CHAPTER 2
MAHASWETA DEVI AND THE MYTH OF ‘SATI’
This chapter studies Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Maina sati athoba ekti aloukik kahini’ (1992, Maina sati or a supernatural story) to analyse how Mahasweta explores the process of mythification of real incidents of widow burning. It reveals how the system of patriarchies works through religion, class and economy to influence the apparently spontaneous process of mythification, and thereby fabricates a ‘custom’. The story revolves around a real incident – the “self-immolation” of a young widow called Roop Kanwar on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. Mahasweta depicts in minute details how and why this myth was constructed and spread across time and space.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first gives an account of the real incident concerning Roop Kanwar emphasising the common pattern of widow immolations. The second goes back into history to explore the socio-political conditions that constructed the practice of ‘sati’ in India, and finally culminated in the death and deification of Roop Kanwar. In other words, this section explores how the linguistic sign ‘sati’ became the mythic sign ‘sati’. The third section analyses Mahasweta’s story ‘Maina sati’ to delineate how this fiction enriches the understanding of the system of patriarchies and mythification.

I

Since the story of ‘Maina sati’ directly refers to the immolation of Roop Kanwar, a brief account of this incident would help in understanding the ground from which

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1 In this chapter the term ‘sati’ (within single inverted commas) has been used to refer to the custom, sati (without any inverted commas) to refer to the woman, and Sati as proper noun.
Mahasweta’s story takes off. It is however, important to remember that this incident is, by no means, singular; rather that of a representative one. Several such incidents have taken place in India and they share almost a formulaic structure, which shows that there are some common reasons behind all these incidents. This section will actually discuss this formulaic structure with special stress on the Roop Kanwar incident, which is also known as the Deorala sati incident, and then proceed to explore the reasons.

Roop Kanwar was an eighteen year old girl of a village in Jaipur, Rajasthan. She was married to twenty-four year old Mal Singh who lived in Deorala village, Rajasthan, with his parents. Just seven months after their marriage, when Mal Singh died in 1987, Roop Kanwar was immolated alive in her husband’s funeral pyre in the name of a sacred religious ‘custom’.

Sangari and Vaid (1991), after analysing several such widow immolations, have discovered a common pattern behind these incidents. The husband, to begin with, usually dies after a long illness, and his death is already anticipated. The illness and anticipation of death helps the family members to prepare mentally for the death and provide enough scope to brood over the post-death situations. Although Mal Singh, Roop Kanwar’s husband, died of gastro-enteritis at a very young age – he was only twenty-four years old – still it was clearly not a ‘sudden death’. He was suffering for quite a few days and was hospitalised where he died on 4th September 1987. (Upreti & Upreti, 1991).

Secondly, on hearing the news of the death of her husband, the widow declares her intention to immolate herself along with her dead husband. At this point it is
necessary to prove that she is actually possessed by ‘sat’. This is, in fact, the most
important step towards commemorating a sati, because acts of homicide and suicide are
criminal offences, and legally punishable. It is this step that gives the incident of
immolation a religious air and thus distinguishes the ‘sacred’ act of ‘sati’ from petty
homicide/suicide. The presence of ‘sat’ is usually proved by some ‘miracles’, like trunks
opening themselves, the funeral pyre lighting itself automatically, etc. As Sangari and
Vaid (1981) have noted, such ‘miracles’ besides proving the presence of ‘sat’, also paves
the way for the family members’/ villagers’ denial of assistance in the act:

The perception of mundane events as miracles has a dual
function: it becomes a means of concealing or denying
individual and community responsibility and the ‘miracles’
became evidence of the presence of sat. (1288)

Denial of collaboration in the act is important, because abetting suicide or homicide is
also a criminal offence.

Thirdly, to avoid any legal responsibility, the senior male members of the family,
particularly the father-in-law and the head of the village, are always absent from the
scenario. Roop Kanwar’s father-in-law, allegedly, fell unconscious and the Sarpanch or
the village-head went to the police station to inform the police. Needless to add that both
these acts are also parts of the formula. The police however, either do not arrive on time
or do not dare to intervene. The first newspaper report that came out three days after the
Deorala incident, on 7th September, confirmed that the police did not dare to interfere in
the celebration, for the fear of hurting people’s religious sentiments, “…Local
newspapers reported that the police was not going to interfere before the Chundari
Mahotsava, so that the religious feelings of the people were not hurt…” (Upreti & Upreti, 1991: 47)

Fourthly, the funeral is performed very quickly, in order to avoid any unwanted interruption. On 4th September 1987, the dead body of Mal Singh was brought back home at around 10 a.m. and the funeral took place at around 12:30 p.m. It is said that almost four thousand people gathered to watch the incident. However, Roop Kanwar’s parents were not informed despite the fact that they live some 65 kilometres away from Deorala. (Upreti & Upreti, 1991).

Fifthly, in case of a police proceeding – if it happens at all – no witness is ever found, although several photographs and pictures of the event start circulating soon after the incident. Roop Kanwar’s photograph, for instance, depicting “Roop Kanwar, sitting on the burning pyre with her husband’s body in her lap, while a Goddess blessed her from the skies…”, (Upreti & Upreti, 1991: 36), became very popular, and served as an important means of deification. This “collective amnesia” (Sangari & Vaid, 1991: WS-6) gives an insight into the process of construction of memory. In case of the Deorala incident too, a few people arrested for the act were released due to lack of proper evidence.²

As a final step of the entire process, the immolated widow is portrayed as pious and possessed from her early childhood, and a temple is built, usually very near to the house of the in-laws, in the memory of the widow, which completes the process of deification. Roop Kanwar, after the immolation, was claimed to be a devotee of Rani

² Quite a few days after the incident, police arrested some members of Roop Kanwar’s family to question them, but at the end, nobody was punished for the act. The state government of Rajasthan however, issued an ordinance and the central Government revised the existing laws regarding ‘sati’ and created The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act 1987, to put an end to further immolations of women and its glorification.
Sati, an earlier sati of Rajasthan who also had a temple in her name. It is also significant that this stage of deification is usually done jointly by the natal and marital family of the widow. The Deorala incident was glorified as a rare instance of ‘Hindu’ religious belief, and direct and indirect support from a large group of political parties, business men, police and common people, expedited the entire process, projecting Roop as a “voluntary” sati. The influence of the event on Deorala’s economy in general is evident:

The village economy got a shot in the arm. Business prospered. The increase in transport business was tenfold with the average of 10,000 pilgrims streaming in everyday...The villagers, recognising the opportunity, set up temporary shops, selling coconuts, sugar cane, sweetmeats and photographs of the couple. Offerings at the sati sthal within four to five days reached 2 lakhs, pre-recorded cassettes of devotional songs on sati started selling. (Upreti & Upreti, 1991: 110)

The government showed some activity only when the women’s organizations all over India became vocal on the issue, and demanded an end to such exploitations of women. The activists also appealed to the Rajasthan High Court to stop the Chundari ceremony, to be held on the 13th day after the immolation, that is, on 16th September. Accordingly, on 15th September the Rajasthan High Court ordered the State Government to ensure that no public ceremony takes place in Deorala. Nevertheless, that did not prevent the glorification of the incident:

However, the Chundari Mahotsava held on 16th September was attended by two-and-a half lakh pilgrims even though
organisers had preponed the ceremony fearing police intervention following the High Court directive of 15th September. …It was reported that not a single uniformed police man was seen at the site. …Political leaders also attended the ceremony. (Upreti & Upreti, 1991: 48-49)

Contemporary Indian society was immediately divided in their reactions to this incident. There was one group which actively participated in the deification of Roop Kanwar emphasizing the fact that it was a sacred ‘religious tradition’, that Roop Kanwar was a ‘voluntary’ sati, and she was possessed by ‘sat’ or the Supreme Power, and had left this world to enjoy eternal bliss with her husband. They considered it as an exemplary act of spirituality in ‘Hindu’ religion. The other group regarded it simply as a form of women’s exploitation, that Roop Kanwar’s in-laws killed her so that they could enjoy her dowry, without having the responsibility to maintain her for the rest of her life. Significantly, “…according to the Rajput custom when a man died without an issue his widow could go back to the parental house along with the dowry which she had brought.” (Upreti & Upreti, 1991, 72).

However, a closer analysis of the formulaic structure of various incidents of ‘sati’ depict that the root of the ‘custom’ is far deeper. The above discussion of the formulas makes it evident that any event of widow immolation is well-planned. The religious colour is attached to it quite deftly and shrewdly, and finally it is glorified in order to meet certain specific needs of the family or the community in general. In fact, the memory of the entire village is modified in order to meet these needs. In other words, a well-planned murder is mythified to look like a sacred act. Historicising the act of widow immolation would help in understanding exactly how a ‘custom’ gains such power.
This section shall explore the politics of patriarchies that gives rise to a ‘custom’ like widow immolation. As in any other case of mythification, in this case too, the respective community, in general, plays a very important role.

