CHAPTER FIVE

Living on the Edge: Women in the writings of Mahasweta Devi
WOMEN WRITING IN INDIA

Unlike South Africa, where the tradition of women writers writing women subjects has a history dating back only to Olive Schreiner, in India there has been a long history of women writers, with a number of hymns in the Rig Veda also written by women. Of course, as already discussed in the introductory chapter, many critics have rightly refused to acknowledge a single category as Indian literature. The wide variety of languages – 22 official languages and approximately 1632 minor languages and dialects is testimony to the fact that a single unified category is not possible. Western Indologists have always preferred to firstly deny the existence of the rich Indian literary and cultural traditions and secondly, attempted to create a “perception of Indian literature based on a pan-Indian language” which was Sanskrit. Indian critics such as Sisir Kumar Das have opined that while there are dangers of accepting a single language as the “true vehicle” of Indian literature, there are still “unities” within these literatures in terms of themes, genres and symbols that bring one nearer “to the idea of an Indian literature.”

In comparison to Bessie Head, and her tumultuous life, Mahasweta Devi had a fairly comfortable upbringing. She was born in Dhaka, now part of modern day Bangladesh in 1926 to parents who were both writers. Her father, Manish Ghatak was a poet and novelist who belonged to a unity band called the Kallob group. Her mother, Dharitri Devi, also a writer and social worker, spent many years addressing social issues affecting the people of India. Both parents were highly influential and provided Mahasweta with a writing foundation and sense of responsibility for social concerns, which has remained throughout her life. In fact, she comments on the responsibility of the writer towards society:

I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty towards society. Yet I don’t really know why I do these things. The sense of duty is an obsession. I must remain accountable to myself.

1 Sharmishtha Panja. *Many Indias, many Literatures*. p.1
2 Ibid.
3 Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. *Imaginary Maps*. The Author in Conversation. p. ix
Mahasweta’s adolescent years saw her gradual involvement with the social and political theatre of colonial India, when theatre groups like Gananatya aimed to take contemporary theatre and street plays into rural Bengal in the 1930’s and 1940’s. After completing her education with a Masters Degree in English, she held several jobs in the central government, was a school teacher, lectured in a college from 1964-1987 and also served as a reporter of a Bengali daily newspaper from 1983-1984. Mahasweta Devi has been the recipient of several literary prizes. She was awarded the Jnanpith, India's highest literary award in 1996. In the following year, she was one of the recipients of the Magsaysay award, considered to be the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize. In 2003, she was awarded with the Officer des Arts et des Lettres (Officer of Arts and Literature), France's second highest civilian award and in 2006, she was awarded the Padma Vibhushan, the second highest civilian award in India. Most recently, she, along with Habib Tanvir, has been appointed as a National Research Professor, in recognition of their unique contributions to literature.

Mahasweta Devi today stands as a distinct category in Indian literature. Unlike her contemporaries, especially those writing in Bengali, her identity as a woman is not integral to her writings. Her subjects and language have transcended the boundaries of stereotype and gender. Her women are strong; they have a tremendous sense of self-respect and are prepared to fight all their battles to the end, even if the end is death. On the other hand, her contemporaries and seniors document a different woman’s world altogether. Giribala Devi, Jyotirmoyee Devi, Ashapurna Devi, Lila Majumdar, Pratibha Basu’s women are all limited and constrained by the constructed walls of society. The politics of women’s oppression and subjugation is totally absent from their writings. Maitrayee Chattopadhyay writes:

In Pratham Pratisruti and Suvarnalata, Ashapurna Devi has highlighted the woman’s fight for emancipation. But her defensive outlook could not accept the new, modern woman. Thus, the sad consequence of women’s empowerment is seen in Bokul Kothai. Pratibha Basu and Lila Majumdar have written love stories to highlight the barrenness of the woman’s life. Although Bani Roy’s writings were different. The problems of women highlighted by her were not issues that the women of the period were too
concerned about, and thus she has largely remained neglected.\(^4\) (translation mine)

All these writers limit themselves within the social boundaries constructed by patriarchal society. In this respect, Mahasweta Devi is different. “If the name of the author were unknown, one would not know whether the author was male or female.”\(^5\) The world of Mahasweta’s women is not limited to cooking, eating or sleeping. Their struggle for life and existence and for justice and identity continues alongside their men and alongside thousands of others in the same position. Beyond their social identities of wife, lover, daughter and mother, these women are human beings inhabiting and struggling for their rights in a society far removed from the purview of the urban middle class.

A prolific and best-selling author of novels and short stories in Bengali, Mahasweta is equally well known for her pioneering work among the most down-trodden in the Indian society – the dispossessed tribal population and the marginalised segments such as the landless labourers of eastern India. The quarterly Bortika that she has been editing since 1980 has been a mouthpiece for these people. Her writings are based upon meticulous research, conducted sometimes via unconventional means (such as oral traditions), into the history of the people she writes about. Her writings can be divided into three phases. Her early works like Jhansir Rani (1956), Amrita Sanchay (1964), Titu Mir and Andha Malik (1967) have the British colonial period as the backdrop. The next phase of her writings is greatly influenced by the Naxalite movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s. As she admits in an interview, she feels “an urge and an obligation”\(^6\) to document this major event, which had begun as a rural revolt by landless workers, peasants and tribes against the landlords and moneylenders and had its roots in the Naxalbari regions of West Bengal. This movement later spread to the urban areas of Bengal, where it gained tremendous support, especially from the student community. Works like Hajaar Churasir Maa (Mother of 1084) are located around the Naxal movement. The third phase of Mahasweta Devi’s writings stem from her work as an activist for the various tribes of India and her fight for their social, political and economic advancement. She characterises these communities as

\(^4\) Maitrayee Chatterjee. ‘Mahaswetaar Nari Jagat.’ Korak. p.2
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Samik Bandopadhay. Five Plays. p.vii

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the "suffering spectators of the India that is travelling towards the twenty first century." The women protagonists in many of her works articulate her concerns and obvious displeasure with the prevailing establishment. These stories "are often located in communities of the fringe, outside the dominant upper caste milieu" and "this life on the fringes creates a culture of the fringe, a culture often defined...in terms of rituals, foods and practices that lie outside the pale of respectable existence." 8

A number of themes run through the writings of Mahasweta Devi. It is also not the case that all her works have women protagonists. But as discussed in Chapter 3, women in Indian society are certainly in a much tougher situation as not only do they have to battle social prejudices and 'imaging' but also have to counter such images by participating more proactively in the struggles of society. Feminism for such women is certainly very different from the western ideals of feminism. One of the themes in which this becomes all the more apparent is in Mahasweta's discussion on motherhood.

One of the major pitfalls of the position accorded to women in Indian society, irrespective of their socio economic identity – wherein they have been simultaneously marginalised and deified – is that although a woman may be reviled and considered an outcaste from mainstream society, it is her role as a mother that gives her a unique position that no one can replicate. The fact that the cause of the dispossessed and the travails of the marginalised have gained central focus in Mahasweta Devi's writings has often tended to blur out other important aspects – for instance – motherhood. Radha Chakraborty writes:

From Jashoda in *The Breast Giver* to the unnamed mother in *Jamunaboti's Mother*, her fiction offers an array of maternal figures as well as diverse figurative constructions of the maternal idea. (my emphasis) 9

By underlying a distinction between motherhood and the idea of motherhood, Mahasweta Devi therefore seeks to juxtapose emotions of motherhood with the constructed notion of motherhood:

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7 Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. op cit. Introduction.p.xi
8 Samik Bandopadhyay. op cit. p.147
9 Radha Chakraborty In the name of the mother. Introduction. p.i
These works demonstrate how the traditional deification of motherhood can often conceal a collective attempt to circumscribe women within socially prescribed roles while denying them the right to articulate their individual needs and desires.10

Writings on motherhood, especially in the Indian context, have tended to associate the mother, not just with divinity but also with the Nation. In fact, in the nationalist agenda, “the figure of the woman which had the most emotional potency was that of the mother.”11 There always existed a dichotomy between the traditional, loyal wife and the ‘veerangana’12 but the image of the mother cut across all boundaries and permeated all sections of society. Three different discourses worked in tandem: the discourse of the family (the biological mother), the discourse of religion (devi or the goddess) and the discourse of the nation (the motherland).13 And each of these discourses contained within it, a series of further multiple discourses. The colonial period, with its distinction between the coloniser and the colonised had already intensified questions of power, identity and hegemony. Partha Chatterjee’s discourse on Indian nationalism argues that the incorporation of women in the nationalist movement in the colonial period did not conform to any gendered derivative. The primary objective of Indian nationalism was to fashion an identity within which the autonomy of the nation could be located, and it was the Indian woman who was entrusted with this responsibility. The social reform movement of the nineteenth century, as discussed in Chapter 2, did try and rewrite history from the Indian perspective, but as already stated, such rewritings were ultimately a part of the larger agenda wherein Indian men attempted to assert their masculinity, having been portrayed as effeminate by the colonial agenda. The image of women in the nineteenth century at times attained a mythical stature – “taking real power from women and creating a myth about her strength and power,”14 especially when it came to constructing the image of the mother. Radha Chakraborty comments:

The narrative of nationalism sought to create an abstract, homogenised figure of woman as mother, to serve a particular political agenda, without any

10 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Jasodhara Bagchi, quoted in Radha Chakraborty. op cit. p.viii
concern for the needs of actual women in different sectors of society. Motherhood was taken as a figure for the spiritual essence of national selfhood, as distinct from the material sphere of progress...in the definition of motherhood that has evolved in the decades following Independence, the elision of femininity and maternity has becoming a determining feature. Motherhood is deified, but paradoxically, the myth of the mother's quasi-divine status is premised upon her capacity for voluntary self-sacrifice.  

A number of critics and theorists have written about the constructions of motherhood and the maternal idea. In her classic work Of Woman Born, Adrienne Rich states that “patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms; therefore they are treated as axioms, as 'nature' itself, and not open to question...”  

The book has been pivotal to mothering theories in the manner in which it investigates women's experience with their children and relates it to their subordination in society. Rich criticises the ideological institution of motherhood by arguing that by commandeering the birth process, male institutions had devalued motherhood and kept women in an inferior position. At the same time, Rich extols the practice of mothering. Mothering, as a female defined and centred experience, may actually, Rich stated, be a site of empowerment for women. 'Motherhood' is almost invisible in feminist texts, even though mothering plays a prominent role in women's lives. Psychoanalytic studies combined with feminist studies have proved the most useful in analysing the representations of motherhood and the construction of the maternal role. Psychoanalytic theorists have examined the mother's unconscious actions, exploring her deep attachment to her children while sociologists have attempted to trace her actual experience of child rearing, identifying the way that society and culture have affected her behaviour and her attitudes. Feminists, especially since the beginning of the liberation movement in the late 1960s, have been concerned with the subordination of women in the mothering role and have offered impassioned and often contradictory ways of thinking about motherhood. Freud's ideas of differences between male and female behaviour have provided a starting point for many theories on motherhood. He argues that as the parent with

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15 Radha Chakraborty. op cit.
16 Adrienne Rich. Of Women Born. p.43
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
whom the child shared the closest love relationship in his infancy, the mother occupies a central position in the child's world. However, as the child grows up, during the Oedipal phase, the boy renounces the love of his mother in fear of his more powerful father while the girl also moves away from her mother, seeing her as powerless and 'castrated'. The notion that all women desire motherhood was not universally accepted. Simone De Beauvoir, writing in France in 1949, claims that a women's ability to give birth is the source of her subordination. As she states, "One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman." For her, motherhood was a sign that women were twice doomed – biologically, during pregnancy when they lacked control over their bodies; and socially, when children restricted them to the home. The same view is subsequently expressed in different forms by other feminist critics like Betty Friedan and Shulamith Firestone. Both argue that the site of women's oppression can be located in her role as a child bearer and rearer, a role into which they are often pressurised as a part of their 'duty.'

French theorist Julia Kristeva posits a more complex theory of motherhood. She believes that motherhood is associated with a repressed desire to recover the maternal body. And in doing so, she looks at the earliest discourses of maternity, prior to the stage when supposedly Freud's Oedipal complex sets in. She calls for a new discourse of maternity that acknowledges the importance of the maternal function in the development of subjectivity and in culture. As a woman and a mother, a female is sexed, but not as long as she fulfils the maternal function. She also posits the view that the maternal body operates between nature and culture, and is not just limited to biology and nature. In fact, Kristeva uses the maternal body as a model for all subjective relations. Like the maternal body, each one of us is what she calls a subject-in-process. As subjects-in-process we are always negotiating the other within, that is to say, the return of the repressed. Like the maternal body, we are never completely the subjects of our own experience.

