoimala’s urge to survive blazed bright and stepped into the darkness unmindful of the raging storm and torrential rain, in search of her childhood companion, Golak.

During an encounter with Golak earlier, Khoimala had expressed her love for him but he had simply told, “I’m ... I’m just a boatman’s son.”(43)25. Being haunted by his beloved Kaitari, Golak worried about her. The news of her marriage to Nilomini Ghoshal had left him in great sadness. Whenever Ascharya Fakir’s tale of Dewana came to his mind, he wished that he would not become ‘Dewana’. His engrossment with his ‘Kaitari’ was mistaken by everyone as madness. A witch doctor, on examining Golak, had said, “You’re saying this boy’s lost his mind? More likely he’s lost his heart to someone.”(58)26. He ran away on knowing that he would be treated by the exorcist whom he was afraid. Both Golak and his ‘Kaitari’ met on a boat, tossing and turning in the fierce wind and the raging cyclone. Meeting after a prolonged longing for each other, they filled in incredible joy and set sail towards a wonderful land where no one would slander her love for a boatman’s son, where no one would damn his love as sin.
Golak's father, his brother and others chased them on the river till they floated far away in the rushing current of water. Khoimala's pleading to Ishwar Patni is heart rending. She asks, "Ishwar Kaka, he's not mad! ... Why did they hound him so? Was Golak a beast of the wild?"(72)²

Thus, Mahashweta Devi shows how a society ridden with blind beliefs, caste feelings and ignorance, throttle the natural instincts and aspirations of the young people like Golak and Khoimala. Plight of a poor woman, especially a girl is disappointing in such a society. The narrative voice focuses on this as, "Women were always punished in excess, even the youngest were not spared the cruelty of maligning tongues. Little girls, mere babes at the breast, they too are burnt alive. No mercy, none."(7)²². Life of a poor woman is not better, than that of an animal marked for sacrifice. Greed for money and property does not prevent people from burning a woman alive. Birth in the higher caste and even the extraordinary physical beauty do not change the prospectus of a girl. Her fate is the whim of other people. They were the ones who twist it at will into shapes of their own pleasing.

The argument of Gurubaba with Khoimala's mother who is unwilling to marry of the six-year-old girl is extremely inhuman and ridiculous. He observes, "A six-year-old cow can give milk, a six-year-old horse can draw the cart. And a girl? What can a six- year-old girl do?"(18)²². Mahashweta Devi exposes the circumstances leading to the marrying off of a young beautiful girl to an old, withered and a bed-ridden patient, only to serve him as a nurse, tolerating all torments and tortures. The insatiable lust and greed of men like Nilomni Ghoshal is lashed at in an ironical tone. Ghoshal had many love affairs to his credit and married numerous wives to get money. When he fell prey to
tuberculosis in his old age he looked up his list of wives and spread word of his illness, but he had forgotten Khoimala. At last reminded by Joyhari, he remembered Khoimala.

Mahashweta Devi does not spare words to lash at the hypocracy of all those who enjoy sensual pleasure in whorehouses but condemn those who provide that very pleasure, afterwards. Ascharya Fakir who had abandoned his family after smitten by a 'Bagmari' beauty and lost his peace of mind, Golapi who had taken up whoring only partly for monetary gain, partly also out of habit, Sanatan, who did not follow his conscience but claim to be conscientious, are all the victims of Mahashweta Devi's wrath. Thus, Mahashweta Devi gives a detailed picture of the Indian society, especially the Bengali society during the time of Warren Hastings (1772-84) that had achieved economic prosperity due to the increased trade and commerce. But it was reeling still in the quagmire of social degradation, moral bankruptcy and intellectual poverty. The society that was seemingly prosperous and progressed, was obviously lop-sided.

_Bedanabala, Her Life, Her Times_ (1996) is an important work of Mahashweta Devi. It is set in Bengal during freedom movement. Here she delves deep into various aspects of one of the ancient practices of the human society i.e., the practice of prostitution. The undocumented history of this old practice that runs parallel to the documented Indian Freedom Movement and modernism is constructed here. The entire story is a reminiscence of Bedanabala, a woman whose mother was rescued from a whorehouse, the most detested place on the earth. Memory of Bedanabala, the daughter of a fortunate mother bears witness to the experiences of the most unfortunate women who find themselves out side the periphery of safe domestic life. Though they were forced to embrace whoring as their inevitable way of life, they make unacknowledged but invaluable contribution to the freedom struggle and the social reforms and thereby give their mite in shaping the destiny of the country. Mahashweta Devi
draws our attention towards this section of the society who had been condemned and looked
down upon even by the same people who get gratified by them. The basic right of this section
of the society to light, to break free of the darkness is stressed upon by Mahashweta Devi and
she says that they must earn for themselves.

Narrated in the first person, it is not just a recapitulation of life and times of Bedanabala
but also a recollection of the life and the time of her mother, Kamal and various others who
were associated with her. Only a few of them were lucky enough to escape from the baleful
influences of the environment in which they were brought up. But most of them bogged down
in that inescapable and stigmatic social set up.

Prostitution, the antiquity of which is not clearly known, is an ancient social practice. It
was all the sport of the gods in Satyayug. Our epics and puranas have ample of references to
this practice. Of course, it was called by different names at different times. In this context, the
narrator opines:

"These names were old, very old — dig into this earth, this soil and
deep, deep down, buried in our history, you will find these names carved
in stone. The deeper you go, the farther back you reach, you'll see.
They’ve been around, always. And every age has branded them
different."(Devi, Bedanabala 35)

This ‘ancient trade’ and an ‘ancient crime’ which has no beginning and no end,
remains an incomplete story forever. The change that has been going on in all
walks of life has no much effect on this trade. The change one finds here is merely a
superficial one. This ‘trade’ is alive not only in the cities but also in the villages, districts,
markets, parks, hotels and stations. It is called a profession and they are called sex workers
and in some places their children get a chance to go to schools. That is the only change. What was expected of the society was to consider the whores as human beings born with some rights, some hopes and not just with a scar across their fates. It is something yet to take place.