In order to understand this process of mythification, it is important to explore how the linguistic sign ‘sati’ became the mythic sign ‘sati’. At one point of time the linguistic sign ‘sati’ simply stood for something that exists. The word ‘sati’ is actually a Sanskrit word derived from the root ‘as’ (अस्), meaning ‘to be’ or ‘to exist’. The present participle of this verb is ‘sat’, which means, “being, existing, occurring, happening, being present”. (Monier-Williams, 2004: 1134). The feminine form of ‘sat’ is ‘sati’ which has several meanings including, “her ladyship, your ladyship”. (Monier-Williams, 2004: 1135). The term has been used to connote several meanings in different Sanskrit texts. Among others, the Mahabharata uses the term to mean “a good and virtuous or faithful wife (esp. applied in later use to the faithful wο [popularly called Suttee] who burns herself with her husband’s corpse” (Monier-Williams, 2004: 1135).

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3 In the Rigveda, the earliest extant text of India, and in various other texts the term had also been used to mean “real, actual, as any one or anything ought to be, true, good, right…beautiful, venerable, honest” etc. (Monier-Williams, 2004, 1134).

4 In Varahamihara’s Brihatsamhita, Kathasaritsagara and elsewhere, the term has been used to connote “a wife, female (of an animal)” (Monier-Williams, 2004, 1135). In Bhagabata Purana, it means “a female ascetic” (Monier-&Williams, 2004, 1135). In the Rigveda, it has also used as the name “of the goddess Durga or Uma (sometimes described as Truth personified or as a daughter of Daksha and wife of Bhava [Siva], and sometimes represented as putting an end to herself by Yoga, or at a later period burning herself on the funeral pyre of her husband)…” (Monier-Williams, 2004, 1135).
Long since, fidelity towards husband has been a determining characteristic of a ‘good’ wife, who is considered as a ‘sati’. Significantly, according to *Siva Purana* (Tarkaratna, 1985), Sati is said to be the name of the daughter of king Daksha, who married Siva against the wish of her father. When Daksha reviled his daughter and son-in-law, that is, Sati and Siva, publicly during a sacrifice or *yajña*, Sati, being mortified, chose to immolate herself in the sacrificial fire and quit the body that was generated from the seed of Daksha; for she considered that existence impure for happening to hear her husband reviled.\(^5\)

This is probably the reason why self-immolation became closely associated to the term sati, but it is very difficult to ascertain exactly at what point ‘chastity’ became an essential attribute of fidelity. Chastity of the wife is important to ensure the fatherhood of her children, so that the man’s property can be transferred to his legitimate heir. The three epic characters generally considered as the three greatest satis in India are Sita, Savitri and Damayanti, all monogamous women. Among them, Sita is believed to be the incarnation of goddess Laxmi, and therefore, the model of ‘ideal’ Indian woman. It is interesting to note that all these three women suffered a lot on account of their respective husbands, particularly Sita. According to the *Ramayana*, Sita, unable to bear Rama’s unfair accusations, sought shelter in the Mother Earth, who materialized and welcomed Sita to her bosom. Taking this story as a symbol, it can be inferred that being accused of infidelity by her husband, Sita actually killed herself. In fact, Sita was accused of being ‘unchaste’, for she had spent a long time in Ravana’s palace as his captive.

\(^5\) At this point it is important to remember the Indian philosophy which considers death not as an end of life, but a beginning of another life. Thus the ever immortal soul quits the old body and finds a new one. See *Bhagavat Gita* 2:22
It is very important to note here that none of the five women characters ‘traditionally’ described as women who, if worshipped every day, can destroy all sins – Ahalya, Droupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari – are “chaste”.\(^6\) Each of these women had physical relationships with more than one man; be it ‘adultery’ as in the case of Ahalya, or a ‘socially-sanctioned’ relationship, like the latter four. Significantly, Tara and Mandodari married their respective brothers-in-law after the death of their husbands.\(^7\) In fact, the most important ‘Hindu’ religious text, the \textit{Rig Veda} also advises a widow to marry her brother-in-law (10:40:2), though as later studies have revealed this was simply another patriarchal practice designed to keep the bridal wealth in the in-laws family. In the \textit{Mahabharata} there are a few instances of widow burning, but the instances of living widows clearly outnumbered those burnt,\(^8\) which proves that widow burning was not mandatory. In fact, a number of living widows play very important part in the story of the \textit{Mahabharata}, for example, Satyavati, Kunti, Uttara, Subhadra and various others. Neither does Kautilya’s \textit{Arthasastra} nor does \textit{Manusmriti}, two most important Indian books on conducts of human beings, consider widow burning mandatory. This proves

\(^{6}\) There are controversies regarding the reading of this hymn. Following is one of the various versions of the hymn:

\textit{Ahalya Draupadi Kunti Tara Mandodari tatha panchakanya svaranityam mahapataka nashaka} (Bhattacharya, 2001: 1)

According to some scholars these five women are known as “kanya”, and not as sati. As Pradip Bhattacharya (2001) has explained the term ‘kanya’ connotes a self-assertive, psychologically independent woman as opposed to sati which signifies a self-less woman who exists for and through her husband. However, the article fails to answer why these ‘kanyas’ have been regarded traditionally as “panchamahasati” or five great satis of India. The other group of scholars argue “panchakanya” is a misreading, and the correct reading is “panchakam nah”. Both the groups of scholars, however, agree that these five women were considered to be “mahapataka nashaka” – destroyers of vilest sins.

\(^{7}\) See \textit{Valmiki Ramayana} (Basu, 1989).

\(^{8}\) Perhaps, the most oft-cited example of widow-burning from the \textit{Mahabharata} is that of Madri. But it is important to note that Madri did not burn herself alive in her husband’s funeral pyre. She wanted to follow her husband (the term used in the text is ‘sahagamana’, which literally means to go together.) to the heaven, and therefore Madri – against the advice of Kunti and others – by the power of yoga, left her worldly body right after her husband. Later, both the dead bodies were brought to Hastinapura and cremated together. (Sinha, 1980: I, 210)
that widow immolation was not a common practice in ancient India, and up to a certain point ‘chastity’ was not important either.

Nevertheless, while the Burial hymn (10:18) of the *Rig Vida* has been cited widely, that of widow-remarriage is almost unknown. Such acts of selection and rejection – of a hymn/text/practice/culture – help in forming ideologies and public consents in favour of the supportive institutions. From several historical evidences it is clear that widow burning was not uncommon in ancient and medieval India. During the 18th century however, there was a drastic increase in the frequency of widow burning, particularly in Rajasthan and Bengal. And as Sangari and Vaid (1981) point out, in both these regions the occurrence of ‘sati’ increased during periods of “social turmoil”, which leads us to the question of colonialism.

It is now well-known that colonial period in India is also the period of revival of ancient Indian culture and traditions; and within this paradox is inherent the politics of colonialism. The threat that British colonialism posed against Indian culture and traditions was becoming more and more intensified since the battle of Palashi in 1757. Most of the Indians responded to this threat primarily, either by appropriating it as a positive and desirable way to betterment, or by ignoring it completely. From this point of ignoring the ‘other’ stemmed the desire to define the ‘self’ and this prompted a quest for origin, for roots, which, sometimes, ended up in an exaggerated glorification of ancient Indian culture as opposed to British culture.

However, ignoring the Master’s model was not easy (Said, 1995). Therefore, even the group who tried to resist the British influence also ended up following the model of
the nineteenth-century Victorian English woman by prioritising ‘chastity’. Such priorities are reflected through the subtle process of selection within the entire project of glorification of women which actually reveals the politics of patriarchy. Through this process of selection Sita became the ideal Indian woman, and Ahalya and other four great women got rejected. Thus ‘chastity’ became an essential part of fidelity, and the linguistic sign ‘sati’ which once simply meant ‘to be’ gradually became a ‘custom’, a myth, and in the mythic system of signification it came to signify a ‘chaste’ woman who, for some abstract, spiritual gain, dares to burn herself with her dead husband to prove her fidelity.

The other group, the group that had more exposure to the British culture, had protested against this ‘custom’ for a long time. Rammohun Roy was one of the pioneers who ventured to put an end to this ritual murder of women in the name of a ‘custom’. He published three pamphlets to argue against this practice. It is significant that in the first pamphlet in 1818 he addressed mainly the religious concern, confirming that a ‘Hindu’ widow could achieve the highest spiritual level by living an austere life, instead of burning herself. And even more significantly, a lot of people actually accepted this opinion, and believed that nobody should be forced to commit sati, but the option should remain available to those who want to burn themselves along with their husbands to

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9 It is difficult to ascertain exactly how and when this transformation took place, but a definite change in the character(isation) of women becomes explicit if one studies the evolution of some particular mythical women characters. For instance, the character of Sita in Valmiki’s Ramayana (c. third century BC), in Krittivasa’s Ramayana (c. fifteenth century AD), and in a twentieth century short story by Navaneeta Deven, titled ‘Mul Ramayana’ (The Original Ramayana). Valmiki’s Sita is a dignified woman who, when asked to take the fire test, did not hesitate to retaliate Rama. Krittivasa’s Sita, however, is a typical ‘ideal’ Indian woman, an ever subservient creature, who never dares to talk back to her husband. In Dev Sen we find again a modern version of Valmiki’s Sita, who escaped from Lanka with Hanumana, and rebuked Valmiki for criticizing her. Through this story Dev Sen has actually unraveled the process of ‘taming’ women who dared to talk back.
attain the eternal bliss. That is, the emphasis of this debate was on the ‘voluntariness’ of the widow.