Given the above context, it is perhaps not difficult to locate Mahasweta Devi's depiction of motherhood in her works. Motherhood is an integral part of society, and her mothers are very much a part of the milieu around them. What she seeks to do however is to destroy the homogenisation that surrounds the entire concept of

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20 Simone de Beauvoir. The Second Sex.
motherhood especially in India, where “motherhood is deified, but paradoxically, the myth of mother’s quasi-divine status is premised upon her capacity for voluntary self-sacrifice.” 22 For Mahasweta Devi, the truth lies in between the “hypocrisy so latent in discourses of maternity” and the values of love, care and responsibility... traditionally associated with the maternal role.” 23 In fact, motherhood/mothering often forms the central experience through which her women are awakened to a greater understanding of society and its evils, and it provides them with the strength to sustain themselves and fight for justice even against the toughest odds. She portrays a wide variety of mothers – from the poor yet caring mother – the stereotype of ideal motherhood – the spiritual mother, the exploitative mother and even the professional mother. The relationship that each mother shares with her child is also unique. Some are willing to sacrifice everything for their children, as in Jamunaboti’s Maa and Chinta while for others, motherhood is like any other business or profession – where emotions are measured in quantities and motherhood is seen in terms of a business proposition. For example, in Saanjhshokaaler Maa, the success of the ‘divine’ mother during the day is premised on her denial of affection to her son during those hours:

‘Don’t call me Ma, son, my own dear son.’
‘Never?’
‘No, son. Late at night, before sunrise, call me Ma. After sundown too you can call me Ma.’
‘Only at dawn and dusk, right, Ma?’
‘Yes, son.’
‘At dusk and dawn you’re Ma. And in the daytime you’re Thakurni?’
‘Yes, son. I’m your dusk to dawn mother, your Saanjhshokaaler Ma.’ 24

In Stanadayini or The Breast Giver, motherhood takes on a totally different dimension – of the professional mother – whose only means of survival lies in her ability to produce children and be in a process of continuous lactation. In fact, ‘motherhood’ and ‘mothering’ here merge into one another. It is only through the biological action of ‘motherhood’ that enables Jashoda to indulge in ‘mothering.’ Motherhood here includes in its purview all the children – own and fostered – that

21 Kelly Oliver. ‘Kristeva and feminism.’ www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/Kristeva.html
22 Radha Chakraborty op cit.
23 Ibid.
24 Mahasweta Devi. ‘Saanjhhshokaler Maa.’ tr. Radha Chakraborty. In the Name of the Mother. p.2
have suckled at her breasts. Yet another mother-child relationship is portrayed in *Hajaar Churashir Maa*. Mahasweta Devi describes this story as “the awakening of an apolitical mother.”25 Sujata, the mother, comes to really know and recognise her son, as she pieces together his life on his second death anniversary. The mother-son bond in this novella is stronger in death than in life, and in the process 1084 becomes a metaphor – not just Brati’s corpse number, but also a random figure for the thousands of nameless young men and women killed by police due to alleged extremist activities during the Naxal movement. Sujata is just not the mother of Brati, in her understanding; she becomes the mother of all these young men and women. And in *Bayen*, similarly, Chandi feels for all the dead children that she has buried as a part of her profession, after she has a child of her own:

Because of her own child, she now felt a deep pain for every dead child.26

Yet, her sudden ostracisation from the village community means that she cannot share the normal mother-son relationship with Bhagirath. He is forbidden from acknowledging her as his mother, and by the time he is finally able to do so, it is too late. In most stories, what is striking is the woman’s consciousness of her role as mother – both as an individual and as a part of the larger community. And in the process, there takes place an internalisation between the processes of ‘motherhood’ and ‘motherland’, in which the three categories that stated by Meenakshi Mukherjee merge together. At the same time, one notices a critique of this kind of an attitude towards motherhood in Mahasweta’s writings. It is ironic that the very people who deify the Indian mother and put her on a pedestal are also the same parasites who exploit it and suck its blood. A case in point is *Douloti*.

What links all these women together is their suffering of political, economic and social oppression, which in turn is reflected in their relationship with their children. As part of the community in which they live, the women are in a position of continual subservience. And if they happen to belong to the lower castes this subservience is multiplied many times over.

In *Shaajhshokaaler Maa* it is the community that actually constructs Jati ‘Thakurni’’s’ divinity. The duality that exists between divinity and motherhood is most vividly and ironically presented in this story. In her son Sadhan’s innocuous comment “when its dusk, Thakurni turns into Maa,” lie the contradictions of society, which continually forces the woman to make choices, in which even her son unknowingly has become a victim. The primary reason given for Jati’s transformation, divinity as well as her ultimate illness and death is her economic condition. It is ironic that in a country where people even today mint money through divinity, Jati dies as a result of sustained starvation. Jati’s divinity is obviously fake, and it takes her some time to begin believing in it. It is a cloak of survival against the lustful male predators, ever looking for an opportunity to take advantage of her situation. In fact, the whole process of “becoming” ‘Thakurni’ begins with a trident and a red cloth that a sanyasi presents to her as she prepares to leave his shelter and travel to the village. The Sanyasi also advises Jati to call herself ‘Jati Thakurni’. The cloth and the trident instantly transform Jati from human to divine; the lustful looks are replaced by respect, and she is overwhelmed at the hypocrisy of society:

> How the people respected her, honoured her. Was this what it was like, then?
> To move up in life? Alas, if only Utsav were present, he could see how no court, no official paper had been needed. Only a cloth and a trident had promoted Jati’s caste, elevated her class.28

Gradually, Jati begins to believe in her divine status. In fact it acts as a saviour for mother and son, protecting them from the unwanted attention of the opposite sex as well as providing them the means of sustenance:

> After much thought she became Thakurni. Or else Jati could not have saved her idiot son. She could not have saved herself from the eyes of men.29

What Mahasweta Devi clearly implies is that women are exploited by society from all sides – and in order to survive she has to take the protection of divinity, even at the cost of all other relationships. Jati too, has no other option. But even this is not enough to sustain mother and son. Jati dies a starvation-induced death, caused by

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27 Mahasweta Devi. ‘Shaajhshokaaler Maa.’ tr. Radha Chakraborty. *In the name of the Mother.* p. 6
28 Ibid., p. 25
29 Ibid.
“eating nothing, starving, feeding all the scraps to Sadhan”\textsuperscript{30} which has caused her nerves to dry up. And herein lies the dichotomy between motherhood and mothering. As a mother, Jati’s natural instincts are of self-sacrifice for her son’s well being; as a Thakurni she exerts tremendous power among all her followers. \textit{Shaanjshokaaler Maa} – the title thus takes on added meanings by exhibiting the dichotomy between motherhood and mothering.

The quack Anadi daktar is Jati’s foster son. Apart from Sadhan he is the only person who addresses her as ‘Mother’, notwithstanding the fact that he does so only when he has sinned. Mahasweta Devi takes great pains to note how the Brahmin doctor pays obeisance at the feet of the divine:

Anadi daktar’s prosperity was predicted by Jati Thakurni. It was for that reason perhaps, or perhaps for the fear of his sins, of all the foeticides, abortions, fake certificates, that the Brahman Anadi daktar pays obeisance at Jati Thakurni’s feet with offerings of oil – coconut – rice – salt.\textsuperscript{31} (emphasis mine)

The Brahmin at the feet of the outcast(e)/tribal – the irony is difficult to miss. Equally difficult to miss is the fact that Thakurni survives because of the Brahmin’s alms. Therefore, while Anadi’s methods are severely criticised, Mahasweta Devi cannot help but deny the ‘privileged’ position to him as a Brahmin and affirm the casteist position – and this is where her own position as an upper middle class and forward caste writer comes into play. The true facet of Anadi’s character only comes to the fore after Jati’s death. By giving Sadhan a bowl of rice for the ceremonies, he absolves himself of all responsibilities and severs links with Jati’s family. Internally, Anadi may have always feared that Jati would have exposed his secrets and criminal deed to the police at any point of time; however, with her death, he no longer has to worry, the bowl of rice absolves him of all bonds and responsibilities.

For Sadhan, his mother represents his entire universe, and he is unable to comprehend a life without her. Jati has fulfilled the duties expected of her as a mother, by feeding her son to her utmost capability while she lived. All that the idiot Sadhan knows about life is that his mother was able to control his insatiable hunger

\textsuperscript{30} ibid., p.9

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by giving up her portion of food for him. He cannot see why this has to change after her death, and that is why he sees nothing wrong in snatching away the rice that had been kept aside for the shraddh rites. His mother had sacrificed her food for her son's sake all through her life; he sees no reason why she should not 'sacrifice' this final 'feast' as well. And as he begins to cook the rice, he once again remembers his mother – the mother may die, but the bond she shares with her children lives on, even after death.

Another angle to divine motherhood is described in Sindhubala. Unlike Jati, Sindhubala is not beautiful. Like Jati, Sindhu ‘becomes’ divine through circumstances beyond her control. She had entered the world feet-first and hence, her feet were deemed as auspicious. The mother-child relationship here has a double dimension. On the one hand, is the biological relationship between Sindhu and her mother, on the other, is the symbiotic relationship between Sindhu and the children she treats. Sindhu’s mother has always been critical of her daughter’s looks – "bulging forehead, snub nose, black skin" — and has lamented the fact that she has no male child. Sindhu’s bad luck continues even after marriage. Unable to stand her ugliness, her husband leaves her for other women and Sindhu ultimately has to return to her parents’ home. Then one day, Manudasi the midwife, brings a woman to Sindhu’s home. This woman is looking for someone like Sindhu, i.e. someone born with her feet coming out first. It was said that such people "could keep children safe from ailments by touching them with her feet." Initially hesitant, Sindhu does as asked and is rewarded with a gamcha, some coins and some batashas. Sindhu’s mother, clearly business-minded, is quick to grab the opportunity. She realises that Sindhu’s ‘divinity’ would be a helpful aid in managing the household expenses. She controls the finances and the money earned out of Sindhu’s ‘divine’ deeds, and also sets up a Khoi-muri-chhola shop in one corner of the home. As she says:

\begin{quote}
Work hard never rest  
Your fortunes will prosper  
Your home’ll be blest.  
\end{quote}

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31 Ibid., p.4  
32 Mahasweta Devi. ‘Sindhubala.’ tr. Radha Chakraborty. In the name of the Mother. p.34  
33 Ibid., p.35  
34 Ibid., p.36  
\end{flushright}
Jati Thakurni uses her divinity as a medium through which she can save herself and her son from being exploited, physically and sexually. However, Sindhubala’s divinity is forced upon her. And in saving the lives of others, she has no choice but to suppress her own physical and emotional needs. It is only through such self-denial that she can succeed. Radha Chakraborty comments:

Like a fruitless tree, Sindhu craves for the fulfillment that her plain appearance has placed beyond her reach. Discarded by her husband and exploited by her mother, she awakens too late to the realization that her divine status is premised upon hollow self-denial. 35

Sindhubala’s’ only fault seems to be her inherent ugliness which has deprived her of all the normal desires and cravings associated with womanhood and motherhood. In both these stories, Mahasweta Devi is clearly critiquing the process of female deification in society, and the manner in which they are at times forced to take on roles to ensure their own survival in an increasingly harsh and inhuman world. It is perhaps not coincidental that all these women are economically deprived and belong to the backward castes. Divinity becomes a market proposition, and a tool for survival, a far cry from the original defied woman in terms of the nation and the motherland.

This is clearly apparent in the novella, *Douloti, the Bountiful*. Here, Douloti is not deified as the Nation, rather the bruising and battering she undergoes from different quarters, culminating in her death, becomes a metaphor for the oppressed and exploited country, where the rich become richer and the poor remain poor. *Douloti* is a story of bonded labour in Palamu, a long-standing system in which the women are the major sufferers. Women, before or after marriage are taken away when their husband or father has borrowed money from the money-lending forward castes. They are taken straight to brothels in the big cities to work out that sum. And the sum is never repaid because the account is calculated on compound interest. 36 Mahasweta Devi states how, even today, the lives of bullocks are considered superior to the lives of lower caste bonded labourers:

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35 Radha Chakraborty. op cit. p.x
36 Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. *Imaginary Maps*. Introduction. p.xiii
These bullocks are costly. If I send a bullock, it will suffer in the heat and it might collapse. But these bonded labourers don’t count for much a man can be wasted, a bullock cannot. 37

The story of Douloti is where multiple levels of oppression and marginalisations – caste, class, gender – merge together. Douloti is sent by her father to the service of prostitution in order to pay off his debt to the upper caste master. And, as Mahasweta Devi comments, this is nothing new. Although bonded labour was officially abolished in 1975, it has been replaced with a more inhuman form of exploitation. People are now taken away to large towns and cities from the villages on the promise of ‘good jobs’ and then kept captive. For the villagers, there is no alternative. They may have got land ownership after the abolition of bonded labour system, but this land is basically uncultivable. With no water for drinking and irrigation, and no other employment opportunities from Government sources, there is no choice but to become a kamiya. 38 Even today therefore, slavery is being practiced by the powerful and the mighty in different places under different names – this is the social system, as it exists today:

Different names in different regions
The system is slavery.
The marginal, the harijan, the tribal is its sacrifice. 39

Douloti presents an account of the various contradictions operating within India. Quite literally, a midnight’s child, she is the first generation of newly independent India, with hopes of a new life, new dreams, new aspirations. Yet, it seems that for the tribals and Scheduled Castes, nothing has changed. The system of oppression continues, they continue to be the victims, only the masters have changed. Throughout her life, Douloti’s body has been battered by the powers through constant exploitation. Jaidev comments:

Douloti’s 27 years [is] a parable of postcolonial India, a parable addressed to whatever/whoever professes to be the Nation. 40

37 Ibid.
38 Mahasweta Devi. Economic and Political Weekly. 6th June, 1981
If motherhood is indeed identified with the Nation, then there is perhaps no greater indictment of both the concepts than seen in the novella. It is not a coincidental irony that Douloti dies on the eve of India’s anniversary of independence, her blood spilling all over:

Filling the entire Indian peninsula...here lies bonded labour spread eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vommitted up all the blood in its desiccated lungs.

Today, on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in [the] India...Douloti lies stretched over the whole of India.\(^{41}\)

How is the maternal idea reflected in Douloti? As a consequence of her first few encounters with Latia, Douloti becomes pregnant, and it is revealed that she is not the first:

...whose belly hasn’t he put two or three children into? To all the grits, to each and everyone, yearly...\(^{42}\)

When Douloti becomes pregnant she is given a pill to abort the child. Her fellow-mate, Somni, has also put her maternal feelings on hold as she comes to pay off her family’s debt, leaving her husband and son back home and also separated from the three sons that she has borne of Latia. There seems to be no place for a woman in society. It is her body that is important, her body that becomes a sacrificial lamb in the game of power that is exercised by the forward castes over the comparatively poorer, backward castes.