The girls are stolen at the tender age of six or so. They are initiated to the order of the whores. 'They are made regulars, turned professionals' and their names are put on the list at the police station. Then there is no turning back. Men will tear them to pieces while they are alive and when they are dead, the government will swallow every bit they leave behind. This is the fate of the prostitutes in a nutshell. The young men visit the brothels. Some time men of great stature like Mani's father visit them 'for new tastes, new flavours'. Because of such 'gentlemen' the 'trade' still continues. But they remain innocent. No one calls them sinners. All the sin is left behind to keep the company of these 'unlucky' women. They had been burdened with the thought of their sin, praying for a saviour who usually do not turn up. The society that believes in the dictum that 'A whore's daughter is always a whore' and the women like the Didi Ma who easily buy and sell, too are responsible for the perpetuation of this 'trade'. Prostitution is like a money lending business—small capital, great returns.

The life of every whore is a case in itself. They are usually gripped with a strong temptation to be a householder. Elopement, murder, suicide, attempt to suicide are the common features of this life. The only thing they have been taught from the very beginning is that 'a whore by trade was a sinner indeed'. They are the kept women and are rotten to the core, living only to corrupt men. They die when their bodies break. If they are careful, they live and those who are not, would become beggars and die on the streets. Mahashweta Devi's anger towards the society, particularly the men who exploit the prostitutes, is evident in the
following words:

“It is the society that inscribes such a fate for them even before they are born, even as they grow in the womb, the men of that very society do not else but visit brothels, give the women ugly diseases, suffer from the same diseases themselves and ultimately burn on the pyre complete with their mistresses and their legally married wives.” (Bedanabala 70)\(^3\)

Some girls are stolen at very young age and are made whores. Sometimes, poverty drives them to it. There are some who’ve left behind the lives of glitter and happiness, homes full of riches and comfort and voluntarily choose to live this life. However literate a whore’s daughter is, she cannot fulfill her desire of a married life. But high-born daughters with not a word to read or write are married off with no trouble.

There is no difference between Hindu-Muslim to a whore. Taramani who goes away with Selim, a Muslim, got murdered by Lakshmidasbaba who wanted to marry her. Mani, who was stolen at six and was made a whore, meeting her mother on the river ghat after many years is the most touching incident in the story. Her longing for the mother and the mother’s love for the daughter and her helplessness are very effectively brought out. If the girl returns home, the villagers will excommunicate all the members of her family. It will be hard to marry off the other girls and the angry father would cut down her into pieces. Once she tried to commit suicide by jumping into a river but the fishermen had saved her. Surjomukhi ran away with a Nawab’s son, converted herself to Islam and married him. Only a few fortunate souls like Satyabhama and Kamal could come out of this vicious circle. Satyabhama had built an ashram at Kashi with the help of helpless prostitutes and she sheltered the freedom fighters too. Kamal, the mother of the narrator, Bedanabala is the most
fortunate of them all. A stolen girl, very beautiful and attractive, Kamal was brought up with utmost care and concern by Didi Ma, who wanted her to be a different kind and taught her reading and writing. Balarambabu, a landlord and an idealist who 'dreamt and worked for newer, better society' and had been associated with on going revolutionary activities against British, married her. Balarambabu marrying a girl from the brothel was a great revolution indeed. He was one among many who committed heart and soul to the cause of the freedom struggle, yet not enlisting himself as a fighter.

Balarambabu’s house was like a ‘kingdom in itself’ with all comforts and luxuries. He was not unhappy when Kamal gave birth to a female child. He believed in education of the girl child and to make her to stand on her own feet.

Didi Ma plays an important role in giving shape to Kamal’s life. Though she takes up flesh trade as her way of life and involves in stealing female children, she strives hard to see that Kamal remained untouched by the brothel environment and gives her education with an expectation that she would lead a contented domestic life which is materialized later with Balarambabu marrying her. Her treatment of other whores under her is marked with motherly love and human concern. Later, she would give up her old habits under the impact of Kamal who was the beat of her heart, the apple of her eye. She says that Kamal had brought her to her senses.

Mahashweta Devi intertwines the dreams and passions of the whores in the backdrop of the country struggling for independence. Some of the prominent leaders of the Swadeshi Movement had accepted donations from the prostitutes and they had started walking out in groups. The prostitutes gave shelter to the revolutionaries who had gone underground and
donated generously for the national causes. Their contribution to the Nabya Hindu Mission activists who set up an ashram for ‘kept women’ and undertook flood relief activities is noteworthy. They were working under the influence of Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda. The incidents like hanging of Kshudiram, death of Kanai Dutta, the assassination of the Lt. Governor by Jiten Banerjee, the death of Naren Gosain evoked a heartfelt reactions from many whores.

Balarambabu’s response to the two young freedom fighters who surprise at him for marrying Kamal, is eye opening. He bluntly says that such narrow-minded people have no business serving the motherland. We’ll take refuge, seek out shelter, accept their tender ministrations, gratefully use their donations to our cause but ironically, it is considered a sin to marry them. Further he remarks:

“Freedom is not far. Each one of us a soldier then. Each one of you. But how can you fight when your hearts are weighed down with ancient custom? Is just the burning of foreign goods enough? And what about the superstition heaped upon your soul? Locked within you? Who will set Match to those?”

If the whores can give shelter to the freedom fighters, they too can pray, they too can think themselves that they do something for their country and get solace in the thought that their lives are also something worthy. The questions that Balarambabu poses are the questions that Mahashweta Devi poses to the Indian conscience which every sensitive Indian must strive to find answer.