It is significant that in the 1980s ‘voluntariness’ again comes at the centre of the debate, apparently, emphasising the woman’s will. A large group supported the immolations of Om Kanwar in 1980 and Roop Kanwar in 1987 saying that these were ‘voluntary’. None of these debates considered the position of the woman in question, that whether she had any option at all, other than to succumb to the family and social pressure. And as I have discussed in Section I, attaching a ‘voluntary’ cover to widow immolation is not difficult at all. In fact, the very pattern of these murders has been designed to give it a ‘voluntary’ look. The only option that Rammohun’s first pamphlet provided was to live a life of severe austerity, which is equivalent to living death. No one however, bothered to ask whether the widow wished to be in mourning for the deceased husband for the rest of her life. Thus religion has been used as a tool to exercise control over women’s sexuality.

In the next two pamphlets Rammohun Roy made it clear that the ‘custom’ of sati provided a whole set of benefits to the patriarchal society. These two pamphlets draw attention to the inferior treatment of women in general, and the material gain of the in-laws from the death of the widow. By killing the widow in the name of a ‘custom’ the in-laws inherit her property, which she inherited from her deceased husband; they got rid of the duty to maintain the widow for the rest of her life, and also the risk that she might indulge in sexual relationship ‘dishonouring’ the family values. Sangari and Vaid believe that these pamphlets successfully de-mythified the concept of ‘sati’: “Thus sati is totally
demystified, stripped of its religious sanction and shown as an act of murder/suicide.”
(1981, 1285)

However, the religious act of ‘sati’ was gradually becoming a cultural act. As Dorothy Stein has stated, the question of non-interference in religious traditions has been reiterated:

Although the English believed that one of the functions of the Empire was the social uplift of the colonized people, at first they pursued a course of noninterference. … They were also somewhat apprehensive over the possibility of a rebellion in the native army. In 1813, after consultation with the Hindu religious advisers to the Supreme Court in Bengal, it was decided not to go beyond monitoring the ceremonies to make sure they were in accord with the specifications laid down in the sacred writings and voluntary on the part of the widows. (1978, 258)

Despite the imposition of supervision, however, the rate of immolation shot up radically. According to A. Mukhopadhyay, while in 1815 the total number of immolations was 378, in 1818 the figure was 839. (1957, 102) The statistics prove that the orthodox ‘Hindus’ did consider the act of supervision a threat to their ‘culture’ and ‘traditions’, posed by the colonisers and probably they considered widow immolation as an easy and effective means towards preserving their traditions. The Sati Abolition Act was passed in 1829, but even after that we find that the authorities were hesitant to interfere in an act of widow immolation for fear of offending the Indians’ religious belief. It is also very interesting to note that in 1987, after the Deorala incident, a similar excuse of non-inference in
religious matters was given by the Indian government. Thus ‘religion’ remains a perpetual armour of patriarchy, or ‘power’ in general.

While criticising the theory of cultural relativism, Mohanty (1997) has specifically talked about rituals as “a specific kind of social practice in which the role of human agency needs to be appreciated in its historically sedimented and collective dimension…” (1997: 140). Thus ‘sati’ can be dissected to discover the palimpsest of “human agency” which made it a religious practice. Be it the British government of colonial India or the independent government of the Republic of India, none has dared to interfere with this ‘religious practice’ for fear of hurting people’s sentiment. However, the colonial government did not hesitate to interfere with India’s education system, language and thousand other things. It was only in case of certain ‘customs’ and ‘rituals’ where they chose not to obstruct. On the one hand, this can be viewed as the coloniser’s attempt to create and preserve the difference between their own ‘self’ and the colonial subjects – a distinction important for the proper functioning of colonial politics. On the other hand, it also highlights the worldwide network of patriarchal politics which in this particular case has been exercised through the facet of colonialism.

In fact, in her path-breaking essay ‘Gendered Violence, National Boundaries and Culture’ Kumkum Sangari (2008) has explored the role of religion in women’s exploitation by linking widow immolation with various other forms of patriarchal violence all over the world, like clitorodectomy or fatwa. The similarity between all these forms of violence is that they all constitute some sort of social practices or ‘customs’. Such practices are customised, argues Sangari and Vaid (1991), through public consent,
supportive institutions and ideological formations. These are the modes through which human agency acts. Section I of this chapter shows how the transformation of the linguistic sign ‘sati’ to the mythic sign ‘sati’ takes place through these modes, which helps to legitimise the custom. It is due to the present of public consent that neither the colonial government nor the independent government dare to put a stop to this ritual murder. Their trepidation of not interfering with religion is actually fear of not interfering with the public consent. The colonial government as well the independent government both need – for different purposes – public consent in order to function effectively. Nevertheless, the colonial government went against public consent on several other socio-political situations. Clearly, ‘sati’ is exempted, not because it is a religious practice, but because it is part of the larger plot of patriarchies. The abysmal but cohesive system of patriarchies, works all over the world in different ways. The fact that similar forms of sexual violence like widow immolation is present in almost all the countries of the world,\(^\text{10}\) and the government – be it colonial or independent – has generally been more or less reluctant to put a stop to this practice, shows the solidarity of patriarchies as a system. This system works through several supportive institutions. For instance, in case of ‘sati’ – as in most such cases of sexual violence – religion plays the role of a supportive institution. Active involvement of such institutions actually makes the customisation of sexual violence possible. They also help to generate ideologies, which in turn, justify the existence of these supportive institutions and thereby help to secure public consent.

\(^\text{10}\) For a detail history of widow immolation all over the world, see Fisch (2005).
Public consent is, again, inextricably linked with material gain. The questions that Rammohun raised in the latter two pamphlets are extremely important, and actually explain a lot of fanaticisms in the name of religion. Most of the orthodox ‘Hindus’ have never quite accepted the widow’s right to the deceased husband’s property, and killing her is the easiest way to solve that problem. Also, after the death of the husband it becomes the in-law’s duty to maintain the widow for the rest of her life. Above all, it has been the easiest way to handle the threat that woman’s sexuality poses to a patriarchal society. For a long time marriage of young girls was a common practice in India. And often the girls were married at a quite young age to very old men, because of class, caste and dowry considerations. And after the death of the husbands these girls, in most cases, were not permitted to remarry. Both the in-laws and the parental families considered these young girls as a threat, that they might endanger the family values by getting involved in sexual relations; and killing these widows was the easiest solution to this problem. Probably it is this desire to control women’s sexuality that erased the names of Ahalya and other four great satis, who were not exactly ‘chaste’, from the canon and replaced them with Sita, Savitri and Damayanti – women who suffered, who were monogamous. Thus it was very easy to secure public consent in favour of ‘sati’, and to turn this blatant sexual violence in a ‘religious custom’.

The supportive institutions help to customise such violence by generating ideologies to justify the act. Thus in orthodox ‘Hindu’ belief widow immolation has never been regarded as a murder, but an act of magnanimity. It is believed that a woman who is possessed by ‘sat’ or the Supreme Power can only burn herself alive with her
husband.\textsuperscript{11} And the belief in miracles helps to ‘prove’ the presence of ‘sat’, as it has already mentioned earlier. It is needless to add that such ideologies and beliefs also help to camouflage the material gain, which is one of the principal objectives behind this ‘custom’.

Deification of the immolated widow reveals the subtle politics of the supportive institutions. The worship of female power, apparently, contrasts sharply to the general exploitations of women in daily life. However, it is basically interrelated. Worship and exploitation, both, are part of the ideology, which aims to control women’s sexuality. Deification, in fact, serves a dual function. On the one hand, the elevation of women facilitates the process to dominate a woman for her entire life with the assurance that she would be worshiped after her death if she follows the patriarchal dictates in this life; on the other hand, constructions of temples on the sati spot contribute in the dissemination of the supportive institutions like religions, and help to popularise the religion by securing more and more public consent.