While discussing motherhood in the context of the writings of Mahasweta Devi, the works that have garnered the most attention are *Hajaar Churashir Maa* or *Mother of 1084*, *Stanadayini* or *Breast-Giver* and *Bayen*. The first of these stories, set in the backdrop of the Calcutta of the 1970’s is the journey of Sujata Chatterjee – an “apolitical” mother. Calcutta in this period reverberated with the sound of the Naxal revolt. This revolt, initially started by the peasants in Naxalbari against the corrupt

\(^{41}\) Mahasweta Devi. op cit. p. 93  
\(^{42}\) Ibid., p.61
and feudal landlords and zamindaars ultimately grew into a movement that also reached urban battlegrounds like Calcutta. Young students from various college campuses, often from upper middle class families, symbolised by Brati and Nandini, joined hands with the peasants to fight the growing forces of oppression and repression, of which the state machinery was a crucial part, symbolised by the likes of Senanayak in Draupadi. The text of Hajaar Churashir Maa spans just over twenty-four hours in terms of time frame, but this one day symbolises an entire journey and process of evolution in the life of the protagonist, Sujata Chatterjee. Sujata, like many other women from similar strata of society has remained blissfully unaware of the political happenings around her. Thus she cannot understand why her husband and son are so perturbed and upset at being asked to go to Kantapukur. Kantapukur is of course the government morgue, where the corpses of all those killed by the state machinery are kept for identification. She is shocked to learn that her youngest son, and the one whom she had always felt closest to, Brati, was a part of this movement. That is the first shock for Sujata, who thought that Brati had kept no secrets from her. Now, two years later from that fateful day, when Brati and his comrades were killed, ironically also Brati’s birthday, Sujata stands at a crossroads in her life. It is evident that the mother-child relationship with her other three children – Jyoti, Nipa and Tuli – are extremely fragile. All are caught up in their world of artificiality and hypocrisy to have any sensitivity to the situation around them. Perhaps it is their way of pretending that everything is all right. But Mahasweta Devi locates the distanced relationship between Sujata and her other three children within the structures of patriarchal society. Dibyanath, Sujata’s husband had no interest in her physically, except when he wanted another child. Having done his ‘job’, he would play no further part as a parent. Her mother-in law too played no part – as the author writes, having lost her husband at a young age and after the birth of only one child, she grudged other women the happiness and joys of being a mother. From birth to upbringing of her children, Sujata was left alone. But Brati, born six years after the birth of her third child, Tuli, was the one child born out of Sujata’s own desire to have a child – perhaps she envisaged Brati to be the companion and support that her other children could not be. Brati was indeed more sensitive than the others, and the most concerned about his mother’s well being. He articulated the feelings of frustration and sorrow that she had always kept repressed within her. Now that Brati is dead, the other members of his family have conveniently forgotten his very existence, not even
remembering his birth/death anniversary. In fact, Tuli has fixed her engagement for that very day, with a grand party at the house – her immediate concern is whether her mother will be able to get her jewellery from the bank vault!!!

As she relives the dastardly killing of her son, Sujata searches for an explanation, but fails to find any legitimacy for his death. At the same time, she gains an insight into society and realises that the cancer of illegitimacy has spread throughout society – in the “administration, in the cultural-intellectual establishment, in politics, in the existence of a whole anti-social fringe of killers prepared to serve the interests of any organised police force anywhere.”

Sujata also becomes aware of the sharp dichotomies that exist in society between the various classes. Dibyanath, Sujata’s husband is able to use his clout and influence to ensure that Brati’s name does not figure in the media. The five deaths become four; Brati it seems has vanished, not just from the newspaper headlines, but also from the scheme of things of Dibyanath and his other family members. They continue to live their lives as if nothing had changed and Brati had never existed. His name today only conjures up memories of an embarrassing interlude:

Brati belonged to the family. But his cruel murder was an embarrassment for his father, brother and sisters, who did not know how they could explain his death to their social circle.

On the other hand, for Somu’s mother, living at the margins of mainstream Calcutta society, it is a different world. There is no scope for her to pretend that her son never existed. She mourns him certainly, the plaintive wails of the night of the murder are now replaced by quiet tears, but for her there is no other alternative but to continue the struggle for survival. Yet both these women, otherwise far removed from each other, are bound by their grief and loneliness. Somu’s mother enables Sujata to really know her son – his belief, his ideals, his love – and the reason for his death. She still has to continuously relive the horrors of the incidents two years back. Somu’s sister is constantly harassed as she struggles to keep the household going. Her reality is far harsher than Sujata’s, it is a question of survival; there is no time to live in the

past, a luxury that Sujata can afford. In fact, Somu’s sister hates Sujata’s intrusion into their world:

She hated the idea of an outsider coming in once a year to remind them of her dead brother.\(^{45}\)

Bound as they are by common sorrow, Sujata is and will continue to be an outsider in this world, limited and constrained as she is by her lack of understanding of the realities of life. Two years after Brati’s gruesome death, everything remains “normal” in the outside world. Except for Sujata, everyone has moved on, living their own lives.

Apart from Sujata and Somu’s mother, the third mother who is projected is Mrs. Kapadia, Tuli’s would be mother-in-law. Although a minor character, she plays an important role. She is what Dibyanath had wished Sujata could be, a part of the same social brigade as him. Mrs. Kapadia is least interested in her son and his actions; she is insensitive and has no hesitation in inviting Saroj Pal, Brati’s alleged killer to the engagement party. Among these people, all supposedly her own, Sujata is the ‘Other’, an outsider in the true sense. And yet, apart from the pain of loss, she cannot identify with the gruelling reality that makes up the life of Somu’s mother and sister. However, at the end of the story, Sujata is able to locate in Brati’s silent revolt: “an articulation of the silent resentment she has carried within herself against her corrupt-respectable husband and her other children and their spouses and friends...In a sense she can ‘find’ her son and hold him to herself only when she can find in his death a fulfilment that she has yearned for and never dared to claim for herself.”\(^{46}\)

Nandini, Brati’s girlfriend, too forces Sujata to re-think the parameters and limits of the mother-child relationship, by questioning the very foundation of her relationship with Brati:

Everyone remains a stranger these days to everyone....It’s an obligation these days to know one’s son.\(^{47}\)

\(^{45}\) Ibid., p.36
\(^{46}\) Samik Bandopadhyay. *Five Plays*. Introduction. p. xi
\(^{47}\) Ibid.
Changing times have meant that no relationship can be taken for granted anymore, even the mother-child bond. Parents may live under the illusion that they know their children, without actually making the effort to understand them. Fundamental questions are once again raised. Is motherhood just a biological bond, a symbiotic relationship linked by the umbilical chord? Do parents ever really make the effort to know their children? Are they, more often than not concerned, like Dibyanath, in ensuring that the glasshouse does not break, that the façade is not disrupted and the mask remains in place? And when they finally do understand, it is often too late – the damage has already been done.

The three central women in the text – Somu’s mother, Sujata and Nandini are also representative of three stages of knowing and three stages of hierarchy. Somu’s mother is firmly located in her socio-economic-cultural reality – “the helpless fear and submission of Somu’s mother (voiced in her pleadingly insistent ‘didis’)… has a foil in the resentment/anger of Somu’s sister.” Sujata is in the next stage, the process of knowing and understanding. In many ways she may be considered to be an independent woman, holding a job in a nationalised bank. This very significant day in her life begins for her by recalling Brati’s birth so many years ago – the pain and the absence of her husband even at this time; it ends with her finally able to confront the hierarchical order and challenge him for the first time, leaving him voiceless and with no option but to leave the room. The cry that Sujata lets out at the end has thus been interpreted by many as a ‘second birth’, a corollary to the pain she had experienced at the time of Brati’s birth. It has also been seen in terms of her acquiring a powerful voice of her own drowning out all other voices; a time when the meaning of ‘motherhood’ has become clear to her. The society, which has been her identity, now becomes truly alien for her. They are dead, while the dead are truly alive. The final stage in this process of knowing is Nandini – younger than Sujata, but of course much more brutally experienced in the ways of the world and aware of the prevailing power relations in society.

In contrast, for Jashoda, there is no such epiphanic moment of realisation and knowledge. Like Sujata, she too is left totally alone at the end, her real children and her foster milk-children, both having forsaken her and left her to die alone. In these

48 Mahasweta Devi. op cit. p.xvi
stories, the prevailing caste and class equations operating in Indian society are reworked and rewritten to focus on the issues of gender and motherhood. Both Sujata and Jashoda are Brahmins; this accords them a certain degree of privilege in society, but does not lessen their gendered suffering at all. A major reason for Dibyanath and others like him to hush up the deaths of people like Brati is the upper middle class and upper caste Bengali society, who considered the Naxal movement a taboo topic for discussion. In fact, most families found themselves in a tricky position, unable to take sides in this bloody battle. Jashoda works for the Haldar household, and this is significant. Codified caste structures of society often meant that many Brahmin households would only employ servants of the same caste, in order that the so-called ‘sanctity’ is not defiled and societal status is maintained. On the contrary, for the lower caste but upper class Haldars, employing Jashoda is a conscious decision, seen from their perspective as a symbol of their movement upwards in society though perhaps in a different manner than Srinivas’ position of Sanskritisation, discussed in Chapter 2. Jashoda is employed as a wet nurse only because she is a Brahmin. Having her in the middle of the household is a matter of great prestige, and also gives the Haldar family a strange sense of authority and empowerment.

Jashoda, as Mahasweta Devi comments, is a “mother-by-hire.” And while she sacrifices her entire life for the sake of all her children, they in turn only abuse and exploit her and forsake her in the hospital, when she is dying and needs them the most:

All this misfortune happened to her as soon as that (milk producing ability) vanished. Now is the downward time for Jashoda, the milk-filled faithful wife who was the object of reverence. 49

For as long as her memory serves her, Jashoda has been pregnant, with Kangali drilling himself into her every night. For the otherwise disabled Kangali, Jashoda’s pregnancies serve as ‘proof’ of his virility and sexuality. As is well known, Indian society has always attached tremendous importance to a woman’s role as mother. Just as the barren woman is criticised and abused, a woman who can give birth numerous times is nothing short of ‘divine’. Jashoda of course, thereby acquires

a divine status, although for her motherhood is not a matter of choice but of sustenance:

Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings. Jashoda was a mother by profession... not an amateur mama like the daughter’s and wives of the master’s house. The world belongs to the professional.  

The story of the Breast Giver succeeds in encompassing within the framework of a single narrative all the three identities traditionally associated with motherhood and mothering, particularly in the Indian context. Naturally and expectedly, she is the biological mother of all the children born out of her womb. This maternal feeling is then further extended towards the children of the daughters-in-law of the Haldar household whom she breastfeeds and thus a bond is formed between them. However, Jashoda also feels a strange kind of motherly love for her husband Kangali:

Her mother-love wells up for Kangali as much as for the children. She wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest.

Ironically for Jashoda, a fulsome harvest can only take place if the land is ploughed properly. Yet no serious effort is made to nurture her body and take good care of it. In her desire to become Mother Earth, Jashoda equates herself with the idea of Mother as ‘Nation’. Her body is exploited by the nouveau-riche Haldars, just as the postcolonial nation space has been dominated and exploited by the rich, upper classes. Jashoda’s body thus becomes a commodity with its price tag. Like the kamiya-whores, bound by the bond slave system, she too has no alternative if her family has to be sustained. Jashoda’s death from breast cancer at the hospital may not be as visually and violently gruesome as that of Douloti, but it is as painful and perhaps much more pitiful.

During her lifetime, Jashoda is literally Jashoda ‘Devi’. In the Indian context, the term Devi has various levels of text and context. A Devi is a Goddess, ‘Devi’ is also often an indicator of a woman’s married status in many parts of India and ‘Devi’

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50 Ibid., p. 40
51 Ibid.
is also Goddess manifest – a special divinity that is accorded to Indian women by virtue of their ability to bear children. It is also significant to point out that ‘Maa’ or mother is often a term of respect for Indian women and a woman’s identity is carved out of her ability to give birth repeatedly. Krishnalal Shridharani writes:

It is motherhood more than womanhood...that the Hindus glorify... An Indian artist will prefer to paint a picture of a woman with a child at her breast....Paying greater honour to motherhood than to womanhood implies emphasis on creation rather than recreation. Accordingly, marriage becomes more work than play. The Indian marriage still centres around the progeny.\textsuperscript{52}

Similarly, Mahasweta Devi comments:

Such is the power of the Indian soil that all women turn into mothers here and all men remain immersed in the spirit of holy childhood. Each man the holy child and each woman the divine Mother.\textsuperscript{53}

Jashoda’s divinity is thus constructed by the Haldar family, largely based on her caste background. She is ‘divine’ because she is a ‘good’, ‘faithful’ wife who uses her unique position in society to create new life. Her divine status is also derived from her name. Jashoda is of course a mythical-historical figure, the Sanskritised Yashoda – the foster-mother or milk-mother of Lord Krishna, who brings up him and rears him like her own child. Mahasweta’s Jashoda is premised upon this character, with the added dimension of economics in keeping with the times. However, her divinity and special position has by no means been diminished in this period.