Thus, Mahashweta Devi tries to orient ourselves with this ancient ‘trade’ and places us vis-à-vis various facets of it. She feels that whatever is told about these women is, incomplete.
Infact, it can never be complete. She writes: “If the sky were sheet of paper, if every blade of grass on earth were pen, if the seven seas were awash with ink, if all of that were used up even then, it would not be enough for their history to be written.” *(Bedanabala 72-73)*. This may look a little bit of exaggeration on the part of Mahashweta Devi but it certainly gives an insight into the seriousness of the problem of prostitution and various complex dimensions of this ancient ‘trade’. It should be looked at with human concern.


*“Pterodactyl is an abstract, the crux of my entire tribal experience,” (Imaginary Maps XIV)* says Mahashweta Devi. By the time she comes to *Pterodactyl*, she had gone a long way in the ocean of tribal history. Her tribal experience reaches its culmination at this point. The more she knows about them the more painful her experience becomes and makes her expression more mysterious and enigmatic. Hence, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rightly says that *Pterodactyl* (1993), which came out a decade after *Chotti Munda* (1980), is a more mysterious text than *Chotti* (*Chotti Munda* XVII), of course, more poignant and tragic too. Here a tribal community, famine-stricken and poverty-ridden, encounters *Pterodactyl* a prehistoric bird of their ancestors and Puran Sahay, a concerned journalist bears witness to the encounter till the bird dies.

Mahashweta Devi tries to show what has been done to the entire tribal world of India. She tries to communicate the agony of the tribals and the marginalized all over the world. The
tribal world is like a continent handed over to us. She regrets that we never tried to explore it, know its mysteries, we only destroyed it. We did not respect their tremendous potentiality and their rich treasure house of values which they had bequeathed to us. Without knowing all these things sympathetically it is not possible to re-knit the entire tribal experience.

Mahashweta Devi intends to make us realize the fact that there has been an unbridgeable gap between the mainstream people and the tribal ways. The two different ways running parallel, never twine to meet at any point of time. There is no point of communication and contact between Puran Sahay, the journalist, the representative of the mainstream people and the Pterodactyl which is prehistoric. Hence, the message which Pterodactyl has brought is missing. As a result, whatever has come in the name of development has spelled disaster for the tribes and made them 'endangered species’. In her usual style Mahashweta Devi exposes the system which is rotten to the core in independent India where millions and millions of rupees spent for the tribal welfare under various schemes and projects disappear even before they percolate down to the target group. She takes the politicians, officials, contractors and the businessmen into task.

Puran Sahay, who married Saraswati after his first wife Archana died giving birth to a son, is a journalist by profession. His wife Saraswati often wondered as to how the person who has failed to build a human relationship with his family, be able to do justice to the profession of journalism. But he succeeded as a journalist though he failed to give justice to his domestic life. His ‘razor-sharp’ reports on various incidents had received praise from every one and had fallen into disfavour with the Government of Patna. He visits Pirtha in order to prepare an investigative report on the condition of the tribals in the distant villages. Puran’s old friend Harisharan, who was the Block Development Officer for the Pirtha
Block, wanted Puran to follow up the report of Suraj Pratap. The Pirtha Block, which comes under Madhopura district in Madhya Pradesh state, is an Adivasi majority area. By the time Puran visits Madhopura he felt the possible hostility against the journalists there. He came to know through the Sub Divisional Officer (SDO) that the Adivasis in Pirtha had once seen a monstrous shadow of a gliding large bat-like bird and it had left a deep imprint on their minds. A boy Bikhia had engraved the image of the bird on the stone wall of his room and it was being worshipped. After knowing many such things from the SDO, Puran reached Pirtha in a truck provided by Harisharan, the BDO.

Pirtha took Puran into entirely a different world. He was taken aback by the havoc played at Pirtha in the name of civilization and development. Independent Government of India was a fairy tale for the people of Pirtha. Harisharan, the BDO of the Pirtha Block was the first Government Officer to visit that area. One would naturally doubt if the Government knew that there were human beings in Pirtha. Shankar was the only literate person in the village. People constantly died of man-made famine, diseases and after drinking poisonous water. The severity of their exploitation and oppression was so much that they were forced to live upon the seeds of the acacia fruits.

Legal-aid cells were a hoax and the honest officers had no role to play there. They would be transferred to other places. The much talked about green revolution in the state of Madhya Pradesh had not reflected at Pirtha. As a consequence hundreds of people left homes after being mesmerized by the labour contractors. Even the tribal representatives like M.L.As, M.Ps and Sarpanchs never opened their mouths. Various projects and programmes that the Government had introduced for the eradication of poverty and for generating employment had become a farce. People had been building roads and bungalows with the tribal welfare
money. Such roads helped only the owners of bonded labourers, the moneylenders, the touts, the pimps, the abductors and the bestial alcoholic young men lusting after the tribal women enter directly into the tribal habitations.

The slogans of family planning had become ridiculous at Pirtha. The poor household needed many children. The more children the better for them. The posters propagating family planning and leprosy eradication were used by the women to lay down their babies and for sifting the relief food grains. They used to paste them on the glass frames to keep out the wind. Mahashweta Devi says that the Government proclamations serve the poor in this way alone. The Government has acknowledged the role of voluntary organizations in the eradication of poverty. Such organizations could get in and even got some work done ‘precisely’ because the Government had failed in its work. Government cannot do anything though it knows that foreign money infiltrated through those organizations in the name of welfare. So many job quotas for the tribals has no meaning as they cannot make use of them. The ‘ocean of money’ that flowed for the tribal welfare had not reflected at all in Pirtha where the people were condemned to a life sentence of starvation. Mahashweta Devi calls these people of Pirtha as the suffering spectators of India that is travelling towards the 21st century. On record, it was only a drought and not a famine. It was only a man-made famine. The Government would not consider it a famine as it would expose the guilty: the Government the officers, the politicians and the contractors.