The socio-political situation of India has changed considerably after the independence. However, the patriarchies still dominate through ideologies, public consent and supportive institutions. And therefore, even after 40 years of independence incidents of widow immolation have been reported. Two such incidents which created a lot of turmoil in the contemporary India are the immolations of Om Kanwar in August

\textsuperscript{11} In connection to the Om Kanwar incident, Sangari and Vaid has explained,

The following reasons were given as to why particular widows are the ‘chosen’ for the act of sati: the old widowed aunt felt that god chose those widows who have no one to care for them; a Harijan woman said that sat possessed women alone and not men because men can remarried; the priest ascribed it to the right \textit{samskara} of the woman; the headmaster said women in general have greater spirituality and fortitude, hence hey, not men, are the vehicles of sat. (1981, 1288f)
1980 and of Roop Kanwar in September 1987. Both the incidents took place in two different villages of Rajasthan. And Mahasweta’s story, by revealing the reasons and effects of such a ‘custom’, actually explores this entire formulaic structure of patriarchies.

III

Mahasweta Devi’s story ‘Maina sati athoba ekti aloukik kahini’ (written in 1992, Maina sati or a supernatural story) is divided into nine sections or ‘ullasa’ each of which has a separate title. The story is situated in a fictional, impoverished, Indian village called Maina. The names of the two main protagonists – the husband and the wife – of the story are also Maina. The story basically narrates the life and death of these two Mainas, and while doing that it incorporates the broader socio-economic perspective within its realm.

A brief outline of the story here would help us to proceed with the analysis. Maina, the second son of Karali, married his beloved, who was also named Maina (and was called Madhumati later) against his father’s wish. Karali’s sole ambition was to earn a lot of money. He was against this marriage because Madhumati’s family was too poor to offer him enough dowry. Nonetheless, he had to succumb to the community pressure and accepted the marriage of Maina and Madhumati, two popular lovers of the village.
However, being inspired by the myth of Roop Kanwar, he eventually caused Madhumati’s death and then killed his son Maina; declared Madhumati a ‘sati’, built a temple in his house in the name of Mahasati Maina, and began to earn a lot of money and fame.

The story opens with the narrator’s attempt to locate the distant and unreachable space, called Maina. All of the first three chapters are introduced by the same title – “ময়না কোথায়?” or ‘Where is Maina?’. In answer to this question Mahasweta gradually reveals the chronotope, the geographical and cultural backdrop of the story. The first chapter reveals the time of the plot – “বাংলা ১৩৯৭ সনের মোল ফল্টুন, এক্সেল ফাল্গুন, সুভূতি.” (Devi, 2004: 243) [Bengali year of 1397, 16th Falguna, Friday]. A significant detail must be added here, the story begins almost three years after the Deorala incident. After specifying the time, the narrator also spells out the exact position of the moon – “কৃষ্ণ প্রতিপদ’ – that it was the first day after the no-moon night. The second chapter describes the geographical location, – “উত্তর চর্বিল পর্যায়ে হাড়া ও হাসনাবাদের মধ্যামিতে ময়না গ্রামটি অবস্থিত।” (244). [Maina is situated somewhere between Haro and Hasnabad of North 24 Parganas.] Besides the logical attempt to situate the story in a particular time and space, the astrological precision draws our attention to the traditional beliefs of India, where most of the rituals are performed following the lunar calendar. Thus at the very beginning of the story Mahasweta gives a hint that the story will draw heavily upon ‘traditional’ beliefs. At the very beginning the narrator confirms “ময়না ঘোষণা ছিল সেখানেই আছে” (243), that Maina is where it was. The confirmation that Maina is where it was signifies that Maina has remained more or less similar throughout the years, and has not changed or developed much. That is, Maina
remains a fertile ground where ‘traditional’ beliefs can still operate, without any confrontation with ‘rationality’ which is said to be a trait of ‘modernity’.\(^\text{12}\)

It is important to clarify at this point that even in independent India, there is a gaping disparity between the urban and rural areas. Pre-colonial Bengal was a village-centric community. This village-centric community structure was destroyed completely by the colonisers who created big cities in order to facilitate the development of the tertiary sector. Since then while the big cities have ‘developed’ at a faster rate, the rural areas have remained ‘under-developed’. And even in big cities there has been a seemingly strange yet casual duality of ancient ‘traditions’, beliefs and customs, and ‘modern’ life styles shaped by technological advancements. Thus, even ‘modern’ India has not been able to get rid of problems like caste and dowry. And of course, women’s exploitation also continues. Mahasweta’s story points out this difference between the rural and urban areas and somehow also tries to bridge the gap between the urban and rural society.\(^\text{13}\)

This attempt to identify the gap between urban and rural society is made explicit by her narrative technique and language. It is interesting to note here that at the very beginning of the story the narrator clearly distinguishes between the subjects of the story and the target readers. In the first chapter of the story Mahasweta directly addresses her readers to explain her abundant use of “slang” in this story:

\(^{12}\) By ‘traditional’ I mean beliefs, practices, rituals which, apparently, have been continuing for a long time. And by ‘modernity’ I mean so-called rational thinking and technological development which, to a large extent, have been associated with colonialism. Despite the fact that both these terms are extremely controversial and can be challenged easily, it must be acknowledged that they can also be used as very useful entry-points to study a culture. Hence throughout this chapter I have used these terms within quotes.

\(^{13}\) It should be mentioned in this connection that Mahasweta Devi is not only an author, but also a social activist. Probably her work as a social activist has provided her such insights into the problems of the society, and also inspired her to try to bridge these gaps.
Sophisticated readers! This story is from a region where the word ‘buttock’ is used excessively. Here to clean a bowl means to clean its blackened buttock, to repair a can is to repair its leaking buttock. The use of this and other slang must be excused.\footnote{A note on translation must be inserted here. For Mahasweta, language is not just a means of story-telling, but an integral part of the story itself. Thus her language is highly culture specific, and at times, lacks what Benjamin (2003) calls “translatability”. The above sentence is one of those examples. In such cases I have taken recourse to paraphrase, rather than translate. The first word of the paragraph, for instance, literally means ‘readers of good taste’.

This sentence serves a dual function in the narrative. On the one hand, it informs the readers that the urban notion of ‘taste’ does not apply in this case, that the Bangla word for ‘buttock’, in this region, is not considered as ‘slang’, but is a part of everyday vocabulary. Thus, Mahasweta warns her readers that they cannot apply their notions of ‘taste’ in this case, that she is talking about a region which has its own code of conduct, its own language. Through this de-familiarising technique, at the very beginning of the story the narrator proclaims that she is going to talk about something that her readers are not familiar with. On the other hand, it is also explicit here that Mahasweta’s target readers have a ‘different’ notion of ‘taste’. And by explaining this difference to her “sophisticated readers” and by asking them, apparently, to excuse her use of ‘slang’, Mahasweta makes it clear that there is a cultural difference between the characters of her story and her readers, and simultaneously scoffs at her ‘sophisticated’ readers. Thus, the sentence also conveys the author’s attempt to bridge the gap between the rural
atmosphere that she has created at the very beginning and her urban “sophisticated readers”.

However, thanks to her deft narrative technique, Mahasweta does not create a self-and-other dilemma or fall into the trap of alienating the ‘other’. The story is narrated by a third person omniscient narrator mainly in mimetic mode. Almost all the incidents are depicted through the conversations of the characters, although twice in the story – once at the beginning and once at the end – the narrator interrupts the story to address the readers directly. As I have just mentioned, the first time the narrator interrupts to justify her use of abundant ‘slang’ in the story. In the last section of the story the third person omniscient narrator informs the readers that a team consisting of social workers and journalists from Kolkata went to Maina to prevent the deification of Madhumati, and Sujay, Madhumati’s brother-in-law, told them what actually happened. Here the third person narrative is suddenly interrupted in the middle of a conversation by a first person voice, which addresses the readers, and says – “ফেরার পথে এরা গানেশ ইলেকট্রনিকস বসে যা শোনে, সে কাহাঁই শোনালাম আপনাদের!” (277) [On their way back what they heard in Ganesh Electronics, is the story I have told you.] (Emphasis added). How the narrator heard what “they” heard is not very clear, unless it is inferred that the narrator herself was a member of the team. That is, she is also a part of the urban society. Simultaneously, in this sentence, the narrator becomes a character of the story, insignificant, yet a part of it. Thus she avoids creating a self-and-other dilemma. She is neither reporting the incident from outside, nor is she confined in the web of the incident. She is the one who is trying to bridge the gap
between rural and urban India. The mainly mimetic mode of the narrative also helps to avoid alienation, and the ambiguity of the narrator’s identity also serves this purpose.