Thus, while motherhood may be the greatest joy in the world, it is also the most painful, as Jashoda soon realises. She may have fed and brought up the Haldar children like her own, but when she needs them, they all desert her, including Kangali:

\begin{flushright}
Is a Mother so cheaply made?
Not just by dropping a babe!!!\textsuperscript{54}
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{52} Krishnalal Shridharani. \textit{My India, My America}. pp.198-200
\textsuperscript{53} Mahasweta Devi. op cit. p. 47
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p.52

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It is the maternal idea that is here questioned. On the one hand are the Haldar wives, whose pretensions and desires in aspiring towards upper class recognition is imitated in their actions wherein they believe that their duties as a wife and daughter-in-law are fulfilled just by giving birth. They are mothers in name, and that is enough for their position in society. On the other hand is Jashoda, whose maternal feelings are extended not only to her biological children, but also her foster-children and even her husband. Jashoda’s maternal feelings are manifested in the act of nursing. And when she can no longer bear children, when her breasts have been sucked dry, Jashoda is rendered useless. The breasts have been her most treasured and precious objects, her means of earning a livelihood. She has always taken special care of them. Yet, it is these same breasts that ultimately become the cause of her death. The cancer has spread too far too be cured – indeed the malaise of exploitation has spread too far into the system, perhaps never to be cured.

While there are a large number of mothers in the text – the Haldar mistress, the daughters-in-law, even the Lion-seated Goddess, Jashoda becomes the idealised Mother figure, subsuming the identities of all the others, and all these other women exploit Jashoda and her body for their own selfish ends. Kangali too is no different. As soon as his wife’s body is no longer economically viable, when he sees her ill and realises that she is dying, he summarily rejects her. Jashoda is no longer the caring personality –“hair in a topknot, blindingly white clothes, a strong personality” – stereotypically associated with motherhood, and thus she no longer has any value. Thus, Jashoda Devi, Goddess manifest throughout her life, dies alone, unattended and forgotten. This is her reward for years of service. After all

When a mortal masquerades as god here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone.56

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak locates the story of The Breast-Giver firmly within the cocoon of subaltern history. As she states, Mahasweta Devi herself saw the novel as a “parable of India after decolonisation” where Jashoda becomes a mother-by-hire, exploited and abused by everyone, but more especially the economically

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., p. 75
57 Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. ‘Breast Giver for author, reader, subaltern, historian…’ in Breast Stories. p. 78

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affluent, socially emerging nouveau-riche, petit-bourgeoisie class of Indians. “If nothing is done to sustain her...she will die of a consuming cancer.” The motherland and its subjects, far from being caring and considerate, turn into all-devouring, exploiting predators, and it is the subaltern, gendered woman – in her role as wife, mother, daughter, who becomes its greatest victims.

Both Hajaar Churashir Maa and The Breast-Giver therefore rework different dimensions of the maternal concept, highlighting the pleasures and pains associated with it. The pain and the joy are simultaneous – just as the pain of labour and the joy of hearing the baby’s first wail. Motherhood, as has already been said, is an experience unique to women; it transcends all socio-economic, man-made and natural divisions, but the responses to motherhood are often ambivalent, and a product of the prevailing socio-economic structures.

Bayen of course is a sad commentary on such socio-economic structures, where the woman is once again the culprit and the victim. In this case, she is forced to separate from her family and live a life of loneliness and ostracisation due to the stereotyping and collective scapegoating that comes as a result of societal superstition. Chandi’s family has traditionally been ‘domes’, entrusted with the task of burying children. The opening lines of the play immediately bring the maternal idea to the fore and also recall Stanadayini, with the image of the mother suckling her child at her breast:

BAYEN: .... I used to rock him like this, suckle him, all that milk, a real flood, the milk from the breast spilled on the floor.59

As already discussed above, the image of a child at the woman’s breast is a stereotypical marker of motherhood, taking precedence over everything else. In Bayen however, it is soon seen how Chandi has over time, begun to acquire the identity of a witch or bayen. The ‘making’ of a bayen, as already discussed in Chapter 2, is a part of society’s constructed and codified structures that seek to always oppress women. Chandi moves into the shadows just as she sees her former husband and son approach, because conventional superstitions stated that if one encountered the ‘gaze’ of a bayen, one was doomed to suffer. Her act may be construed as an extension of her

58 Ibid., p.78
motherly feelings. Having internalised the belief that she is cursed, she does not want her son to suffer, and this can only be achieved by the denial of maternal affection. Of course, till this time, her son Bhagirath has been led to believe that his mother is long dead, and thus initially he refuses to believe that the woman “without food, clothes and oil in the nature” can be his mother. For Chandi of course, the maternal feeling is not just limited to Bhagirath. Mahasweta takes great pains to state how she feels when she has to bury the dead children. This surge in feeling has arisen because now she has a child of her own:

Before you were born, I never knew I’d feel like this. Now it hurts so bad when I bury the little ones under the banyan tree.61

Once again, the real mother and the idea of motherhood are synthesised into each other. Chandi is now painfully aware of the pain of losing a child because she has one of her own. And as she is proclaimed guilty and convicted to banishment by her community, she is rendered voiceless and perhaps has no option but to believe in the superstitions created by man, by society.

The short conversation that takes place between mother and son is poignant but illuminating. Bhagirath begins gingerly, not yet convinced that he will not be cursed by the ‘bayen’. Chandi too instantly covers her face on seeing him, overcome by the same fears. Gradually however, Bhagirath enters into a process of knowing – realising that if his mother is crying – it means that she is still human and emotional and caring, not someone who is to be feared. However, this process soon comes into an abrupt end; before mother and son can finally acknowledge each other, Chandi dies, sacrificing her life for the sake of the community – the same community that had ignored and ostracised her during her lifetime.

Much like Bessie Head, Mahasweta Devi has, in her writings tended to privilege the community over the individual. The individual, after all, is a small cog in the wheel that enables the community to continue to function. And in the Indian context, communities, especially in the villages of rural India, are strictly codified –

59 Mahasweta Devi. ‘Bayen.’ tr. Samik Bandopadhyay. Five Plays. p.75
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., p. 81
on the lines of caste, class and gender. And women, literally, are on the edge of such classification. Mahasweta deliberately gives details of the castes of her major protagonists in many of her stories, and more often than not, their caste as well as economic status plays an important role in their experiences of life. Therefore, the Dalit woman Douloti is forced into prostitution because her father Ganori Nagesia has to pay off a loan to the Brahmin master, Jashoda's role as a wet-nurse or 'Stanadayini' is justified by her masters on the grounds that she is a Brahmin, Sanichari, in Rudaali is condemned to live at the dushad basti and Chandi in Bayen is forced to carry on her family traditions of burning bodies till the time that she is deemed to be mad, and therefore unfit to live in mainstream society. These are just a few examples – many more are to be found in the writings of Mahasweta Devi.

It is perhaps ironic that while the community is seen as the strongest bond that binds people together, it is this same community that also promotes divisiveness. The image of communities of lower castes living together is a recurring one in Mahasweta Devi. By actively stressing on such communal living, she is able to place her characters within a specific socio-economic and historical perspective. As the opening lines of Rudaali state:

In Tahad village, ganjus and dushads were in the majority. Sanichari was a ganju too. Like the other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty.62

These opening lines “firmly establish that Sanichari, who shares the condition of poverty with the other villagers, is one of a community.”63 One is here immediately reminded of the opening lines of Om Prakash Valmiki’s Joothan:

Our house lay next to the house of Chandrabhan Taga. After that, there were a few families belonging to the Muslim weaver community. Right in front of the Ghes of C. Taga, there was a Johadi – a small pond – which had created a demarcation between the cluster belonging to the Chuhra Community and the rest of the village...The house of Chuhras were built around this Johadi...64

62 Mahasweta Devi. 'Rudaali.' tr. Anjum Katyal. Rudaali: From Fiction to Performance. p.2
63 Ibid., p.3
64 Om Prakash Valmiki. Joothan. p.11
Such descriptions clearly detail and demarcate the "geophysical space organization of the village along caste lines" and portray a true microcosmic picture of rural India where "caste is a sine qua non of Indian life." But do these communities further reinforce such hegemonical attitudes by intensifying caste divisions, or do they work in unison to bring about socio-economic emancipation of individuals within the community, and thus by extension, emancipation of the entire community? There does not seem to be any clear answer. *Rudaali* is definitely a tale belonging to the second category. A complex combination of factors - society, economy and community - assist in the evolution of the central character, Sanichari, who by the end of the story seems much better prepared to "adapt, survive and manipulate the system." Right from the start, Sanichari is historicised - it is clearly suggested that her problems are common to her class, caste and gender - she is definitely not in a unique situation. Therefore, there is no need to individualise her - her appearance, clothes, speech and mannerisms are 'communal', i.e. common to the specific community. It is almost as though the narrative is more of a report, objectively placing the facts in front of the reader and leaving them to draw their own conclusions. The character of Sanichari becomes a microcosm for the suffering of the lower castes, and through her, one becomes aware of the "larger discourse of struggle and exploitation." Her inability to weep at the deaths of her family members is clearly and directly linked to the larger concerns and the exploitation at the hands of the upper caste masters, from which there is no respite.

When her mother-in-law dies, Sanichari has no time to cry as both her husband and her brother had then been imprisoned by Ramavtar Singh, who "enraged at the loss of some wheat, had all the young dushad and ganju mates of the village locked up." As a result, she and her sister-in-law had to carry out the funeral rites. A few years later, both her brother-in-law and his wife die as well. Once again Sanichari cannot cry, as she was again struggling for her very existence:

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66 Ibid.
67 Mahasweta Devi. op cit. p. 2
68 Ibid., p. 4
69 Ibid., p.55
Ramavatar Singh had started a hue and cry about throwing the dushads and ganjus out of the village. Terrified of being driven out, Sanichari was on tenterhooks.\(^7^0\)

Suffering and unhappiness too are common to all the village people. And as is common to a small close-knit community, they were "continually caught up in squabbles and quarrels"\(^7^1\) with each other. And yet, this same community lends her a helping hand when she needs them the most - after the death of her husband, and left alone with a small infant. While Dulan’s wife takes over the caring of the infant by giving him the milk from her daughter-in-law, who was also nursing, Dulan offers her a job as part of a group of labourers who have to repair the rail line. Thus, Dulan and his wife literally become Sanichari’s saviours:

The breastfeeding by Dhatua’s wife kept Haroa alive. While Sanichari worked on the job, she didn’t need to cook. Dulan’s wife would send her meal of roti and achar along with Dulan’s.\(^7^2\)

Meanwhile, others in the village offer her land for her hut, or sell her vegetables for her in the market. All in all, it is a perfect example of community living. The narrator comments:

If her fellow-villagers had not rallied ground in this manner, would Sanichari have survived?\(^7^3\)

And also a little later:

In order to survive, the poor and the oppressed need the support of the other poor and oppressed. Without that support, it is impossible to live in the village even on milk and ghee provided by the milk.\(^7^4\)

As already mentioned, this communal empathy exists alongside the constant oppression of Ramavatar Singh. One cannot help but notice the tremendous irony in the name. He becomes the symbolic representative of another community, another system - “which dehumanises, brutalises, invading the most private space of an

\(^7^0\) Ibid.
\(^7^1\) Ibid., p. 5
\(^7^2\) Ibid.
\(^7^3\) Ibid., p. 62
individual, the emotions, so that even grief is destalked in the desperate struggle for survival.”

Being a woman, Sanichari finds life even more difficult, being doubly oppressed and unable to find a way out of the system wherein the oppressor also becomes the source of income, thereby leading to a vicious circle from which there is no end. And yet, Sanichari, ironically finds her calling in a life of a ‘Rudaali’ or professional mourner, paid to grieve and shed tears at the death of the upper classes. It seems money can indeed buy everything, and here it works as a two-way system. For the malik, the commodification of grief is a ritual characteristic of their social class; hiring rudaalis enhance their position and prestige. On the other hand, for the outcast and the marginalised, shedding tears becomes an art. Sanichari, who could not shed a tear at the death of her family members, cries for the death of the malik’s kin. Tears therefore become a produce, a source of earning. Mahasweta Devi’s clear implication is that for lower castes and classes, even their tears are not their own – the flow of tears, i.e. emotions, like the rest of their bodies, are hostage and helpless in deference to the wishes of their masters.

Rudaali has often been critiqued for privileging caste and community over women’s issues. However, can these three categories be placed in watertight compartments? In fact, Mahasweta Devi suggests that one can be both ‘classed’ and ‘gendered’ – they are not polarised entities, rather each informs the discourse of the other. Yet, Rudaali remains a feminist text in more ways than one. It is a tale of survival against all the odds, literally survival of the fittest. The tale depicts Sanichari’s transformation from a weak, dependent, repressed woman to one who is strong and empowered, manipulative and shrewd. She has learnt the business and economics of her profession – enough to contemplate formation of a union of rudaalis and prostitutes. And since many of the prostitutes have provided offspring to the masters, forming of a union means that the wheels have turned full circle. Anjum Katyal comments that by turning a casual occupation into an ‘organised profession’,

74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., p.4
the author has succeeded in "transforming a woman-intensive casual labour sector into an organized sector."

*Rudaali* is also a story of friendships and jealousies, each specific to the caste and class that an individual belongs to. Therefore, while the relationship between Sanichari and Bikhini is mutually productive, each dependent on and learning from the other, the other women of Sanichari’s community too extend their support in different ways, as detailed above. On the other hand, between the women and wives of the upper classes, there exists spite and jealousy, as each tries to outdo the other. Yet some things remain the same, such as the preference for the male child:

She [Nathunis’ middle wife] looks down on her marital home as poor compared to her fathers’, and resents her co-wives, because they are mothers of sons, whereas her child is a daughter, which lowers her status in the eyes of others. (my emphasis)

Polygamy was an accepted practice, especially among the upper classes, and as a practice it cannot favour the women. Also, while the middle wife may be most favoured by the husband, because of her father’s economic position, the other women are jealous of her. But her inability to give birth to male children allows them to ‘score’ over her and also marks a certain degree of unfulfillment within her. Having failed to produce a male heir, she is deemed a ‘failure’ by the milieu around her.