They would not have bothered all these deprivations had their ethno-national identity not been violated, freedom and dignity were not stolen. They observed all the disciplines, rules and ethics of their community. They never violated their tradition still they could not escape the misfortune. They could not make out the reason for it. All their happiness and glory disappeared.
with the intrusion of the foreigners into their territory. The people who lived like kings since the
time immemorial, lost their fields and homes and were made bonded slaves. They were displaced
and the roads went chasing them wherever they went. They revered their ancestors and the
forest most. But the aggressive intruders polluted everything. They destroyed the forest
and the graves of their ancestors for building roads houses, schools and hospitals. They
regret their failure to give peace to the ancestors. They felt that nobody could save them from
meeting their doom. They were cursed by the ravaged land, village field, home and forest and
were haunted by the unquiet soul of the ancestors in the form of a strange bird. When Puran
reached Pirtha the tribals were observing mourning as a penance.

The Bird that haunted them was a Pterodactyl, which is an extinct species. It was a
flying reptile of the Pterosauria class from the Mesozoic era. They were quadruped and
probably ate fish. This first known crow-sized bird was in existence about one hundred and
forty seven million years ago. By referring to Pterodactyl, Mahashweta Devi symbolically
suggests that the tribals are as ancient as the bird. The so called mainstream people, who are
very young compared to the tribals, could not make out either the bird or the life
and tradition of the tribals. Bikhia, the nephew of Shankar was a chief of the
community. He was venerated by all. While the entire tribal community
observed mourning after seeing the Pterodactyl, in their own way, Bikhia observed it with self
imposed silence. Mahashweta Devi considers the silence of the most respected tribal leader
as a form of resistance to the aggressive intrusion of the mainstream population. Only he knew
when exactly the mourning began and when it came to an end. They observed mourning
appropriate to the funeral rites of the formerly living. But for the mainstream people the belief
that the soul of the long dead returning hundreds of years later in the form of a bird is only a
myth. That is the reason why there is no point of communication between Puran and the Pterodactyl. There is a message in the Pterodactyl but Puran is not in a position to grasp it.

But Puran’s persistent and sincere efforts yield result. The realization dawns on him gradually. By the end of his visit, Pirtha was everything for him, and all other places seemed trivial. He is spell bound to know the antiquity, rich culture, traditions and myths of these simple people. He prepared a detailed report on Pirtha, based on his peculiar experiences. He realized the fact that we have lost somewhere to Bikhia’s people and to Pirtha. By comparison with ancient civilizations, modern progress is much more barbaric at heart. We are defeated. We never tried to understand the tribal world – the undiscovered continent – but we only destroyed it in the name of civilization. We destroyed the primordial forest, water, living beings and the humans.

We had been following two different parallel ways leading to two different worlds. It gives no chance for any interaction. We have neither loved them nor respected them for centuries. The only way to rebuild, to reestablish is to love them beyond reason for a long time. Puran concludes his report by writing:

“Bikhia’s people are finally much more civilized, holder of the ancient civilization, and so finally they did not learn our barbarism, there is possibly no synonym for ‘exploitation’ in their language. Our responsibility was to protect them ... Only love, a tremendous, excruciating, explosive love can still dedicate us to this work when the century’s sun is in the Western sky, otherwise this aggressive civilization will have to pay a terrible price, look at history, the aggressive civilization has destroyed itself in the name of progress, each time.”(197)
Thus, by introducing Pterodactyl, Mahashweta Devi reveals the existence of two divergent ways and views: the modern mainstream Indians for whom it is an empirical impossibility and the tribals for whom it is the soul of the ancestors. She warns that if the divergence is allowed to continue further it will harm both. Hence, she propagates a ‘national history’ that holds the tribals and the non-tribals together which is the only way to escape from the haunting ghost of the ancestors in the form of the Pterodactyl.

_Douloti the Bountiful_ (1993) is the first novella of Mahashweta Devi in the trilogy on the bonded labourers. It is set in Palamau district of Jharkhand state. Here, as she says, she has written about how women, especially are being exploited. The inhuman practice of the bonded labour system is seen through the experience of a poor untouchable woman. The two persons, whom Mahashweta Devi had seen with her own eyes in the Palamau district of Bihar, are the real inspirations behind this story.

The crook Nagesia who was crushed while pulling his master’s cart, and a skeletal girl in the local hospital who could only pronounce the name of her village and nothing else, are the specimen of what were going on in Palamau. Out of these experiences Mahashweta Devi makes one of her most probing exposures of bond slavery in India. Douloti had to pay through her life for a loan of three hundred rupees taken by her father. Her masters raise over forty thousand rupees from her prostitution. She dies at the age of twenty-seven, shattered by years of prostitution and the innumerable diseases. Even after many decades of independence the concept of ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’ and ‘equality’ have remained alien to the vast majority of people who are poor and belonged to the lower rungs in the caste ridden society. Mahashweta Devi feels, “Post-Colonial India has seen the abolition of princely regimes but has
ironically multiplied the number of unofficial, uncrowned princess... Internal colonizers have been flourishing all along.” (Jaidev 32)36

The historical process of decolonization has not reached the poor and the needy. Hence, the poor women are treated just as merchandise and commodities and men are not better than animals. Exploitation as a system has not been facing any real and sustained threat since 1947. Instead, it has been gaining strength and growing more and more sophisticated and repressive. Mahashweta Devi lashes at the society and the system, which remain mute at and sometimes encourage directly the inhuman, illegal and the immoral practices that every civilized person should be ashamed of. The reason for more concern is that the people like Munabar Singh Chandala, Latia, Paramananda Mishir, Bajnath Mishir are growing prosperous at the cost of the Crook Nagesias and Doulotis in a society which is called democratic, civilized and modern. Mahashweta Devi warns that our complacency, while the crook Nageshias and Doulatis are being sucked and drained to their death, is a dangerous trend.