The language of the story also delineates this confrontations of rural and urban India. Mahasweta’s language, in this particular story as well as in most of her writings, is remarkable not only for the use of ‘slang’, but also for the tone. The book is written in Bangla, but it is not the ‘standard’ dialect used in urban areas. Mahasweta is using a rural dialect with lots of ‘grammatical mistakes’, words pronounced differently from the ‘standard’ pronunciation, and words that are considered ‘slang’ in the ‘standard’ dialect. To a Bengali\textsuperscript{15} reader the very language would reveal the geographical and social backdrop of the story, that it is situated in a rural area and mainly among ‘lower’ class and ‘lower’ caste people. This, however, is only one aspect of the narrator’s language. There is another aspect of it, which uses highly refined classical Bangla. And yet another aspect which mixes certain English words along with the rural dialect or classical Bangla. For instance, consider the following passage:

\begin{quote}

মননা দেখানে ছিল দেখানেই আছে যে স্থান প্রাচ্যন কল্যাঙ্কনেশ্বরের কাছে অঙ্গ দুর্বিধার্মকা বলে মনে হয়, যে কারণে তিনি মননা না দুর্বত মননা বিষয় প্রচুর তথ্য সংগ্রহ করে আসছিলেন কিন্তু বাংলা ১৩১৭ সনের দৌলত ফালুন, গুরুকুল, কৃষ্ণ প্রতিপাদ ‘তাঁর মননা যায়না’ গ্রন্থটি ভেঙে যায় এবং দেই থেকে তিনি নির্দিষ্ট মননা যেয়ে ধরেন, ‘মননা সার্থক মননা’-র থানে পাঁচ টাকার নোট দিয়ে সাটতিস্পন্ন প্রণালী করেন এবং উভয় থানের সিদ্ধুর ও মাটি নিয়ে বাড়ি করেন। (243)

Maina is where it was, the place that even the former chief of Panchayet considers as extremely secluded, and therefore he has been gathering lot of information about
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} I use the word Bengali here to mean persons who are familiar with the languages and cultures of West Bengal, irrespective of their geo-political location, nationality etc.
Maina without ever having been there but in the Bengali year 1397, 16th Falguna, Friday, on the first day of a no-moon fortnight, his ego ‘I won’t go to Maina’ breaks and since then he regularly goes to Maina, worships the shrine of ‘Maina Sati Maina’ with a five-rupee note, and returns home with the sindoor and soil of the shrine.

These are the opening lines of the story. In this large sentence Mahasweta uses ‘tatsama’ words, (that is, words that are drawn into Bangla directly from Sanskrit) like sthaana, ateeva, duradhyagamya, prcura, pratipada, etc.; as well as colloquial words and words that are not pronounced in the ‘standard’ manner, like gomar, jeye thaken, thaan etc. Although the entire sentence has been narrated in a third person, omniscient voice, we can clearly distinguish two tones in this sentence. One is the narrator’s tone, which uses “standard” Bangla to inform her readers that Maina is a secluded place really far away. The other tone distinguishes itself from the former by using colloquial Bangla, as if imitating the tone of the rural people. In this tone – or, to be more precise, through this shift of tone – we can also detect a faint tinge of mockery towards the Panchayet-chief. The use of this colloquial, rural dialect, on the one hand, shows that the people of Maina does not use ‘urban’, ‘standard’ Bengali and thus substantiates the former statement that Maina is a remote village; and on the other hand, reveals the social position of the Panchayet-chief through the mockery. It mocks the Panchayet-chief because by visiting the temple of Maina sati and by buying the sindoor and the soil from the temple, the chief becomes a part of this whole scheme of deification of ‘sati’. Even more, because, so far, he has never bothered to visit Maina to do his duty, but now he goes there despite its remoteness to buy the symbolical blessings of the goddess, which also reveals that
superstitions have more power on him than duty. Thus, even in didactic mode we can hear two different tones in this story. Simultaneously, the whole sentence also reveals clearly the narrator’s stance as an outsider who is reporting the events of this remote village, sometimes with mockery, sometimes with fury.

The narrator’s position in the urban society and her act of addressing the urban readers becomes clearer from the use of English words along with classical Bangla in didactic mode, which is a common phenomenon of urban, cosmopolitan dialect. For instance consider the following sentence: এহেন দৈববাচ্ছী শুনে তৎকালীন ‘দ্রুঢ়েড় ড্যাকোর্ট’ মাশান কাপালী বিদৃঢ়তাহিত হয়। (244) [On hearing such an oracle, the then ‘dreaded dacoit’ Mashan Kapali was shocked.]. Here along with a few Sanskritised words like, daivavaanee, tatakaalina, vidyuttadita etc., Mahasweta has also used two English words, “dreaded dacoits”. This reflects urban, ‘educated’ people’s tendency to use English words within Bangla syntax.

The socio-economic condition of Maina is revealed in minute details through Mahasweta’s use of language. Present Bangla language uses several English words, and some English words are actually considered as part of Bangla vocabulary. Many people who have absolutely no knowledge of English use certain English words, without being aware of the fact that they are using English. A number of Mahasweta’s rural characters speak English in a peculiar pronunciation. Consider these examples: “যারের টাকা চেরে বিড়িটেনস করে কে ? [Who does a business with his own saved money?16] ‘জাতের সার্টিফিকেট আছে...’ [You have a caste certificate…] ‘ছেলেও আমাকে টেল আউট করে দেবে’ [My son also turns me out] ‘নে করবে টাউনের মেয়ে।’ [He’ll marry a town girl] (249). These sentences, all uttered by Karali, consist

16 Italicized words in the translation signify that they have been used in the original as well.
of a few English words like “business”, “certificate”, “get out” (turn out), and “town”. The pronunciation of the first two words, ‘business’ and ‘certificate’ differs considerably from the ‘standard’ pronunciation. The third, ‘get out’, has been used in Bangla syntax, not as a verb – as the word “get out” is normally used in English – but as an adverb. The fourth word “town”, although retains its English pronunciation and syntax, in this case, is loaded with a very different nuance. Karali says his son is going to marry a town-girl, who will never come to live in Maina. What Karali (and Mahasweta) does not spell out, but any reader familiar with the corresponding cultural context will understand, is that Maina is a remote, underdeveloped village. ‘Town’ is a place which is more developed than Maina, and therefore a girl from town is generally considered to be more ‘advanced’ than a girl from a village. Urmila, the girl that Karali’s oldest son Vijay marries, is such an advanced girl. She works in a government office, and is used to the town-culture. Therefore, she would never come to live in Maina. Thus the connotation of the word ‘town’ here is very different from its usual English connotation, and this difference, once again, draws attention to the cultural difference between a town or city, and a village.

In fact, a closer look at the English words used in this context gives interesting insight about culture and commerce. Most of the English words that Karali uses in the above sentences – business, certificate and town – are related to commerce. This signifies that Maina, despite its remoteness, has had some exposure to commercialisation, be it directly or indirectly. Even before he was introduced to the picture of Roop Kanwar, Karali (and rest of the people in Maina) was already conscious about the difference between a “town” and his village, and he also knew what a “business” is. The sentence
“Who does a business with his own saved money?” shows that Karali is not against the idea of business, but against a business which demands considerable monetary investment. So the moment he comes across the idea of a business that does not require a huge amount of monetary investment, he immediately sets off to work on it.

In the above sentences it is interesting to note that the pronunciation of certain Bangla words also diverge from the ‘mainstream’ pronunciations. For instance, ‘tyakaa’ (‘standard’ pronunciation is taakaa), ‘aache’ (‘standard’, aacche), ‘be’ (‘standard’, biye). This is also an indication of Karali’s social status, that he is an ‘uneducated’ and ‘lower’ caste man. Compare to this the language of Dayadharma Naskar, a person of comparatively higher class and caste, but barely ‘educated’, “টাকা নেবে, বে দেবে। সবসদ বিচের তুমি কে ?” (249). [You’ll take the money, and arrange for the marriage. Who are you to think about right and wrong?]. The problems of his pronunciations are depicted in words like ‘be’ (‘standard’ pronunciation Biye) and ‘bicher’ (‘standard’ pronunciation Bichaar), even if he uses the word ‘taakaa’ in a ‘standardised’ manner, and also uses a ‘tatsama’ word, ‘sadaasad’. Thus Mahasweta uses language as a tool to lay down the social backdrop of her characters.

Mahasweta’s attempt to locate Maina continues in the third chapter where she reveals the present socio-economic state of the village and substantiates why Maina is where it was:
Maina village has remained the same. ...Maina is comparatively under-developed, ...the nearest road is far away, and so is the rail station. ...it costs a lot of trouble to reach Maina. The development programmes for Maina, construction of bridges, and such plans are still being deferred, but have not been rejected. The village is secluded... the health centre is in Kalipur, the bank is in Kalipur, post office is in Kalipur too...

This impoverished condition of Maina paves the base on which Mahasweta spins her story. Probably it is this remoteness, this distance from the ‘happening crowd’ that made Maina even more prone to generate another myth in the extensive mythology of ‘sati’. It should be remembered here that Deorala was not as remote as this fictional village. However, it took several days for the rest of India to know about the incident – a point that leads us back to the question of disparity between urban and rural areas. This second chapter of the story, however, abruptly ends the description of the socio-economic conditions and goes on to introduce the major theme and most of the major characters of the story. Later the narrator again takes up this motif to relate it to the process of mythification.