*Rudaali* therefore emerges as a multi-layered and multi-dimensional story -- where issues of caste, class, gender and economics come together to portray a woman, who, in spite of all the odds ultimately finds the road towards empowerment and success, with the silent help and support of her community. As they are not individuated, Sanichari’s success is therefore also the success of the community; a pointer that in unison even the oppressed can achieve what was considered the impossible.

Community makes itself manifest in many other ways in Mahasweta Devi’s writings. One clear difference lies in her presentation of rural and urban communities. And while, communities offer support to others like them, it is also these same people

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76 Ibid., p. 19
77 Ibid.
who can actually destroy lives of their fellow mates. Nowhere is this contrast greater than in *The Hunt* and in *Bayen*.

*Shikar or The Hunt* provides for an interesting reading. It is set against the backdrop of *jani parab*, the women’s hunting festival in Bihar and Jharkhand, also known as the festival of justice, as already discussed in Chapter 2. The actions of Mary Oraon bring new meaning to this festival:

She resurrected the real meaning of the annual hunting festival day by dealing out justice to a crime committed against the entire tribal society.\(^{78}\)

Mary is a tribal no doubt, but of mixed blood, being born of a tribal mother and a white father, in many ways similar to Head. This gives her slightly different looks – “tall, flat-featured, light copper skin”\(^{79}\), which makes it difficult for her to find a mate among her community. One notices a certain respect and reverence that the other villagers have for Mary. In spite of their admiration however, they keep their distance:

Mary has countless admirers at Tohri market. She gets down at the station like a queen. She sits in her rightful place at the market.\(^{80}\)(my emphasis)

However, Mary does not want to become one like her village people. Engaged to a Muslim boy Jalim, she is painfully aware that

...had she resembled any Oraon girl - if her father had been Somra or Budhaa or Mangla Oraon – the Oraons would not have let this marriage happen. Because she is the illegitimate daughter of a white father the Oraons don’t think of her as their blood and do not place the harsh injunction of their own society upon her.\(^{81}\) (my emphasis)

There is a certain degree of ambiguity that is to be seen here. While on the one hand, Mary is liked and respected, on the other, she remains an outsider. The clear underlying impression is that however much she may be liked and admired; she can never be a part of the ‘mainstream’. And she is aware of the fact:

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\(^{78}\) Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. *Imaginary Maps*. Introduction. p. xi
\(^{80}\) Ibid.
\(^{81}\) Ibid.
In her inmost heart there is somewhere a longing to be a part of the Oraons. She would have been very glad if, when she was thirteen or fourteen, some brave Oraon lad had pulled her into marriage.82

Mahasweta’s portrayal of Mary is part myth, part reality. Her actions have been replicated again and again by many other women. Mary’s story has been historicised and passed down the generations as a part of the oral tradition; through songs, and yet, as Mahasweta comments, there are thousands of such Mary’s across the tribal belt of Jharkhand, who are repeatedly forced into performing the same action again and again to ensure their survival. The issue of the position of women in tribal societies, especially in Bihar and Jharkhand, is brought to the fore in this story, and this is symbolic of the prevailing reality today also:

Women have a place of honour in tribal society. When I went to Lapra I would see this light-skinned girl in a yellow saree...sitting in the most relaxed manner, chewing sugarcane. Chewing paan, smoking biri, arguing and always getting the upper hand. Such a personality.83

Faced with the choice of giving into the Tehsildar’s amorous advances or remaining resolute to her dream of marrying Jalim, the choice before Mary is clear. She has no qualms about resorting to violence in order to prevent herself from getting violated. The Tehsildar naturally is representative of the powerful mainstream – the corrupt contractor indulging in acts of illegal deforestation for profit. In fact, he is a part of the entire corrupt system, symbolic not just of this state, but the length and breadth of the country. Mary’s killing of the Tehsildar therefore takes on larger repercussions – as the subaltern’s challenge to and ultimate victory over the so-called mainstream; an assertion of their very existence and independence.

It is doubly significant that Mary chooses jani parab as the day of destiny. As an event that comes once in twelve years, it is an extra-special day for the women, a day for them to prove that given the opportunity, they are as good as the men in ostensibly ‘manly’ activities such as hunting:

82 Ibid., p.5
83 Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. op cit. p.xi
Like the men they too go out with bow and arrow. They run in the forest and hill. The kill hedgehogs, rabbits, birds, whatever they can get. Then they picnic together, drink liquor, sing, and return home at evening. They do exactly what the men do. Once in twelve years. 84

And what about the men? Well, they indulge the women in their ‘game’ – which is now meaningless as there is hardly any game left in the forest. “Only the day’s joy is real” 85 – the narrator comments, and it is primarily a day for female bonding – cooking, singing, drinking, dancing and reminiscing. But this year Mary has other plans. Luring and then killing the Tehsildaar, she has indeed made the biggest kill ever in the village. In doing so has brought to the fore the real meaning of the hunting festival; and re-established the role and importance of women in society. The men hardly have any role to play in the narrative where the different layers of women bonding are explored. Mary’s actions make her a hero in the community – her heroics become the tale of myths and an inspiration for other girls. Once again it is the community that plays an important role in this regard. Unlike Sanichari, Mary is not situated within a particular historical context. But she scores in her strength of character, which is derived out of the circumstances of her birth, her intelligence and the courage that she is able to show in the face of tremendous adversity.

The contrast could not be more greatly pronounced when one notices the plight of Sujata in Hajaar Churashir Maa. Her world could not be further removed than that of Sanichari and Mary, but her situation is far more pathetic. Sanichari and Mary, in spite of having hardly any immediate family, have a much larger communal family that Sujata misses, which, as seen, is there to provide support. Sujata, however, in spite of being surrounded by people and family all around her, is lonely and alone. Her experiences, which she suffers on her own, strengthen her and make a far more empowered woman at the end of the text. Community however operates in the text in other ways. For instance, once Dibyanath, Sujata’s husband, learns that Brati’s corpse has to be identified at the government mortuary, his immediate reaction is to keep the matter as quiet as possible.

Sujata: Haven’t I told you? Jyoti, get the car out.
Dipankar: No, Not our car........

84 Mahasweta Devi. op cit. p.11
Dibyaanth: My car, at Kantapukur? NO……

……

Sujata: But why? Why can’t the car be there?

A little later, Sujata’s thoughts say it all:

Sujata: Jyoti and Jyoti’s father… (pause) are rushing about the place to hush up the news…. (pause)….and so I’m all alone……

But why are Jyoti and Dibyanath so intent on keeping Brati’s death quiet? As already stated, at the height of the Naxal Movement in 1970’s Calcutta, the elite upper-classes sought to remove themselves from the movement started by the landless peasants and tribals, preferring to live in their cocooned world, in which, as Samik Bandopadhyay remarks, “the adoration of Godmen, the euphoria over the Bangladesh war, the pretences of radicalism, and scandals, commercial and amorous, constituted a lifestyle that guaranteed their security.” The Naxal Movement was a revolt against such middle class mores. Therefore, for Sujata’s husband and son, there is no alternative but to hush up Brati’s involvement in the Naxal movement and his subsequent death. Sujata, who is far removed from this ‘corrupt-respectable’ world of her husband, cannot believe that his first thought would be towards hushing up the case, rather than rushing to Kantapukur. In such a scenario, for Sujata, Somu’s mother and Nandini is a much stronger bond of support, as they have had similar experiences and have lost their loved ones to the Naxal Movement. On the other hand Tuli, Sujata’s daughter has fixed her engagement on the very day of her brother’s death anniversary, on the advice of the ‘Panditji’ – highlighting her total detachment and disassociation from the world of her brother. In fact, she does not hesitate even to invite Saroj Pal, the police inspector, responsible for the death of Brati and his comrades to the party. Her world, like that of her father and brothers is a world of latent hypocrisy and individualism, where a husband has no qualms about calling his wife a ‘three penny whore’ in public, where individuals pretend that the Naxal Movement does not exist, but at the same time write eulogizing poems as “a homage to Brati and his generation” and where most ironically, Dibyanath can be blase about how close he

85 Ibid.
87 Samik Bandopadhyay op cit. p. x
88 Mahasweta Devi. op cit.
was to his son and how it was other factors – bad company, bad friends, the mother's "influence" that led to his going 'astray.' All this only serves to further highlight Sujata's loneliness. Even Nandini and Somu's mother ask her not to come again, but by that time, Sujata has gained sufficient strength and has learnt the ways of the world. The bursting of her appendix at the end therefore has symbolic undertones – of a new beginning, a new birth.

In each of the above instances, it has been seen how marginalisations and adversities actually help in empowering and strengthening the women against all odds. However, that is not the case with Chandi in Bayen. Chapter 2 discussed in considerable detail the historic genesis of the process of becoming a 'witch', and its linkages with property rights and patriarchal assertion. Here, it is the villagers, who based on age-old societal superstitions construct Chandi's identity as a Bayen, till she actually internalises it, and begins to believe in it. By the time the villagers realise their mistake it is too late. Bayen is an emotional account of the tragedy that can occur when illogical superstitions and beliefs override common sense and logic, and it is the community that is more often responsible for such tragedies.

In many of these stories, the woman's body is an agent of commodification, available at the market, and not necessarily to the highest bidder. Feminist theory has been extremely critical of the blatant commodification of the woman that has been one of the root causes for her marginalisation and exploitation in society. In a world, where gender oppression has been a historical truth, such blatant misuse of the woman is depicted and critiqued by Mahasweta. Embedded within these narratives is also the woman's resistance to or her own 'justification' of such an act. And in this aspect, one thing is clear. Such physical exploitation is not just limited to the rural, uneducated, tribal women – it is an inherent part of the socio-economic order as well as the hegemonic patriarchal order. Sumanta Banerjee states that gender exploitation cuts across class barriers, embracing girls from poorer classes who are victims of a male predatory socio-economic order, as well as housewives of middle class homes who are harassed by a patriarchal domestic order.\(^9\) Such a process naturally entails a movement of the woman from the 'private' sphere to the 'public', and consequently, the gaze upon her becomes all the more powerful and scrutinizing. At the same time,

\[\text{\(^9\)}\text{Sumanta Banerjee. Bait. Translator's Note. p. xx}\]

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the use of her body for different modes of exploitation implicate her entry into the 
‘grey’ areas of society, far removed from ideals of chastity, virtuousness, and other 
similar homogenizing adjectives.

The title of Mahasweta Devi’s story *Shoreer* or *The Body* could not be more 
apt in documenting the extent to which a woman’s body is considered ‘male 
property’. The protagonist of the narrative is Ketaki, but all throughout, she is just 
‘the girl’. Such a generic nomenclature only serves to highlight the fact that neither 
she nor her manner of exploitation is unique in any manner. She is of tribal origin, but 
has spent all her life in Calcutta. Orphaned when both her parents were hanged for 
murder, Ketaki is educated up to the undergraduate level, till ultimately she drifts into 
the professions of stealing and prostitution. As a high-profile prostitute, she drives a 
Fiat, resides in an up market area of Calcutta. She is not pretty, in fact, Mahasweta 
Devi makes it a point to underline how her face seemed “hewn out of some ancient, 
craggy rock.”90 But it is her body, “black, primeval, brutal, frightening”91 like an 
ancient nomadic Goddess that is her greatest asset. She is of course, the mistress of 
Nripati, otherwise known as the Emperor, a politician with links with the underworld, 
and although not satisfied with her profession, she does not have much choice. Even 
within the span of a few pages. Mahasweta Devi highlights a number of things – 
firstly, the role of Anupam. Anupam, now a VIP, was Ketaki’s love, who had earlier 
resisted her advances, her offer of herself. Aware that in an increasingly materialistic 
and capitalist world nothing comes for free, Ketaki offers him her body – the only 
thing over which she had any control. Mahasweta Devi’s acidic wit here camouflages 
the underlying sarcasm:

The girl wants Anupam. In this world, if you want anything, you have to give 
something in exchange. The girl wants to give herself, since she has nothing 
else, nothing special. 92

Ultimately, Ketaki’s desires are fulfilled, as ironically, on the run from the 
powers, Anupam comes to her for shelter for the night. These few hours are what she 
has lived for all this time; caught up in her thoughts she forgets her ‘other’ 
responsibilities. And once Anupam is apprehended, Ketaki has nothing left to live for.

91 Ibid.
She commits suicide, unable to handle any further exploitation, brutality and punishment of her body.

Like Ketaki, Douloti too is forced to sell her body and her youth. Unlike Ketaki however, Douloti is forced into prostitution by her own father, as repayment for a three hundred rupee loan taken by her father from the controlling masters and landlords. Douloti’s forced compliance into agreeing to the life of the bonded prostitute may be seen in internalised constraints such as responsibility, one of the bases in women’s subalternity and the very basics of gender-ethics.93 Spivak continues:

Sweet, innocent, responsible Douloti is not a subject of resistance. Mahasweta dramatises that difficult truth: internalised gendering perceived as ethical choice is the hardest roadblock for women the world over. The recognition of male exploitation must be supplemented with this acknowledgement. And the only way to break it is by establishing an ethical singularity with the woman in question, itself a necessary supplement to a collective action to which the woman might offer resistance, passive or active. Douloti as a subject is a site of this acknowledgement.94

Bond slavery is common in Seora, almost like a hereditary occupation. Since all the poor are bound to the landlords, who exploit them limitlessly, slavery becomes a common tool. In fact, Douloti becomes a metaphor for all those suffering the effects of bond slavery at the pan-Indian scenario. After all, this was not something one did out of choice, it was forced by the social system and loan obligations. Known by various names – Gothie, Kamiya, Seokiya, Chalwaris, Naliyas, Halpati, Jeetho, Haroyaha, Sagri, Bhumidas – bond slavery is the prerogative of the landlords and a fait accompli for the lower, marginalised and oppressed people. Extremely rare is the case when someone like Bono is able to escape the clutches of such inhuman exploitation, and actually work towards the abolition of the abhorrent system.