Ganori belonged to a small Nagesia community in Seora village of Palamau district. Munabar Singh, a Chandala Rajput was the owner of that village who used all the possible oppressive tactics to exploit the poor and the low-caste. Ganori Nagesia was his bonded slave. Once he had to go to jail on charges of stealing water buffaloes from the market. He borrowed three hundred rupees from Munabar Singh on putting thumbprint to feed his community as a formality after returning from the jail. The poor and the low-caste believed that it is fate’s decree to become a Kamiya (bond slave). Munabar Singh was a King and a Government himself by ‘the strength of loans’.

Once, Ganori Nagesia’s carelessness sent Munabar’s plough steer into a tiger’s belly.
The furious master forced Ganori to work as a substitute of the steer and Ganori was met with an accident while pulling the cart. Thus, Ganori Nagesia became Crook Nagesia forever. Munabar Singh, a typical landlord, despotic and cruel, snatches away the pots, pans, cattle and anything the slaves buy and even burns their houses and forces them to become his bonded slaves. Bono Nagesia, the man of independent nature, undergoes the despotic treatment by the master and later escapes to become a personal assistant to Father Bomfuller. Thus, Bono becomes human, but others remain 'animals'.

Paramananda Mishir, the owner of a brothel at Madhopura, arrives to Scora posing himself as a 'most compassionate' and 'the liberator of the untouchables' and to the surprise of all the untouchables, offers to marry Doulati, after paying rupees three hundred to Munabar Singh. That is the amount for which Crook Nagesia had become a bonded labourer.

Thus, fourteen-year-old beautiful, attractive and innocent Doulati is made a bonded prostitute without her knowledge and becomes an unfortunate victim to a 'profound conspiracy of the master society'. She was secured for just three hundred rupees, the sum which together with some fifty rupees spent on her dress and cosmetics, was actually shown as a loan extended to her. Within next thirteen years, Douloti has earned for two Mishra masters as much as forty thousand rupees, first by remaining for the sole use of the 'devil incarnate' Latia, then a Singh Sahib. Later by pulling in ten clients of ten rupee each for a day. When, at last, she cannot pull even a rupee client, she is sent out of the brothel. But the interest on the principal amount has not been paid off yet. Douloti was young virgin and beautiful with blooming, lusty look when she was taken to the brothel. By the time she was discarded from there, she was worn out and emaciated and no longer a profit making machine. The consumptive, syphilis-
ridden Doulati goes to a doctor at Tohri who suggests her to go to the hospital at Mandar. The destitute and helpless Doulati, 'the unknown skeleton', trudges homeward only to collapse upon a map of India, expressly drawn in colour at a way side school by the school teacher Mohan Srivastava for the following day that happens to be the Independence Day. In this context, the writer comments, “The pain became cough, the cough became blood, Doulati closed her eyes.”(93) She spoils the map with her blood draining all over. The school teacher shocked to see the most unexpected turn of event when he comes out with the national flag in his hand next morning. Regarding the severity, all-pervasiveness of bonded labour and exploitation of the poor, the narrator observes:

“Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the ocean to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spreadeagled, Kamiya-whore Doulati Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Doulati is all over India.”(94)

Mahashweta Devi symbolically suggests that such poignant and excruciating experiences are all pervasive in Independent India. Villages like Seora are everywhere in this country. The sale of girls for rape still goes on. Douloti is still true and true for the rest of India. That is why, as she says, she has ended the story like that. It naturally raises a doubt if we are really independent. Jaidev, a renowned writer and an art critic, considered Douloti (1993) a National Allegory, as there are ample instances corroborating his argument. It is India in miniature. The low-caste people are generally illiterate and are ignorant of the idea of the nation, state, motherland, independence and national problems. They can speak of a 'common father' as most of the low caste kids in the village are happen to be the landlord Munabar's bastards.
But it is difficult for them to perceive the idea of the mother India suggesting a common mother. The upper-caste characters are very much aware of all these things, along with the opportunities and avenues that exist for them in Post-Independent India. The painful aspect of it is that the nation and independence have remained in the service of the men like Munabar Singh, Paramananda Misra and their influential clients and friends. Douloti is born in 1948, just after the independence and is drained to the pre-matured deaths with the emergency in 1975. Thus, Mahashweta Devi makes *Douloti* (1993) a parable of Post-Colonial India. Which becomes more clear at the end when Douloti dies coughing out blood in the night, leading on to 15 August 1975. Regarding this Jaidev opines:

"Douloti is certainly important in her own right, important as a tragically wasted, lighted life, but she is even more important as the site on which a whole variety of ‘the Great Indian Meaning’ – mythological, historical, socio cultural, or of class, caste and gender – converges to get illuminated as a set of operative, oppressive forces even as they establish a real, material relationship with her. It is in their astonishing range that these forces turn *Douloti* into a national allegory, or rather, an elaborate charge sheet against the nation." (31)\(^9\)

As Mahashweta Devi says, not only the Doulatis but also the Somnis, Kalabatis, Gohumanis, Reotis, Munarbars and Paramananda Mishras are spread all over the nation. The root cause is the bond slavery and the bonded labour system that prevail all over India, in different names in different regions. The system is slavery. The poor and the low-caste become slaves under loan pressure. This system is not restricted to the countryside alone. Bono Nagesia’s experience shows that everyone sucks the coolie’s blood in Dhanbad colliery. All the exploiting agencies “zoom down like a hungry wolf” on the contract labourers there.

Latia, the ‘highly trusted’ Government contractor, who has never constructed a single
satisfactory bridge and Government building, is a typical contractor of the Post-Independent India. With his Harijan-virginity obsession, unending sexual desire and political lineage, Latia is the best example of the politics-criminal nexus that is rampant in the Post-Colonial India. An interesting thing in the novella is that all the vested interests belong to upper-castes and bear the names with religious overtones, which Mahashweta Devi deliberately does in order to show how exploitation and oppression is carried on in the garb of divinity. Jaidev says: “Munavar, Latina, Kishanji, the Mishras, the labour contractor in Dhanbad, the official machinery, the priest, the Deputy Collector etc. – all constitute the Great Indian Meaning in practice.”