The idea of a son’s marriage as a viable source of income is also introduced in the third chapter along with the myth of Roop Kanwar, through the conversation between Karali and Dayadharma Naskar, “চার চারটে ছেলের বাপ,...একেকটার বে দেবে, টাকা খেচেবে ।” (248). [You have four, four sons…you will get each of them married and wheedle out money.] Thus, in this case, dowry becomes an important device to exploit women and their families. Most importantly, in this chapter Dayadharma Naskar presents Karali the
photograph of “mahasati Roop Kanwar” (250), and Mahasweta gives a detailed description of that photograph:

Karali stares at the picture, spellbound. A girl, beautiful as a queen and dressed like a bride, was sitting on a burning pyre in a gesture of veneration. A very handsome young man dressed like a groom was lying down with his head on her lap. The woman is looking upwards, and a goddess, pleased and laughing, is pouring flowers over them from the sky.

As I have already stated, after the death, or rather, the murder of Roop Kanwar, such photographs were actually sold in the market. Such photographs and hagiographies of the sati are important devices to form ideology in favour of ‘sati’, and thereby secure public consent. Dayadharma also explained to Karali the magnanimity of this woman who has become a goddess – a story that conforms exactly to the myth of sati and the ‘miraculous’ power of ‘sat’:

17 For a detail discussion on how these photographs delineate the body of the woman through male/colonial gaze, see Sundar Rajan (1993).
This is Mahasati Roop Kanwar. ...Her story is really extraordinary! Her husband died a year ago in the month of Bhadra. Right then she was possessed by the supreme power. She did not listen to anyone. She said I shall commit sati. Don’t try to dissuade me. ...she sat on the pyre in her bridal dress with her husband’s head on her lap. A god came down showering flower on her, thousands of people saw, nobody had to light the pyre even. It bursts into flame all by itself, thanks to the power of the sati.

Here Mahasweta delineates beautifully the process of dissemination of a myth. Specifying the geo-political location of the fictional village at the beginning of the story is a very important strategy in order to analyse the process of dissemination of the sati myth and the effect of its glorification. The incident of Roop Kanwar took place in Rajasthan. Mahasweta’s story, however, is situated in West Bengal, a fact that she clarifies at the opening of the story. She depicts how the myth of Roop Kanwar came to West Bengal through anecdotes of travellers and their relatives who live in or near Rajasthan. Generally, these anecdotes were supported by the newspaper reports and pictures, as happened during the Deorala incident. Nevertheless, in an impoverished village like Maina newspapers do not have much power. Word of mouth is far stronger here.

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18 Fifth month of the Bangla calendar.
19 H.C Upreti and N. Upreti have quoted The Hindustan Times to explain the role of newspapers during the Deorala incident:

In a statement the President of All India Newspapers’ Editors’ Conference (AINEC) said that it was deplorable that sections of the Press and political parties had actually either joined in this celebration or had written in justification of it as part of the religious tradition of the people. (1991, 55)
This process of diffusion of myth through oral means also draws attention to the question of orality – oral transmission as an effective way of dissemination of a myth. In fact, orality plays a significant role in the mythmaking process. Spivak has discussed the role of rumour as a “subaltern means of communication” (1988, 21), and has also pointed out that in a country like India it is much more than a ‘subaltern’ means of communication. In India, the oral tradition of the Vedas has been the highest source of authority, not only for the “subalterns” but also for the “elites”. The speed of oral transmission expedites communication. Further, in a country like India, where the rate of illiteracy is very high, oral discourse can reach a wider audience. Thus oral discourse has some advantage over written discourse.

Oral discourse, however, cannot be really regarded ‘authentic’, for, in the process of communication, oral speech has the capacity of incorporating a number of voices into it, and finally it simply becomes a ‘public utterance’, without any signature of an author. While discussing the role of rumour in historiography, Anjan Ghosh has defined rumour as “anonymously authored speech which conveys the collective will of a section of the people, often contrary to the dominant discourses.” (2008: 1235). This absence of an author serves a double function. Firstly any utterance, very easily, can become a public utterance, and secondly anyone and everyone can edit this utterance in accordance with her/his own will/interest. This also gives individuals a scope to conceal her/his own identity in spreading rumour. In case of the sati myth a principal reason behind the glorification of the ‘sati’ has been this scope of concealing identity. It is important to recollect here that after the Roop Kanwar incident the state government of Rajasthan had to pass an ordinance banning widow immolation and also its glorification.
In her story Mahasweta highlights the journey of the myth of Roop Kanwar through oral discourses. Incidentally, the ideologies that support sexual violence like ‘sati’ are generally formed through oral discourses, mainly due to its speed and advantage of concealing the identity of the person(s) involved. Therefore, the myth of Roop Kanwar can travel from Rajasthan to West Bengal very easily. To highlight this journey the narrator specified the geographical location of her story right at the beginning. Thus mythification helps establishing ideologies and beliefs in favour of the supportive institutions.

In addition, it is also easy to alter an oral discourse in accordance with one’s purpose. For instance, while telling the myth of Roop Kanwar to Kapali, Dayadharma told him “সে তুমি বুঝবে না” (251), that he would not understand it. Thus he confirms his own class/caste/intellectual difference with Kapali, that Kapali is incapable of understanding certain things that Dayadharma can. It should be noted however, that despite knowing that Kapali will not understand it, Dayadharma relates the myth to him.

Besides emphasising oral discourses, Mahasweta also reveals the irrational nature of beliefs. After Dayadharma confirms that Kapali is incapable of understanding the nobility of Roop Kanwar, the third person narrator adds within parenthesis, “বাবু নিজেও বোঝেন নি”, that even the master, that is Dayadharma, himself has not understood it. Signifying that beliefs and ideologies, on which institutions like religion rest, are often illogical. People who disseminate it can do it consciously, or unconsciously, without even recognising the significance of the act, and the role that they come to play in strengthening the system of patriarchies. Nevertheless, the rumours/myths survive across
time and space owing to public consent, and the easy mode of dissemination, that is, the oral nature of the discourse.

The story digs out the actual reasons behind such a wide reception of the myth of ‘sati’ by linking public consent to material gain. While narrating Karali the tale of Roop Kanwar, Dayadharma also told him, how this incident has financially enriched Kanwar’s in-laws:

A sati enjoys eternal paradise along with her husband, and her natal and marital families enjoy as much bliss as wealth. They say her father-in-law has got millions of rupees! …who has not become wealthy in that village! …even the farmers there live in style like our landlords.

In fact, Mahasweta’s story centres on the theme of exploitation of women through marriage. The exploitation can be sexual or financial. Thus she actually connects the notorious ‘custom’ of sati to another notorious ‘custom’ of dowry. After introducing the motif of dowry with the photo of Roop Kanwar, the story narrates in detail the marriage of Vijay, the oldest son of Karali. Through this apparently irrelevant incident Mahasweta again draws our attention to the dowry system; particularly to the fact that it is considered as ‘natural’ by the families of the bride and the groom, as well as by the rest of the people. Thus Mahasweta reveals that dowry, like ‘sati’, is also another form of violence designed to keep the ‘other’ in control. Both these forms of exploitations work similarly
through ideologies and supportive institutions, in this case religion plus marriage; and secure public consent – which is, again, related to material gain – in its favour. Therefore, Vijay, an educated man and a government employee, does not hesitate to accept his dowry. His wife Urmila had a burn-mark on her hand. In order to ‘compensate’ for that ‘fault’ her family offered Vijay a huge dowry, which seemed very natural even to Urmila. This shows the range of public consent the ‘custom’ of dowry has received. It is also important to note here that unlike Roop Kanwar or Maina, Urmila is a “town girl”, a government employee; and yet she accepts being a part of a ‘custom’ like dowry, which once again draws attention to the question of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. However, in this case, Vijay himself consumed the entire amount of his dowry, and offered nothing to Karali.

Karali therefore, tried to satisfy his thirst for money, through the marriage of his second son Maina. Maina nevertheless, being already in love with Madhumati, forced his father to let him marry Madhumati. In order to persuade his father, Maina went to Dayadharma Naskar to seek his help, for Dayadharma is the richest person in the village, and therefore the most respected and ‘powerful’, which again alleges to the question of class hierarchy. He organised the entire village to pursue Karali in this affair. The villagers also prevented any payment of dowry in terms of cash in the marriage of Maina and Madhumati. However, Madhumati’s family had to pay the dowry in kind. And the fact that it never occurred to anybody to protest against this system highlights the power

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20 It is important to note that there are various forms of dowry. For instance, it can be in the form of cash or kind. Further, in certain societies, it is not the bride’s family who gives dowry to the groom’s family, but the groom has to provide a dowry to the bride’s family to marry her. In all cases, however, it is the bride, the woman, who becomes the means of such transactions, and a site of violence in case of any dispute regarding the dowry.
of ideologies and public consent, and also shows how such ‘customs’ have been able to survive through ages.