In all the years that Douloti has been a Kamiya and till the time of her death, she has earned over forty thousand rupees for her masters in lieu of the three hundred against which she had been drawn into trade. Yet, the original amount is still

92 Ibid., p. 40
93 Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. op cit. p. xxiv
considered unpaid. After the death of Paramananda, his son inherits the whore-business, and in keeping with the trends of the newer generation, immediately orders for a more profitable approach:

The feeding money will go down more, the number of clients will go up more. Body! Kamiya woman’s body! If the body dries up sac’l depart...is there any shortage of harijan Kamiya women?95

The whores are now therefore subject to even greater exploitation, “twenty to thirty clients by the clock” in order to make fast cash and keep the profits rolling; no matter that their bodies are about to break. After all, replacements for the body are easily available. Consequently, over time, with repeated punishment and subjugation, “Douloti’s body starts drying up fast” 96 till the time of her ultimate death, bleeding all over the Indian peninsula.

The landlords too seek to justify bond slavery, by stating it to be part of the ancient system, codified in ancient texts like The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. Although the landlords themselves cannot verify the authority of such beliefs, they believe in it, as it serves their purpose. They mislead lower castes into believing that bond slavery is permanent, and that there is no alternative. It is only through the portrayal of Bono’s determination, and consequent escape from the treacherous system that a glimpse of an alternate world of freedom may be visualised. Bond slavery of course is not limited just to one gender, it cuts across generations and genders. In fact, even the children born of upper caste fathers and the Kamiya whores are dragged into the system, as their identity and existence, although known about, is not accepted or recognised.

Similar tales of exploitation and selling off women/girls from the villages to the rich contractors in the cities is a common theme that runs through many other stories. For the uncultivated, uneducated, rustic village folks, the city offers a glimpse of an unknown world, where dreams become reality. It provides an opportunity to escape from the clutches of poverty, debt and the constant threat of becoming the object of the landlords’ attention. The city space has often been constructed as an area

94 Ibid., pp. xxiv-xxvi
95 Mahasweta Devi. ‘Douloti, the Bountiful.’ tr. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak Imaginary Maps. p. 80
96 Ibid., p.84
from which the individual may create his own identity. Thus critical spatial identities become connected with localised culture, firmly linked with a place or a locality ... [and are]... connected with the notion of ‘identity’, the belonging of individuals to these groups and ideas... All spatial domains and identities are therefore constructions that are inherently linked to ideas of power and hegemony and “embedded in systems of exclusion and inclusion.”

The idea of space as a domain of hegemony and identity has long been a part of post-modernist and post-structuralist discourse. Foucault talks of ‘other spaces’ and ‘heterotopias.’ Heterotopias are heterogeneous places that do exist, as opposed to utopias, a “kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites...are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.” Heterotopia seems to imply a series of simultaneous spaces, which subvert the motion of alteration, and consequently, power relations. They may exist within the larger society, yet each has a precisely determined function. Yet, questions remain. Best and Struver question Foucault’s “idea of counterplaces, of locating places at the same time within as well as outside reality” by stating that it contradicts Foucault’s’ own theory of power, based on juxtaposition and alteration in spaces. If each heterotopia has a determined functioned, uncontrolled changes become impossible. Therefore, Best & Struver’s critique of Foucauldian concepts of space contradicts the juxtaposition that is a crucial part of spatial theory and a crucial pointer towards questions of identity. It is this concept of heterotopia that was also used by the likes of Henri Lefebvre and Michel De Certeau, but in different contexts. In his work, The Production of Space Lefebvre assumes that society is “spatialised” in connection with spatial practices and representations, formed as an instrument for those in power, which “isolates and separates fragments of everyday life.” Lefebvre wishes to break down the barriers that exist between the private and the public sphere into a more fluid space that incorporates both confluences and oppositions – isotopias or analogous spaces, heterotopias or mutually repellent spaces and utopias or symbolic and imaginary

98 Ibid.
100 Ulrich Best and Anke Struver. op cit.
101 Ibid.
102 Lefebvre quoted in Ulrich Best and Anke Struver op cit. p. 366
Isotopias and heterotopias are however located through the dominant practice of space, by hegemony. “A definition through space is thus automatically a definition through a dominant practice”104 Michel De Certeau too talks about the relationship between space and power. According to him, both strategy and tactics operate within the same domain of space and power. Talking about the city, he states that it is people who take space and turn it into places; they anchor the city in time, if only for a fleeting moment. People order the city space, making it real for themselves. With many people writing their own story, with their own interpretations, a city is pieced together something like a patchwork quilt of individual viewpoints and opinions. A space once defined only remains thus defined for as long as the individual defining the space remains there. People move freely within city space, but without them there can be no space to move within at all. A subject moves through city space, therefore defining it.105

Mahasweta’s delineation of city space is clearly a sphere where hegemony is dominant. The very construction of a spatial identity of ‘us’ presupposes the existence of a ‘them’ or an ‘Other.’ The interrelations through which identities are constructed are never egalitarian and are clearly based on various degrees of power relations. For the innocent girls from the village, the city provides a vision of another world, far removed from their own; a world where girls “wear chamak chamak sarees, chamak chamak jewellery... their homes are overflowing with puris and laddoos...”106 It is with the promise of becoming a part of this world that girls are brought there and then forced into prostitution and physical exploitation. On the other hand, for the city people, the rural migrants are undoubtedly a source of cheap labour, but at the same time, they are seen as an intrusion upon the city space, leading to increasing ghettoisation of the city landscape. The reformatory discourse of integration contests the opposite discourse of exclusion and further re-establishes boundaries within the city landscape. Classes are differentiated by their access to capital. Space is transformed into human habitat through the application of that capital. Therefore the unequal distribution of capital among the classes is also seen in the uneven development of built landscape. Social space is thus a reflection of the class division

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103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
105 The Creation of City Space by Pedestrians according to de Certeau. www.cyberartsweb.org/cspace/politics/wodtke/deCerteau.html
of society, but more than that, it is a mirror of social conditions and one of the ways through which social divisions are constituted. 107

Sanichari of Sanichari and Joshmina of The Fairytale of Rajabhasa are two women who fight this exploitation and differentiation to the point of no return. Sanichari is aware of the sex racket that exists, and resists the advances of Gohuman Bibi, the kingpin of this entire trade who promises that the girls will not have to worry about boarding, lodging, clothing as “the malik will take care of everything” 108 — all they have to do is work as rejas in the brick kilns of the city. Sanichari knows that the reality is different, as told to her by the knowledgeable Hiralal:

‘Why don’t the girls come back?
‘A monstrous city, Kolkatta. Devours everything around it.... Turns some girls into whores, sells off the rest’ 109

Yet, in due course of time, she too has no choice but to subscribe to the inevitable, as it seems to be the only route of escape. Rendered homeless and naked after the confrontation between the police and the tribals, this remains her only choice. However even she does not realise the inhumanity of the situation till she actually reaches Calcutta. The girls are forced to live in pigties; there is one single tube well for three hundred girls and no route for escape. Her revolt against such degrading conditions lands Sanichari the role as the mistress of the owner, Rahmat. In a way, her position is privileged. For her companions, the situation was the worst possible. After working all day, and paid only fifteen rupees per week, the nights are worse:

At the end of the day, when you’re too fired to keep your eyes open, the head Mastaan will call out your name in the daily auction. Today you go to them, tomorrow the driver, the day after the Munshi. 110(my emphasis)

Festival days are much worse. The girls are forced to drink liquor till they pass out and are repeatedly gangraped. Sanichari remains ‘privileged’ till the time she gets pregnant, when she is replaced. Ultimately, when Sanichari returns home, she is not

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107 The Creation of City Space by Pedestrians according to de Certeau.
www.cyberartsweb.org/cspace/politics/wodtke/deCerteau.html
108 Mahasweta Devi. op cit.
109 Ibid., p. 42
accepted in the village. In spite of repentance feasts and rites, both she and her son are outcasts. The worst part is, even her son will never be able to marry into the village, as the Khawasim custom demands that if one parent of the child is a non-tribal, she or he has to get married to a child of similar parentage. However, the strength of Sanichari lies in her refusal to give in to the circumstances. She realises it is not individuals but society that is to blame for the situation that she and many others like her find themselves in. Sanichari’s dramatic depiction of the real culprits brings this to the fore:

Gohuman Bibi too is not the real culprit. You didn’t know that. But I’ve realised it.

‘Then who is, Sanichari? Who?’

‘Everything around you, ev-e-r-y-thing.’

Sanichari stretched out her arms to include the world around her, standing stock still. 111

Mahasweta Devi ends her story on a note mixed with hope and despair. Hope lies in Sanichari’s resolve to establish her identity and keep fighting against all the odds, in which there is a message for other women. Hope also lies in characters like Chand Tirkey’s elder brother, who asks the community to reconsider the excommunication of Sanichari by questioning if it was right to throw out the woman from the village. Yet, no one else in the community is willing to endorse this point of view. Till the time society refuses to change, tragedies like Sanichari’s will continue to happen.

*The Fairytale of Rajabasha* is in many ways an extension of *Sanichari*. The difference is in the fact that Calcutta is replaced by Punjab, Sanichari by Joshmina. Joshmina and her husband Sarjom flee from one town to another, escaping the clutches of the amorous masters, who use their authority and power to abuse Joshmina’s body while Sarojom works in the field as one of the contractors. Niranjan remarks – “We have an efficient system.”112 The socio-economic system has made them pawns, therefore in spite of smouldering with rage, Sarjom finds himself unable

110 Ibid., p. 51
111 Ibid., p. 55
112 Ibid.
to do anything – except run away. There is also the fear that if Josmina is impregnated as a result of these repeated rapes, she and her family would be declared outcasts, as seen in *Sanichari*. And ultimately there is no escape from this plight for her. Not able to bear such an ignominy, not for herself, but for the long-term effects that it would have on Sarjom and their family, she commits suicide. The ‘fairy tale’ thus comes to a sad end, and once again Mahasweta Devi points her finger at society. A woman is doomed to suffer. Irrespective of whose fault it is, the finger of blame is always pointed towards her. It is not that women are not abused within the villages itself; but the situation becomes much worse in the cities. Bound to the masters to ensure survival, the women have no choice but to subscribe to their masters’ desires, notwithstanding the consequences. No wonder, Chinta, another of Mahasweta Devi’s exploited and oppressed characters, comments that ‘*Goriber bhagoban nai go Maa*’ – (There is not God for the poor). Chinta’s story evokes tremendous pathos. Widowed at a young age, she is lured to Calcutta by her lover with promises of marriage. Years and two children later, he leaves her, the proposed marriage never taken place. Chinta is forced to work at peoples’ homes as a maid to eke out a living. Ultimately, however, she has to return to her native village, her relatives having sold off her girls to the flesh trade and her son preparing to pay for her repentance rites from the money earned from his dowry. Chinta is a Brahmin, but even this is no protection against the harsh social structures and the unending class, caste and gender exploitation that makes the lives of all these women a relentless struggle for survival.

It is not at all unusual that it is the women who are always at the receiving end of such suffering. Their ‘punishment’ for being raped and consequently getting impregnated is to be further marginalised and oppressed by being outcast from the village. Repentance rites have to be undertaken as well, for her alleged faults and ‘immoral’ activities, a custom that continues in many parts of India even today, as seen in recent incidents. But is this indeed so unusual? Haven’t the ancient epics themselves constructed a position of subservience for the women? Have women, even in these epics not been subjected to constant tests of their faith? For instance, was Sita not forced to go through the ‘agnipariksha’ to prove her fidelity?

Historically therefore, there may exist a link between history and the internalisation of the female belief of her own subjugation and marginality. History has been a primarily masculine domain, written by men and telling their story. Male
superiority and hegemony has been inherent and integral to such history. The result has been that men have internalised notions of superiority while conversely women have internalised the constructions of their own inferiority. From time immemorial therefore, womens’ identity has sought to be suppressed to in different ways by the forces of patriarchal society.

Mahasweta Devi actually traces the roots of oppression and marginalisation to the ancient classics. In particular, she makes repeated references to characters from *The Mahabharata* and other Indian myths. In an interview with Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, Mahasweta Devi observes that Draupadi was a black woman and therefore a tribal. Both *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*, texts of post-Aryan India, do not dissolve caste boundaries. If anything, they are further reinforced. One recalls how during her swayamvara ceremony, a tradition reserved for the warrior caste, the Kshatriyas, there is objection from all quarters when the Pandavas enter the arena in the guise of Brahmins and aim for the hand of Draupadi. The distinction could not be clearer. The Brahmins may be the highest and the most erudite of the castes but fighting and participating in activities like swayamvaras are reserved for the Kshatriyas. The significance of Draupadi’s black skin, as already stated has been sometimes implied as proof of her tribal ancestry. The clear implication here is that such a woman is liable to be polyandrous, a custom that is normal and acceptable among tribals.