The novella is not merely a tragedy of Douloti, it is a tragedy of innumerable innocent lives. It is a tragedy of Kalabati who becomes first victim to the bestial Latia. It is a tragedy of Gohumani and Reoti whom the crazy clients burn with cigarettes and eat her flesh. It is the tragedy of Kalabati who was murdered by the vested interests. It is the tragedy of Somni who walked into the ‘society of beggars’ after being drained and deranged. It is a tragedy of the Kamiya whores who join the army of beggars and die like flies. It is also a tragedy of Ganori Nagesia and the likes.

But the only hope is the activists like Mohan Srivastava, Prasad Mahato, Father Bomfuller and Puran Chand who represent different organizations. But Mahashweta Devi emphasizes the fact that the initiative for any resistance should come from within the oppressed sections. The outsiders like these activists, however well intentioned, can only help but not initiate action by themselves. Bono Nagesia whom Jaidev considers ‘the true protagonist’ who ‘keeps learning and changing, learning to change and act’ becomes ‘free’ in the real sense and only he can establish a poignant mute interaction with Douloti. Only he could make her feel warm human tenderness who otherwise was being used only as a ‘truck’ by Latia, the
heartless truck owner. The Father Bomfuller softens the arrogant Baijnath Mishra by
threatening with police action. These instances give optimistic touch to the novella which
otherwise is full of exploitation and oppression. It shows that Mahashweta Devi does not
carelessly dismiss the nation-state or its so-called democratic apparatus for which she has not
any illusions. She still believes that justice can be enforced by the persons with deep social
conscience, resolution and commitment. Though Mahashweta Devi always prioritizes and
foregrounds her urgent human themes over form and technique, here she shows how superior
she is to most champions of form and aestheticism, by the affective use of narration, by the
timely authorial interventions and by cleverly distinguishing between three distinctive voices
namely, the exploiters the victims and the narrator.

*The Hunt (1993)* is another interesting novella by Mahashweta Devi. It is set in Ranchi
district of Jharkhand state. In her fictional world, women, particularly the tribal and the low-
caste women are at the receiving end. They are usually helpless and resign themselves to the
‘fate’s decree’ in the face of multifaceted exploitation. They are used to the passive
reception of whatever comes their way. But in this story it is the other way round. This is an
instance of ‘victimizing the victimizer’, a rare experience in the fictional world of Mahashweta
Devi. Here a tribal daughter of a white timber planter transforms a traditional ritual into a
contemporary resistance by killing her mainstream exploiter and a potential rapist. It is not a
simple hunt of a bird, a hedge-hog or a rabbit but a hunt of ‘the biggest beast! a man’ coinciding
with the *Jani Parab*, the women’s turn of hunting by the tribes to celebrate spring festival.

Mary Oraon, an illegitimate daughter of Oraon Mother (Bhikni) and an Australian
father. He was the son of Dixon, the owner of timber plantations in Kuruda, which later was
sold to Prasadji from Ranchi. Both the mother and the daughter are the employees of Prasadji and work to his satisfaction. With Australian blood in her, Mary is quite distinct in her mental and physical make up from other Oraon girls. She is a dare devil and has won countless admirers and also created a tremor among many with her inviolate constitution, infinite energy and razor-sharp mind.

Cleaning Prasadji’s bungalow and pasturing cattle, going to the Tohri market to buy rice, oil, butter and spices for the Prasads are her routine activity. Smoking, drinking tea and chewing betel leaf at the expense of other marketers, without encouraging any one, is her habit. Jalim, a sharp Muslim lad and the leader of the marketers is her chosen mate. They would marry when either’s savings reach one hundred rupees. All those who venture into the act of teasing her or to overtake her would get a thorough slapping from her. This rude girl does not allow anybody to take her for granted.

The problem starts with the arrival of the forest contractor Tehsildar Singh to the Kuruda village. He is a typical Post-Independent Indian contractor who manages everything with his influence at the corridors of power, with money and with a few bottles of country liquor. Kuruda and the surrounding forest-rich areas have become bare and wild animals disappeared because of him. His lustful eyes fall on the eighteen year old, exceptionally tall Mary with seductive look and light copper complexion.

Tehsildar Singh, the womanizer, tries to lure her by various ways only to get slapped by her. When he continued to haunt her, she decides to teach him a lesson once for all. She beguiles him in the guise of a beloved and promises to meet him on the day of the feast, at a rock near the ravine. Men folk celebrate the ritual of the hunt at the spring festival continuously
for twelve years. *Jani Parab*, the women’s turn comes on the thirteenth year. This has been an ancient tradition of the men, to drink, to hunt, to dance etc. on this occasion. While all the women folks are after their prey, Mary, drunken and determined, meets Tehsildar Singh exactly at the stipulated place and kills him with her Machete and throws the body away in the ravine. After that Mary joins the festivity with great happiness and content, as she has hunted the ‘biggest beast’.

Mahashweta Devi in an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says that, every event narrated in the story is true, she had seen Mary in Tohri Market, bargaining, chewing pan, smoking bidi, arguing and always getting upper hand. She came to know through their songs what the girl had done on a *Jani Parab* day in order to marry the Muslim boy. Mahashweta Devi’s close association with the tribal life has revealed the fact that the women have a place of honour in the tribal society. Rape is unknown to them. Insulting and raping a woman is the greatest crime. This was one of the reasons for the Santhal Revolt of 1855-56. The hunting festival is a festival of justice. The offenders are brought to justice after hunting the animals. Hence, Mary in the story, as the author writes, resurrected the real meaning of the annual hunting festival day by dealing out justice to a crime committed against the entire tribal society. Mahashweta Devi defends the violence in the story by saying that when the system fails and becomes a party to the illegalities and immoralities, individual has every right to take up violence and the events she narrates in the story focus on the prevailing conditions in the contemporary Indian society.