The third person narrator of the story narrates how Karali finds inspiration in the story of Roop Kanwar, and how he begins to invoke the woman-turned-goddess to satisfy his quest for more and more money. He kept the photograph that Dayadharma gifted him, secretly in his locker and had never told anybody anything about it. Nevertheless, it does not remain a secret. Maina relates to Dayadharma about some unknown goddess that Karali is worshipping surreptitiously,

बाबा बলचे बेटू थेरे शूर अच्छी धनी ना हल, सेवा बेटू दे की हरे ? की बले ता बुझि ना बाबू। कोंटा एक नविन ठाकुर उठेहे, बेटू आंदोलन पूड़े मरे ठाकुर हहे, शूरके सोनालना फचले निचे... (262)

Father says what’s the use of a daughter-in-law who can’t make the father-in-law affluent? I don’t understand what he says, babu. Somewhere they are worshiping a new god, the daughter-in-law immolates herself and becomes a goddess, and showers wealth on her father-in-law…

On hearing this Dayadharma immediately figured out that Karali is evoking the “sati-shakti” or the power of sati. Dayadharma also realised that it was his fault, for he presented the picture of Roop Kanwar to Karali, “अपात्तर दान करिन्च, अमित दायिक हलाम।” (262) [I’ve given it to an undeserved person. I’m responsible for it.]. Probably in order to make up for this fault he decided to help Maina. Nonetheless, despite knowing all these things at the end Dayadharma never protested against the deification of Madhumati. This
support of Dayadharma and the entire village in the process of mythification exemplifies the public consent.

Being inspired by the fact that Roop Kanwar’s death had made her in-laws millionaires, Karali killed his daughter-in-law and son. When Maina Kamle alias Madhumati was in her advanced state and was suffering from eclampsia, Karali went to visit her secretly, knowing very well that she feared him and in her present state a sudden attack of fear was very likely to cause her death. He was actually waiting for this death in order to deify her. And the situation became more favourable for him, when, after the death of Madhumati, Maina went in search of Karali to avenge Madhumati’s death. Karali killed his son and threw the dead body in a nearby pond. Then he declared his daughter-in-law a sati, consciously ignoring the fact that she died before his son, and that both these deaths are actually murders. Eventually Karali escaped legal punishment due to lack of proper evidence and established a temple called the temple of the Mahasati Maina, in the memory of his daughter-in-law, and institutionalised the myth which he constructed quite painstakingly. Not only did he himself earn a lot of money, but the temple benefited the entire village too. The village economy prospered due to the visits of pilgrims, especially during the annual fair, exactly as it has happened in ‘real’ sati-sites.

Mahasweta here implicitly focuses on the ideological formations and politics of censorship. Patriarchy has not only deployed religion in its favour but has also censored it in accordance with its own need. As I have mentioned earlier, the act of selection and rejection is an indispensable step towards forming ideologies that would cater to the
requirement of the patriarchal system. The whole village, despite being familiar with the entire history, participated in the deification of Madhumati. Religion is censured and manipulated in order to be used as a guise in this process of deification. For instance, the supporters of ‘sati’ ignore the scripture, which explicitly forbids a pregnant woman to burn herself with the husband (Mani, 1998). However, this view also indicates the treatment of women as tools of reproduction.

Mahasweta, emphasising formations of ideologies, depicts how the village, in the haste of having a myth, a goddess of their own, ignores the fact that Madhumati actually died before Maina, and after all none of these are normal deaths but murders. And in that haste the village also quickly creates a “true history” of the “Mahasati Maina”. The Kolkata-team discovered this “true history” in the form of a book that they bought from the temple, and the shop-keeper assured them that the book contained the “true history”, “ওতেই সত্যি হিসটি লেকা আছে” (277) The eagerness of this shop-keeper in establishing a “true history” is quite understandable, that a steady stream of ‘pilgrims’ in the village would benefit him. His language (several Bangla and English words pronounced differently from the ‘standard’ pronunciation) depicts that he is barely ‘educated’. Mahasweta uses this character to intensify her mockery of the society that she has embarked on right from the beginning. She does not reveal the content of the book to her readers, but after telling them the entire story she says that the “true history” is written in the book. The sentence brings to attention another aspect of censorship – construction of history – which is highlighted by the use of the adjective “true” before the word “history”.
Censorship is an indispensable step towards glorification of sati. Through this text Mahasweta depicts the danger of this glorification, a phenomenon that has been ignored by a lot of people. As the Member of the Parliament says,

A member of the Parliament saw a letter in a newspaper and said, “These dailies print *hocus-pocus* news for nothing. What do they mean by glorifying sati? Has anybody burnt Maina alive? Husband-wife, *young couple*, *love-marriage*. One died in the hospital, the other in his house. If the husband and the wife’s death *coincide*, people will say such things. Nevertheless, police are investigating. The police investigation report says the same thing.

The point that this Member of Parliament, the police and most of the people ignore – and the point that Mahasweta is trying to make in this text – is precisely about this glorification of ‘sati’, which is a culmination of beliefs, ideologies, supportive institutions and public consent. It is significant that after all no widow immolation takes place in this story. The third person narrator makes it clear that Madhumati and Maina were actually murdered by Karali. And then by glorifying these explicit murders as ‘sati’ Mahasweta tears off the religious mask of sexual violence. She explores the process of how sexual violence becomes rituals through supportive institutions and ideologies.

Mahasweta also elucidates how this glorification can engender an endless chain of myths, or rather, how glorification helps to form ideologies and beliefs in favour of
sexual violence to institutionalise it. Significantly, the last chapter of the text is titled “কাহিনীর শেষ নাই” or ‘The story is endless’. Despite the fact that the third person omniscient narrator of the story depicts very clearly that Karali was inspired by the Roop Kanwar myth and he is the one responsible for the deaths of both the Mainas, the death of Madhumati is mythified very smoothly, and the Mainas’ legendary love, marriage and death contributed to the process of mythification. It was, however, mainly Karali’s conscious effort to become a millionaire that mythified the incident, or rather, manipulated the lives of his son and daughter-in-law in order to create a myth out of their life and death. As his son Sujay said later “বাবা জেনে শুনেই নেমিলি।” (277) [Father had everything planned.] The vicious circle of mythification completes itself when in the last chapter the author depicts that in the temple yard they are selling a book titled ‘Mahasati Maina’ which includes a picture drawn by hand which is described as “স্যাম্বোলে প্রাপ্ত ছবি” (277), a picture found in dream. The picture depicts a young couple lying on a burning pyre and from above a goddess dressed like a bride who looks very much like Roop Kanwar is pouring flower over them. The third person narrator also depicts that through this temple Karali is now earning a lot of money and satisfying his long-nurtured pecuniary desire, and the last mask of religion is stripped off when Sujay says that the goddess inside the locker has been replaced by currency. Thus Mahasweta again emphasises the commercialisation of ‘religion’. Suandar Rajan has explained how the political and economic reasons bound in the cover of religion have actually created a “cult of sati” in India:

…what worries women’s groups is not an epidemic of sati
…but the disturbing implications of the recent phenomenon
of the glorification of *sati* through temples and annual fairs. ...Annual fairs bring prosperity to villages that have been sites of past and recent *sati*. As is clear, religious sanction, political complicity and economic benefits have combined to encourage a cult of *sati* in a climate of overall oppression of women. (1993: 293-294)

Mahasweta has highlighted this “cult of sati” in various other stories. In another story, ‘Satiranir ghaat’, she depicts how a dying husband expressed his last wish, that his youngest wife should die with him, only to avenge her ‘infidelity’. In this case the young wife was finally saved by her original lover, the nephew of her husband. Nevertheless, not all wives were such fortunate. In one of her novels, titled *Sati*, Mahasweta emphasises the wastage of potential that is caused by glorifying sati. Unlike the other two stories this text is set in an urban backdrop, and shows that women can be exploited in various ways, other than burning. The novel depicts the life of a woman named ‘Sati’, the wife of a great author and a communist activist. However, this author and activist never permitted his wife to continue her writing which was also her passion; because she happened to be a better author than him and this activist-author was too proud to accept that his wife would become more famous than him. In this conflict between home and the world, Sati, like most ‘middle class’ Indian women, chose her home, and gave up writing. This is not a case of what we commonly understand as ‘sati’. As in ‘Maina sati’, here too, no woman was burnt alive. In fact, Sati in this novel is a surviving widow. However, the title invokes automatically this horrible custom, which is enhanced by the plot. A close analysis reveals that there are indeed some similarities. The novel does not depict the physical death of a woman, but an intellectual death, a sheer wastage of potential. This
woman might have turned out to be a great author, probably greater than her husband. By
giving up her passion for writing she not only wasted her own talent, but also deprived
the society in general. And it is popular ideologies, beliefs in certain false notions like
‘fidelity’ that prompted Sati to give up her writing as a proof of her love for her husband.
Thus the system of patriarchy has developed its own devices to dominate over the world,
and most of the stories of Mahasweta Devi actually uncover these devices.