Tracing the roots of the historicity of marginalisation to these texts, Mahasweta appropriates the characters and reconstructs many of the stories to highlight her viewpoint. In *Draupadi*, one of her most well known stories, the protagonist is ‘Dopdi’ Mejhen. Dopdi is obviously a corrupt form of Draupadi, a name given to her by an over-indulgent Brahmin mistress. “It is either that as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name Draupadi, or the tribalised form, Dopdi is the proper name of the ancient Draupadi”113 – a reassertion of Mahasweta Devi’s, views on Draupadi’s origins. In *The Mahabharata*, Draupadi’s attempted unclothing or ‘vastraharan’ sets forth in motion the chain of events that culminate in the Battle of Kurukshetra and the destruction of the Kaurava clan. As Spivak comments, Draupadi’s legitimised pluralisation as a polyandrous woman in effect becomes a


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cause for male glory and an opportunity to display male power. Married to five people simultaneously, Draupadi is as good as being called a prostitute, says Duryodhana, so where is the harm if she has more husbands? Thus, “there is nothing improper in bringing her, clothed or unclothed, into the assembly.” Everyone is aware of the miracle that happens next. As Dushashan attempts to strip her naked, Lord Krishna ensures that Draupadi’s dignity is not compromised – she is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly stripped. The underlying message is clear. Whoever she is a woman’s dignity is paramount and the divine forces ensure that her honour remain intact.

In Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi, this episode is rewritten with a modern perspective. It is Surja Sahu’s wife that gives her this name, but it is Dopdi and Dulna who murder him and forcefully take over wells and tube wells hitherto used by the upper castes. One of the most wanted ‘militants’ of the area, she is finally apprehended and arrested by ‘Senanayak’, who leaves her with his subordinates, with the order, “Make her. Do the needful.” And what is the needful? Repeatedly gang-raped throughout the night, Dopdi has no idea of “how many officers came to make her” at the orders of the officer. All she can see is her deeply mangled breast and her torn nipples. In today’s age, there is no saviour like Krishna to ensure that Draupadi remains clothed. For Dopdi too there is no longer any fear. She walks towards the master:

Senanayak walks out surprised, and sees Draupadi, totally naked, walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head held high. The nervous guards trail behind... Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds.

Dopdi insists on remaining naked publicly, because as she says, there is no one who is man enough to clothe her again. Ironically, it is the extreme physical abuse and molestation that gives Dopdi a courage she has never possessed, a power that leaves the ‘courageous’ police officer, Senanayak afraid of and unarmed target for the first time in his career. Spivak writes:

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114 Ibid.
115 Ibid., p. 11
116 Ibid., p. 34
...She emerges as the most powerful 'subject', who, still using the language of sexual 'honour', can describe as a terrifying super object – 'an unarmed target'.

The inherent images of exploitation and oppression of the woman's body, the assertion of male hegemony, all owe their origins to history. However, today's Dopo has no divine intervention to ensure that her dignity remains intact. Her unclothed nakedness however becomes her mark of protest, there is nothing more that the oppressors can do to her; it gives her a sense of power never experienced. For her male oppressor, it was much easier to unclothe the female body; when confronted with this unclothed body however, he is uncertain how to react.

Mahasweta Devi also rewrites other lesser-known stories from The Mahabharata. Some of these have been recently published in an anthology After Kurukshetra. The volume locates three stories from The Mahabharata to depict how the inherent distinction between the Rajvritya and the 'other' has led to ostracisation and marginalisation of the highest order. As in Draupadi, Mahasweta Devi uses characters from the ancient text to portray a subaltern and feminist reading of the epic. The five women in The Five Women, the nishadin in Kunti and the Nishadin and Souvali in Souvalya are all linked by a common bond: tribal, marginalised women who are drawn into the central tapestry of the epic from the fringes of society. The five women are widows of the foot soldiers who fought the battle; symbolic representations of the many thousands of such widows, mothers and daughters who lost their male members in the war between the clans. The Nishadin is a long-grieving mother, who lost her five children in the fire at Yamavrat, where they died in order that Kunti and the Pandavas could live. And Souvali is of course the mother of Souvalya or Yuyutsu – the son of Dhritarashtra – thus a Kaurava, a fact known but never acknowledged; in fact the only son of Dhritarashtra to join the Pandava army and the only Kaurava son alive after the war. The events of the epic are here looked at from a different perspective – that condemns the waste and inhumanity of war, which is anything but a dharmayuddha; rather, it is a cold-blooded power struggle in which thousands of innocent lives are sacrificed:

\[117\] Ibid.
\[118\] Ibid., p. 36
\[119\] Ibid., p. 11

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Was this some natural calamity? So many great kings join in a war between brothers... It wasn’t just brother slaughtering brother. We know of quarrels — jealousies — rivalries too. But such a war for just a throne? This, a holy war?

Just call it a war of greed. 120

The battle field in *The Mahabharata* was a space from which women were excluded. It was the men who undertook the powerplays right to the wire. All the three stories have as their focus “common” women — “vibrant, strong willed, strong-charactered ... alive with purpose and capable of doing as the royal women are not.” 121

In the first story, the five women enter the royal palace as companions to Uttara, the grief-stricken widow of Abhimanyu. These women, as Mahasweta writes “are not of the rajavrittas, women of royalty, nor are they servants or attendants. These women are from the families of the hundreds of foot soldiers who were issued no armour. So they died in large numbers.” 122 Throughout the story, contrasts are posited between these women, also widows, on the one hand, and Uttara on the other. All are victims of the same circumstances, yet it is these ‘common’ women who are able to remain stoic and realistic. Uttara of course is the to-be mother of the future king of Hastinapur, the heir to the throne, and therefore “it is imperative to keep Uttara in good spirits.” 123 With time, Uttara and the women become inseparable; for a small while at least, there is a collapsing of boundaries, a merging of two different worlds. The five women encourage Uttara to keep active — after all, pregnancy is a natural part of being a woman. By their attitude and positive outlook on life, they force her to question the beliefs that have been inbred from her childhood. For instance, she has been given to understand that all those who had perished in the ‘holy war’ are destined to go to *divyalok*, to heaven. Yet, now she learns that may not have been the case. As Godhumni remarks:

121 Kala Krishnan Ramesh. ‘The Other Great War.’ *The Hindu Literary Review*. 2nd October, 2005
122 Mahasweta Devi. op cit. p. 1
123 Ibid., p.5
No chariots came down from divyalok. They did not go to heaven. The foot soldiers died fighting in the very same dharma.yuddha. But no funeral rites were held for their souls.124

Subhadra, disturbed by Uttara’s questioning, tries to distract her and continually stresses on the difference between the rajavrita and the jana.vr̥ita, or common humanity. From time immemorial, the royal women have learnt what has been taught to them. They remain isolated and totally unaware of the harsher realities of the outside world. Now, when faced with such a reality within their chambers, they are shaken. Shubhadra, Uttara, Draupadi and the others may have suffered, but their royal blood has ensured that their degree of marginalisation has been significantly less. Uttara is given a lesson in life by these five women – a lesson in practicality and reality. In spite of the differences that it seeks to create between the royal household and the ‘Other’ – the commoners, royalty would not also survive without the farmers:

If the farmers didn’t pay with food grain, the royal granary would be empty.125

She learns how society can function truly only if men and women play equal and participatory roles. In the common man’s world, both men and women know how to use the spear – it is a weapon for survival and self-defence. She learns of a much more human world, where emotions are shared and not kept in check, where children stay with their parents and grand parents instead of being brought up by wet-nurses; a world where these women can look forward to continuing in life and remarrying instead of spending the remainder of their lives as widows concealed behind the palace walls. Each contrast serves to further highlight the differences between the two worlds, a disturbing haunting portrait of how worlds and identities are constructed, and how marginalisations work at different layers. For the royal women, their marginalisation is perhaps much harsher, isolated as they are from everyone around them; on the other hand, it is implied that the pragmatism and positive outlook of these five women will actually lead them to happier, fulfilled lives. They leave the palace no doubt, but also force the royal women to re-think their roles in society.

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124 Ibid.
125 Ibid., p.12
Today, monarchy has been replaced by democracy, and the difference between castes has been further amplified with a difference in classes, and the rise of a nouveau-riche bourgeois class, which has replicated the rajvritta-janavritta distinction of *The Mahabharata*. The tale of Souvalya highlights how the rajavritta and janavritta may actually merge. From the time of *The Mahabharata* to the present time, as seen in many texts discussed earlier, the masters have taken advantage and exploited and abused the woman’s body for their carnal pleasures. Many a time, such acts of lust have produced illegitimate offspring, who have never been acknowledged by their father; and have even led to the woman’s being declared an outcaste. *Souvali* is the story of Souvalya, born out of the physical union of Dhritarashtra and a prostitute, who now lives at the outskirts of the city. As Mahasweta Devi writes:

> On the margins of the town live the marginalised. Their settlement is a lively, noisy place. The alleys are narrow, the houses small...Cattle sheds beside the huts. There, on the stoop of a large hut, sat Souvali\(^{126}\)

Certainly a far cry from the palaces of Hastinapur, but it is here that Souvali waits for arrival of her son, who finally arrives after doing the *tarpan* for the now dead Dhritarashtra. As his only surviving son after the Kurukshetra war, this is one birthright that nobody can snatch from Souvalya or Yuyutsu as he is better known. Souvali remarks:

> Today they had to grant you the first right. You are Dhritarashtra’s son. If they left you out, they would have gone against dharma.\(^{127}\)

And a little later:

> Dasiputra! Slave child! It’s because of this dasiputra that you got water from a son’s had! Gandhari never once, in all these years, acknowledged you as a Kaurava. Why should she? Just a dasiputra, after all.\(^{128}\)

For Souvali, Dhritarashtra’s death and Souvalya’s offering of the *tarpan* is cathartic – an acceptance of her son’s (and her’s) identity in death, that was not possible during Dhritarashtra’s lifetime. It is a day of celebration for her, rather than a

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\(^{127}\) Ibid., p. 43  
\(^{128}\) Ibid.
day of performing death rites, like the other dasis in the palace. She supports her son, but realises that his quest for identity and for acceptance as part of the royal kin will never be fulfilled, as even the Pandavas will never accept him as part of their own. She has felt a keen sense of freedom, after leaving the bondage of the royal household, and she hopes that one day Souvalya too will accept this fact and will be at peace with himself.

In each of these rewritings of The Mahabharata it is the marginalised women who act as empowering agents for the women from the palaces, teaching them about the realities of life. In Kunti and the Nishadin too, this is the case. Living in the forest, Kunti is in the process of mourning her eldest son, Karna, whom she could not acknowledge till just before his death, the only son “whose father I [she] took of my own free will.”\textsuperscript{129} The stories of Souvalya and Karna have similar parallels. Both are of royal lineage, but are never accepted as such during the course of their lives. Yuyutsu does of course does perform his father’s last rites, but Karna dies without any acknowledgement of his blood. Kunti reflects on her past life in the palace, and its contrast with her present situation in the forest. It is at this time that Kunti is confronted by the elderly Nishadin. The Nishadins living in the forests have long been perceived to be among the most marginalised sections of society. In fact, Kunti is surprised to notice that the Nishadin can speak and understand her language. It is the old woman who reminds Kunti of what she terms “her greatest crime”\textsuperscript{130} – her acceptance of the plot hatched at Varnavrat to ensure that the Pandavas escaped, leaving five Nishadin men and their mother to die instead. For the common man, “to sacrifice or harm innocents in one’s own self-interest is the most unpardonable sin”\textsuperscript{131} – and Kunti is guilty in this case, as is the whole royal family elsewhere, for having taken advantage of their power and sacrificing thousands of lives for their own ends. The only time the outcastes were invited into the Brahmin feast was on that fateful day, when their faith was destroyed. Today it is the opposite. It is Kunti who has come to the forest, the abode of the Nishadins, and once again a fire is waiting to take place – this time a natural forest fire that will scorch the earth and burn alive the three royals – a divine retribution for the sins of the past. As Kunti owns up to the crime

\textsuperscript{129} Mahasweta Devi. ‘Kunti and the Nishadin.’ tr. Anjum Katyal. After Kurukshetra. p. 29
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
that she does not even remember that she committed, she is left alone and helpless, to face the same fate as that of the innocent Nishadins many years back.

In all these stories, the royal house becomes the oppressor. Having internalised their ideals of superiority and royalty to such an extent, they forget that the lokvritta, or common man are humans just like them, and more importantly, they cannot survive without them. And when his-story becomes her-story, the harsh truths are revealed, and this will forever change relations between the rajvritta and the lokvritta, the royalty and the commoner; the master and the servant; the oppressor and the oppressed. At the same time, the royal women’s victimisation within the palace walls is a result of their own compliance and desire to confirm to the womanly ideal. For the so-called ‘other’, it is a much more practical approach. Just as the earth needs to be ploughed and tended, so does life, in order that it can go on. The five dasi women, the Nishadin and Souvali – all demonstrate qualities of strength that enable them to learn from the past and move on to the future, to a life that is perhaps much more enriching and fulfilling than the lives of Kunti, Draupadi, Subhadra, Uttara and even the dasis living within the palace walls.