*Rudali (1997)* is an important and a powerful novella by Mahashweta Devi. It is also set around Ranchi. It is an acidly ironic tale of exploitation and struggle and above all, of survival. Sanichari, a poor, low caste village woman, is the central character of the story. The
story takes us through the process of this helpless low caste woman growing into a chief of the band of rudalis. The word Rudali is from the Hindi word rudan or rodan which means "weep". The practice of hiring the professional mourners at the time of a funeral ceremony is the background of the novella. This evolution of the central character, who emerges at the end as better equipped to adapt, survive and manipulate the system, is very interesting. It is an evolution, not merely of an individual but of a community, which is more empowered than it is at the beginning. Thus, the individual is historicized. At the same time, the story that focuses on the class-contrast, luxury and lavishness of the privileged class, is in contrast to the poverty and suffering of the deprived classes. It is also a critique on the upper-class landlords.

As Mahashweta Devi claims in an interview with Amar Mitra (Indian Literature, 179, May-June 1997-163), she has found the source of the story from a cremation at Nimthala burning ghat (Kolkata). The story begins with the 'historicization' of the central character. Sanichari's mother-in-law used to say that it was because Sanichari was born on inauspicious Saturday that her destiny was full of suffering. But the fact is that all the untouchables like Ganjus and Dushads who are in the majority in Tahad village lived in desperate poverty. Their life is conditioned by the socio-economic and religious factors. Poverty and suffering are the class specific. The day of the birth would not change it. Sanichari met with series of deaths occurring one after another in her household but she could not shed tears on all those occasions. When her mother-in-law died, Sanichari's husband and his brother were in jail. Ramavatar Singh, the landlord had sent all the male Dushads and Ganjus to jail enraged by the loss of some wheat. Sanichari was too busy to weep. She herself had to go from neighbour to neighbour in pouring rain and arrange for the last rites. Moreover, the old woman had given her so much of trouble that she would not be able to weep for her. Within next three years her
brother-in-law and his wife died. At that time Ramavatar Singh had threatened to drive all the Dushads and the Ganjus out of Tahad. That left Sanichari on tenterhooks. She had to worry about the arrangement of the funeral ceremony of the dead. Hence she had no time to mourn for the dead.

When her husband died of cholera after consuming the contaminated and the ‘sour stinking milk’, which the rich people offer to bathe the Shiva Idol. She was made to pay twice over for ritual offerings – first at Tohri and the second time to appease the local village Priest – forcing her into Ramavatar Singh’s debt trap. As Sanichari had to work hard to repay Ramavatar Singh’s loan and to feed her little son, she found no time to weep for her husband. Sanichari recovers slowly from the previous shocks with the growth of her loving and obedient son, Buddha. He got married and his wife Parabatia gave birth to the son, Haroa. Though the daughter-in-law was quite odd, Sanichari dreams of setting up of a household at last, backed by her son. Unfortunately, Budhua falls ill while working for Lachman Singh and died plunging his mother in deep darkness and shattering all her dreams. Parbatia leaves home and later becomes a prostitute. Untimely, death of the son, desertion by the daughter-in-law and the responsibility of bringing up the grand son, stunned Sanichari and found no time to weep. By the time she slowly recovers the lost hope with the help of other low caste fellow beings, particularly Dulan’s family, Haroa ran away with the magic show lot. Thus, when Sanichari is completely battered in life and all her dreams are shattered, she happens to come across Bikhni in the market place.

Sanichari and Bikhni, the childhood friends, come together after many years. Both are placed in a similar situation. Bikhni, like Sanichari, is abandoned by the loved ones. Her only son had gone with his in-laws, leaving his mother to fend for herself. Both of them started living
together. When the twenty rupees, which Bikhni had collected by selling her two goats exhausted, they met with great problem. They felt as if the sky had fallen on their head. They meet Dulan, a crafty old rogue, who has a sharp mind and would certainly guide them out of their difficulties. As expected, Dulan suggests them to take up the work of *rudalis*.

In rich families, family members find no time to mourn the dead persons. They remain busy trying to find keys to the safe when somebody dies. They need whores and hired rudalis to mourn during the grand funeral ceremonies. But the problem is, Sanichari who could not weep during all these years, feels that her eyes are scorched. But Dulan convinces her by saying, “These tears are your livelihood —— you’ll see, just as you cut wheat and plough land, you’ll be able to shed these tears.”(Devi, *Rudali 70*)

Meanwhile, Bhairab Singh, a landlord was murdered and they needed rudalis at the funeral to keep his ‘honour’ high. Dulan takes Bikhni and Sanichari to Bhairab Singh’s account keeper Bachhanlal and negotiates that they would get Rs.5 each along with rice and wheat. Of course, they would be served with a snack of *chivda* and *gur*. The performance of Sanichari and Bikhni was so impressive that the demand for them increased. Nathuni Singh’s second wife hired. Sanichari and Bikhni as *rudalis* for the funeral ceremony of her father. Thus, they work as *rudalis*, rest of the time they work for the *maliks* or labour in the fields like other people of their class. Their performance as *rudalis* become very popular. The relatives of the dead were pleased with the praises they sang in honour of the deceased. They took the help of the market whores when there is a demand for more members. Bikhni used to collect information about the death of Maliks and contact the whores for the required number of *rudalis*.
In the meanwhile, Bikhni expresses her desire to go to Ranchi in order to meet her son at her nephew-in-law in a marriage function. Sanichari naturally agrees to her proposal and accompanies her up to the bus station. After a few days, when Sanichari was expecting Bikhni's journey back, she received the news of her death. This sad news once again leaves Sanichari in a spot. They came together unexpectedly at a very crucial period of their life. They became as close as kins, like the bark of one tree grafted on to another. Once again Dulan comes to her help. He advises her not to give up the work of rudalis. He says, "It's wrong to give up one's land, and your profession of funeral wailing is like your land, you mustn't give it up."(89)\(^2\)

In the meanwhile, Gambhir Singh died and Sanichari had to organize a band of rudalis comprising of the market whores. Sanichari hesitates to visit the whores. Dulan once again shows her the way by making everything clear to her. He tells her that the Malik Mahajans' wealth is unclean money. It is they who have turned the low caste women into whores. Poor people should not worry about right or wrong. The rich understand it better, the poor understand hunger better. What one is forced to do to feed oneself is never considered wrong. Inspired by the encouraging words of Dulan, Sanichari visits the market whores and organizes a band of rudalis at the funeral ceremony of Gambhir Singh.