It is, however, very interesting to note that despite knowing the incident of the
Mainas only too well almost all the villagers, except a few members of the family,
participated in the process of mythification. In explanation to this strange participation
Mahasweta deftly unfolds the reasons behind this mythification. The one she has been
hinting at right from the beginning, is articulated clearly by the shop-keeper – “মানা হতে
পাঁজর চায়ারা ফিরছে কেমনে কেমনে।” (277) [It is due to Maina, that the village is prospering
gradually.]. Sujay, Madhumati’s brother-in-law, although tried to protest against the
deification of his sister-in-law, also knew the real reasons behind it – “মানার রাঙ্গা হবে,
পাঞ্চায়ত করবে। তিনটে ব্রিজ পাকা হবে, জমির দাম বাড়বে, নত কী হবে!” (276-77) [Roads will be
constructed in Maina by the Panchayet. Three bridges will be modernised, the value of
land will increase, and many more things will happen!] He was afraid that his open
protest against the deification might be regarded as an act of impeding the prosperity of
Maina. As I have mentioned in connection to the Deorala incident, similar things
happened there – “In the name of tradition, a whole industry of Sati developed.” (Upreti
& Upreti, 1991: 110). This leads us back to the question of ‘development’. The State has
neglected the socio-economic and technological development of rural areas. The rural
areas are, on the one hand, too remote to receive any benefits of the city-centric socio-economic or technological developments, and on the other hand, too exposed – directly or indirectly – to the temptations of such ‘developments’. Thus these areas cannot resist a chance to prosper, even if it is at the cost of a murder. However grotesque it may sound, there is no way to deny the fact that long since ‘sati’ was related to economic gain. Rammohun Roy highlighted this point in his pamphlets in the 19th century. Later Sangari and Vaid (1991) have analysed several incidents of ‘sati’ in the independent India, to depict how all these incidents are related to economic gain. They have shown how the ideological formations behind ‘sati’ are actually sponsored by some business groups:

The colluding role of a section of the corporate business sector, comprised of leading industrialists, entrepreneurs and of traders hailing from the Shekhawat area has been crucial to the recurrence of widow immolation in the region. …It is the latter (urban traders) along with metropolitan entrepreneurs who have heavily financed ‘sati’ worship. It is through such financing that worship has been extensively institutionalised in recent decades within the region and to a lesser extent, in different parts of the country. Institutional modes, centred around newly-built temples, have widened the spatial reach and diversified the channels for propagation of ideologies and beliefs in widow immolation as ‘sati’ through holding ritual ceremonies, annual religious fairs, welfare activities, the induction of print, audio and visual media. (WS-9)

Such sponsorship of ‘sati’ actually helps the concerned village to ‘develop’. At the beginning of the story the narrator related that the development projects for Maina village have not been rejected, but are being deferred by the government. The shrine of
‘Mahasati Maina’ accelerates these projects. Thus supposedly neutral institutions like State also contribute – willingly or not – in the process of strengthening the system of patriarchies. The bifurcation of the villagers – that is, those who participated in the mythification and those who protested against it – represents the conflicting tendencies within a State.

The ‘custom’ of sati is generally regarded as a ‘tradition’, but Mahasweta has deftly shown the process of fabrication of ‘traditions’. Right from the beginning of the story Mahasweta has addressed the question of ‘tradition’. Significantly, the title of this story echoes the title of a Medieval Bangla text, *Sati Maina*, or *Mainasat*. This text was composed jointly by Doulat Kaji and Alaol, two poets of the Aracan court around twelfth century AD. It eulogised the chastity and singular love of Maina for her husband Lore – who renounced Maina and went to marry another woman – exemplifying a model of ‘ideal’ woman. As discussed earlier, in some of her texts Mahasweta has challenged severely the very notion of ‘fidelity’. However, it should be noted that in ‘Maina sati’ Mahasweta has never brought up the question of fidelity. Here she has portrayed widow immolation as a murder, stripped off any religious/traditional mask. And her allusion to *Mainasat* highlights this absence of the question of fidelity in the text. ‘Maina sati’ also calls forth the story of *Dharma Mangal* – a *mangal kavya*\(^{21}\) that introduces worship of a new god called Dharma – was also very famous in medieval Bengal, which talks about the king of a region called Maina.

\(^{21}\) A genre in Bangla literature, that narrates in verse the introduction of some new gods or goddesses, mostly a goddess. These long poems are composed in simple meters, and meant to be sung.
By naming the village and the main protagonists as Maina, the text actually evokes this long tradition in Bangla literature; the ‘tradition’ of construction of an ‘ideal’ monogamous woman who has unconditional love for her husband, and also the tradition of introducing new gods or goddesses. The allusion to the _mangal kavya_ genre becomes more prominent in the second chapter, which narrates the history of the Naskar and the Kapali families, where Mahasweta explicitly refers to the worship of goddess Kali. This Kali ordered people to worship her, which again, was a common formula for the _mangal kavyas_. Most significantly, only in this section of her story Mahasweta has used a few lines of verses, and she heightens her allusion to the _mangal kavyas_ by composing these verses in a meter called _payar_ – the same meter that has been used in all the _mangal kavyas_. By drawing upon the _mangal kavyas_ Mahasweta actually brings into limelight the mythification – the introduction of a new goddess, Mahasati Maina. Simultaneously, the text also stresses on the flexibility of the institution of ‘Hindu’ religion, which is known to have incorporated umpteen gods and goddesses within its canon; and therefore, should not have any problem in accommodating Rani Sati, Roop Kanwar, Mahasati Maina and so on and so forth.  

It is also very significant that all the chapters of the story are called ‘ullasa’, which is a direct allusion to Tantric philosophy, one of the very important philosophies of India. The word ‘ullasa’ literally means ecstasy, and various Tantric texts use this word as chapter heading. In fact, Mahasweta depicts Karali’s forefathers as practitioners of the

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22 This flexibility has its own merits and demerits, and throughout the ages has been used to serve various ends. To cite one such example, the 11th century poet Jayadeva in his famous book _The Gitagovindam_ portrayed Buddha as an incarnation of Krishna. For details on _The Gitagovindam_, see Mukhopadhyay (1977).
Tantric cult. According to the Tantric philosophy, ‘ullasa’ is the state of divine ecstasy that the body feels when it unites with the Divine. Thus it regards body as a site of divine communion. However, the Tantric sadhana is heavily male-centric and deploys female body as an instrument to achieve the divine bliss. Mahasweta’s mockery of the ‘religious traditions’ becomes even more prominent by this Tantric allusion. And her story also depicts how exploitation of female body continues under various guises.

In the text Mahasweta has also narrated several incidents which are, apparently, irrelevant to the story of the Mainas, but indispensable to explore the process of mythification. The second chapter depicts the history of Dayadharma’s family, how Dayadharma’s father Shaktidharma actually killed his father Kalidharma. Significantly, after Kalidharma’s death his widow did not die with him, but declared that her dead husband, appearing in her dream had ordered her not to follow the rigorous rites of a Hindu widow. This reveals that widow immolation has not been a common ‘traditional’ practice. The third person narrator also indicates that the son that Kalidharma’s wife gave birth after eight months of this declaration was actually a son of Shaktidharma, drawing attention to the threat of ‘uncontrolled’ sexuality of women. Ironically, this Shaktidharma’s brother Dayadharma is the man who introduced the picture of Roop Kanwar as a sacred goddess, and also sowed the idea of getting rich through dowry in Karali’s mind. The narrator also narrates in detail the marriage of the three sisters of Madhumati, another incident not directly related to the main plot of the story.

23 The philosophy, although rich in its theoretical approach, became very infamous during medieval period, mainly because of its extremism. For a concise discussion of the Tantric philosophy, see Pratyagatmananda (2001).
Nonetheless, through these incidents it is revealed that even dowry is not mandatory in marriage. The three sisters of Madhumati got married without any dowry at all. Karali, however, being inspired by the Roop Kanwar myth and stimulated by his own greed, killed his daughter-in-law and son in order to encash their death, under the guise of ‘religious traditions’. Thus these apparently irrelevant incidents point out the construction of ‘tradition’ through ideologies, beliefs and institutions, moulding or mythifying real incidents.

In this text, by highlighting the process of mythification, Mahasweta actually contrasts the ‘contemporary’ society to the ‘traditional’, and elucidates how a real incident is mythified and then the myth is institutionalised. She has done it not only with the content, but also with the form of the story. On the one hand, she strives to situate her text in the long and rich tradition of Bangla literature; on the other hand, she depicts the process of construction of a ‘tradition’. This simultaneous process confirms that she is not rejecting tradition, but highlighting the exploitation that has been continued for ages in the name of ‘tradition’. Actually, she views tradition from a different perspective, a feminist perspective. It is the feminist perspective that gave her distinct insights into these exploitations. By sticking to these different feminist perspectives, she reveals to her “sophisticated readers” the exploitations in the name of a ‘tradition’, the very process of construction of a ‘tradition’, construction of history, through her fiction.