The novella exposes the socio-economic and religious systems and the nexus between them. Sanichari was forced to pay twice for the ritual after the death of her husband. Mohanlal, the Priest of Ramavatar's presiding deity, forced her into the debt bond of Ramavatar. For twenty rupees, she had to pay Rs.50 through bonded labour on his fields over the next five years. The story presents a contrasting picture of two classes. Mahashweta Devi says that
she looks at the class, not at the gender problem. In her stories men and women alike belong to different classes. The juxtaposition of two mutually contrasting classes are very effectively brought out in the novella. On the one hand, we have the low class comprising Ganjus, the Dushads and other low caste people. Dire poverty, exploitation, bonded labour and suffering are the main features of these people. Everything in this life is a battle for them. Nothing comes handy in their lives. Time passes on an empty stomach. Even the simple desires to possess bangles and combs remain an impossible dream. They are exhausted and emaciated in their daily struggle for a little maize, gruel and salt. They are tied to the moneylenders through their motherhood and widowhood. The burden of religious rituals crushed them completely.

On the other hand, we have the privileged class comprising mostly the upper-caste landlords, exercising all-pervasive influence on almost every aspect of the lives of the lower-caste villagers. They can harass the men folk and put them behind the bar. They can use the low caste women and discard them when they become old. They can extract years of unpaid labour for the repayment of small amounts. Hypocrisy and immorality dominate the life of this class. A wonderful trait of these people is that they do not spend money on the medical treatment of a person. But spend huge amount on the funeral. The grandeur of the funeral enhances the honour of a person.

Bhairab Singh is killed by his own eldest son and two hundred rupees are kept for the rudalis to weep at the funeral. As Dulan says, in rich families the son kills the mother, the mother the son. Another interesting thing is that these rich people do not find time to weep and mourn the death of their kins. They need hired rudalis to perform that work. Nathuni Singh’s mother is on the death bed and remains on her own excrement all day. But he is stocking up
sandalwood, sal wood, bales of cloth, loads of ghee, sugar, dal and flour for the grand funeral ceremony. Gulbadan is the daughter of Gambhir Singh's kept woman, Motiya. After the death of Motiya, she was forced to become a prostitute. What Dulan says about them is absolutely right. He observes:

"There may be litigations and ill will between the maliks, but they have certain things in common. Except for salt, kerosene and postcards, they don't need to buy anything. They have elephants, horses, live stock, illegitimate children, kept women, venereal disease and a philosophy that he who owns the gun owns the land."

They do not respect a mother of a mere girl. The record of interpersonal relation and human behaviours of these people is very bad compared to the low-caste people. They help each other and stand behind those who are in difficulty. When Haroa was a small child, Dulan's daughter-in-law feeds him and looks after him. Without love and affection of the fellow beings Sanichari could not have done anything. Dulan's experience and knowledge goes a long way in the evolution and empowerment of Sanichari. Regarding this Anjum Katyal remarks: "Dulan embodies the resistant will, the sharp intelligence, the irreverence, the cynicism, and the cunning that the subaltern uses to subvert the total control of the masters."

Under his influence the subaltern keep the privileged in perspective. He presents Sanichari with a survival strategy, a way of turning the situation around, so that she is using the system instead of just being used by it. Sanichari-Bikhni relation, which looks like the bark of one tree grafted on to another, is a rare and unique phenomenon in Indian literature. Regarding the use of language and style, Anjum Katyal opines:

"Mahashweta Devi's masterful use of irony is perhaps her most powerful creative tool. In her hands the social custom of rudalis..."
accumulates rich layers of ironic symbolism, variously explicated by Dulan and Sanichari, until it takes on all the power of a weapon of subversion. In fact, the entire text is infused with ironic comment. "(Rudali 26)\textsuperscript{45}

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak feels, Mahashweta Devi’s writing and her activism reflect one another. There does not exist a watertight compartment between the two and Rudali (1997) is nothing but an extension of her activism. In the words of Anjum Katyal, “The story sets out to support the process of struggle she writes about - by enlightening, educating, celebrating, reaffirming and inspiring.”(27)\textsuperscript{46}

Thus, through these short fictions Maheshweta Devi reveals us the vastness and variety of the world of exploitation. She exposes the manipulation tactics of the exploiters. We have realized the reason for Mahashweta Devi’s anger and anxiety for the present state of affairs. It is also clear how she deals with different themes-tribal, historical, social, mythical and political with equal mastery and deftness.

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END NOTES

2. Devi X-XI.
3. Devi XX.
4. Devi XVII.
6. Devi 63.
8. Devi 46.
9. Devi XI.
12. Devi XX.
15. Devi 117.
18. Devi 51.


22. Devi 68.


24. Devi 50.

25. Devi 43.


27. Devi 72.


29. Devi 18.


31. Devi 70.

32. Devi 53.

33. Devi 72-73.


35. Devi 197.


38. Devi 94.


40. Jaidev 33.


42. Devi 89.

43. Devi 73.

44. Devi 9.


46. Devi 27.