In all the above discussions, the focus has been on women characters – quite natural, since it is the women who are the protagonists of the stories and the truly oppressed, marginalised and victimised sections of society, trying to establish their identity in the midst of a harsh, male patriarchal order. But what role do the male characters play in Mahasweta Devi’s works? In discussing the writings of Bessie Head, it has been seen that Head’s conceptualisation of an ideal world is where men and women work in tandem and harmony, and therefore along with the blackish grey male characters, these are also positive ones, who represent hope for the future. However, one notices very few such characters in Mahasweta Devi’s oeuvre. With very few exceptions, her male characters fall into two categories, black and blacker. The women, in spite of being part of the larger community are individuated in their actions and mannerisms. That is not the case with the men. They are generally prototypes for the oppressor, and many of the names given to them – Ramavatar, Senanayak etc. are names synonymous with male hegemony. In most of the tales however, the male characters remain at the peripheries of the narrative, as the author’s main intention is to highlight the plight of women. The men only play a minimal role. Dhouli, Sanichari, Stanadayini, Chinta, Giribala, Saanjshokaler Maa, Sindhubala,
Jamunaboti’s Maa, Hajaar Churashir Maa, Draupadi, Rudaali, Douloti, Bayen – in all these tales, as exemplified by their very title, it is the women who take centre stage. Same is the case with The Five Women and Kunti and the Nishadin, although it may be argued that as retellings from The Mahabharata these were deliberately written in an attempt to project the women’s viewpoint instead of the men.

Senanayak has been described by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak as a character who is caught between the worlds of theory and practice. His name literally translates as “army leader”, but here he is deliberately de-personalised. The author deliberately adopts a detached tone while discussing him; by moving from the past tense to the third person present tense, as though talking about a dehumanised entity. Senanayak is an elderly experienced man, yet he ”remains fixed within his class origins,”132 the politically aware, educated, elite who theoretically, identifies with the enemy, but in practice, he destroys the same enemy. who as the ‘Other’, becomes a threat to his own very existence. Spivak states that in Senanayak she finds “the closest approximation of the First World scholar in search of the Third World,”133 but this analogy may be extended. Senanayak is in reality the Third World scholar of Western theories and concepts. His understanding therefore is somewhat ambivalent, as in his attempt to appropriate and internalise, he begins to perceive his fellow ‘Third World’ inhabitants as the ‘Other’, the enemy.

Mahasweta Devi’s portrayal of Senanayak therefore fulfils a number of other objectives. In a manner of speaking, Senanayak is a part of Devi’s larger critique of the official Left position. And at the level of plot, he is the police officer, who is finally able to capture Dopdi, the Naxalite revolutionary. And it is here that there is a blurring between Senanayak’s ideas of theory and practice. Theoretically, as a member of the educated elite he may be seen as endorsing the official Left viewpoint; yet on the other, he looks down upon the ‘Naxalite revolutionaries.’ One man’s revolutionary is another man’s freedom fighter, but Dopdi is both for Senanayak. It is also here that the differentiation between Draupadi and Dopdi get blurred. He understands Draupadi but must destroy Dopdi. And when face to face with the brutalised, humiliated, naked Dopdi, he is scared. The reasons may be many. The naked Dopdi with her wounded, mangled breasts brings Senanayak face to face with

132 Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. op cit. p. 7
his alter-ego, the male oppressor, with little respect for the woman, the power-monger, who will stoop to any depths. The ‘Burra Sahib’ and his deputies, Arjan Singh and Arijit, are carved in the same mould, and faced with the courage of the ‘Other’, whom they had sought to tame and colonise, they are indeed “terribly afraid.” The ‘encounter’ between Dopdi and Senanayak therefore becomes a trope for the colonial struggle. Draupadi’s battered body is symbolic of the colonised land – exploited, battered and bruised till she bleeds dry, while Senanayak, naturally is the powerful coloniser, who cannot be satisfied till he has succeeded in totally subduing the subject, and who is terrified at the first sign of revolt. Therefore, although not an individuated character, Senanayak is Mahasweta Devi’s prototype of the stereotypical, omnipresent class of male oppressors with no redeeming qualities whatsoever.

Ramavtar Singh, who appears in Rudaali is the poor country cousin of Senanayak – perhaps not as well versed in the theories, but equally, if not more adept at the practice of exertion of hegemony. For the likes of Ramavtar and his clones that reappear in a number of works, exploitation works in different ways. He can send all the dushad and ganju males to jail, enraged as he is over the loss of some wheat. Of course there is no proof that these people were the culprits in the first place. He can try and evict them from the village, and reclaim the entire village space for the upper castes. His oppression “is a constant presence” for all the villagers, which invades even their most private space – their emotions. As a result even grief is commodified and “distorted in the desperate struggle for survival.” And in the closed confined space of the village, there is no choice for the poor villagers, but to return to the devil for sustenance. The male oppressor uses his wealth as a tool of exploitation and repression. But for the oppressed, it is not that they are unaware of the “greed, miserliness and moral bankruptcy” of the “masters”; in fact by pointing out the deficiencies within these people, especially when it comes to materialistic issues,

133 Ibid., p. 1
135 Mahasweta Devi. ‘Rudaali.’ tr. Anjum Katyal. Rudaali: From Fiction to Performance. p. 4
136 Ibid.
137 Ibid., p. 8

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these subaltern classes “keep the privileged in perspective.”133 There is therefore a certain kind of ironic humour in their casuistic remarks:

“He’s not willing to spend a paisa on trying to cure her, but plans to spend thirty thousand on her funeral.”

“...These people cannot summon up tears even at the death of their own brothers and father...”139

The use of the ‘rudaali’ is also a typically upper class activity; a sign of their social status, but significantly, it is in this aspect that the oppressor cannot outwit the oppressed. In order to fulfil societal obligations, the family is forced to spend lavishly; rudaalis like Sanichari and Bikhni take advantage of this situation, and this leads them to a degree of professional empowerment. By using the very oppression of the ‘master’ as a tool for social empowerment, they are symbolic of the subaltern’s use of the hand of evil to suit their own purposes. The gendered subaltern in this case reverses Spivak’s contention that the subaltern cannot speak. In fact, Sanichari and Bikhni are symbolic of just the opposite. Their economically empowered status gives them a voice, through which to further empower the other voiceless. As Anjum Katyal writes:

After her discussion with Dulan, Sanichari’s lingering inhibitions are removed...She is relaxed and friendly, invites two village girls to join them...and emphasises that this profession will stand them in good stead, when, like her, they age, and other means of livelihood fail them.140

Sanichari’s statement made at the funeral of Gambhir Singh displays her newfound maturity:

...Malik said, make a great noise, a big fuss, something people will talk about. Is that possible with mere ten whores?.....Let us get on with our work.

The malik belongs to us now.141

138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Anjum Katyal. Rudaali: From Fiction to performance. p.23
141 Mahasweta Devi. ‘Rudaali.’ op cit. p.91
This last statement carries enormous significance. In death as in life, the ‘master’ cannot ‘survive’ without the rudaali – the difference lies in the fact that post-death, the gaze changes. As Sanichari and the whores appropriate the malik and sing his praises, his family members are reduced to being onlookers and bystanders – watching the spectacle unfold before them. Rudaali is clearly an exception in Mahasweta Devi’s genre. It is one of her few tales to end on a note of hope rather than bleakness. One major reason for this is Dulan. However, in most other stories, there is little scope for female empowerment; in fact, the woman ends up as a victim of the same masters whom they had sought to defy. The Fairytale of Rajabasha highlights this tragedy. Oppression is limited not just to any one village or community – it occurs everywhere. The town may change – from Hajipur to Johan to Kosa – as may the names – from Niranjan to Karnal Singh to Pritam Singh, but the genesis of the oppression remains the same. Joshmina keeps fighting till the end; however the knowledge that she is pregnant with the son of a diku is too much for her. Unable to bear the fact that her entire family will be outcast and doomed to stay at the margins of the village and that her son will never be able to marry within the community, Joshmina decides to end the oppression once and for all – she commits suicide. In Dhouli, Dhouli is punished for her beauty and the fact that the malik’s son has fallen in love with her. In spite of all his good intentions and promises of marriage, Misrilal’s family force him to marry elsewhere, leaving Dhouli pregnant with his child. Ultimately, when all other sources of income fail, Dhouli has to resort to prostitution to ensure survival for her mother, her child and herself. But the same masters who are responsible for her being in such a state in the first place now pronounce judgement on her:

Dhouli cannot practise prostitution in this village. She can go to some town, to Ranchi and do her whoring there. If not, her house will be set on fire and mother, daughter, child will be burned to death. Such sinful activities cannot continue in the heart of this village. This village still has brahmans living in it.142

Misrilal, the master’s son, who claims to love Dhouli, is ultimately unable to revolt and stand up to his parents and marries elsewhere. He continues to profess his love for Dhouli, but when he learns that she is now a prostitute, there is a sudden
change in his attitude. The loving, caring Misrilal – characteristics that individualised him initially – is transformed into just any other member of his caste and class:

A Brahman’s son to be brought up by acchuts! Untouchables! I’ll kill you!145

But Dhouli is now able to stand up to him, telling him that he does not have the courage to kill her. More importantly, she raises crucial questions:

You can get married, run a shop, see movies with your wife, and I have to kill myself?

Misrilal is naturally privileged, because he is upper-caste, specifically Brahmin, and male. It is the norm for such people to have illegitimate offspring. But for Dhouli the rules are different. After the village panchayat pronounces judgment on her, she has to leave the village and become a professional prostitute. She realises however that this is the only way in which she can fight back the system, with the help of the community:

When you are a kept woman, you’re all alone. But now she would be part of a community. The collective strength of that society was far more powerful than an individual’s strength.146 (my emphasis)

Male hegemony is manifested in different ways; yet what men fail to understand is that by subscribing to age-old views, they actually project themselves as weaklings. For instance, had Misrilal had the courage to stand by his actions, he would have been a stronger character, and certainly a better human being. However, his actions prove that he is not different from stereotypical males of his caste and segment of society.

One male character however does stand out amongst all the characters studies thus far – Dulan from Rudaali, a “crafty old rogue”, a symbol of the strategies of survival that are used by the community. Dulan’s gender and formalised patriarchal authority are overridden by his role as a villager, as a member of the community that

142 Mahasweta Devi. ‘Dhouli.’ tr. Sarmishtha Dutta Gupta. Outcast. p. 31
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
tries to help its fellow members. However, Dulan is far from a-gendered in the text. It cannot be coincidence that Dulan, as a male, is the chosen medium for the dissemination of advice to Sanichari and others instead of any other female member. Dulan is practical – he advises Sanichari to do her work slowly because as long as there was work, they would not starve. He questions authority and also teaches others in the village to be critical of it. Of course, Dulan is a major contributory factor to Sanchari’s empowerment, intervening in her life in positive ways to “advise, help, educate, enlighten.” “He succeeds in diverting her mind from helpless despair...to a realization that actually she’s angry about the unfairness of her situation.” One of his most significant suggestions to Sanichari, after the death of her partner and fellow rudaali Bikhi, is that

…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.”

This is similar to Fanon’s idea in The Wretched of the Earth, wherein he states how for the exploited and the oppressed, land is the only means of earning a livelihood, a means of acquiring an identity, and thus, it should be protected at all costs. Dulan’s suggestion that Sanichari should take the initiative to form a union of funeral wailers and whores just as the coal miners did is an important step in her process of empowerment. In fact, it brings to the fore ideas of organised labour and its trade union practices fighting for worker’s rights. As the initiator, Sanichari becomes the unquestioned leader of the Union, and Dulan retains his position of superiority as well. Anjum Katyal writes:

Throughout, Dulan’s is the voice stripping away sentimentality and blind prejudice in favour of adaptation and rational argument. His is the voice that criticises, accuses and condemns the upper classes and highlights their moral corruption, greed and hypocrisy.
Dulan is configured as Gramsci’s thus “organic intellectual.” However, even within this homogenised ideal of community, issues of class creep in, and it is this that distinguishes Dulan from his fellow villagers. Mahasweta Devi states that Dulan is a contractor who has a contract to supply twenty labourers. Therefore, he is in a clear position of authority vis-à-vis other members of his community in spite of being a ganju. For the masters, Dulan is as much an ‘Other’ as everyone else in the community, but within the community, he is in a comparatively privileged position.

Mahasweta Devi has commented in an interview that Sanichari, Dulan and other characters have their origins in real-life characters and their experiences. Dulan’s experiences too change accordingly:

...In my story Dulan receives books from someone. But since he cannot read, he keeps the books aside...The grandson and his wife have learnt reading and writing. Now the grandson gets killed. The wife is rescued. Dulan goes back to his books. Towards the end of the story Dulan takes the books with him and joins the adult literacy class. Now he has to learn the alphabet. He wants to read what is written there.

It is Dulan’s position among his community members that leads Mahasweta Devi to imagine such a positive postscript for him in her sequel. He is given books to read because he is male; even in the sequel, the courage to go to an adult literacy class can come to him because he is male – after all, how may women, especially from the ganju-dushad community can actually find the time and energy, even today to join such classes that would contribute to their empowerment. Thus, in spite of all assertions to the contrary, Dulan does remain contextualised within the patriarchal and hegemonical structures of society - structures that pervade all class and caste divisions.

A similar idea to some extent is also offered in DouloT. Here Dulan is replaced by Bono. He is a heroic figure for the bonded labourers simply because he escaped from becoming a bandhua slave. And although he realises that slavery

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151 Anjum Katyal takes Gramsci’s position of a social group that creates various strata of intellectuals within it that give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function in the economic, social and political fields.

152 Anjum Katyal. op cit. p. 25
continues to persist in different forms, even in the organised sector, his very
determination not to be bowed down by such pressures elevates his personality.
Through Bono, Mahasweta is, as Jaidev states, “at pains to emphasise that for any
resistance to be successful, the initiative has to come from within the oppressed
sections.” Bono ultimately becomes a personal assistant to the Government
missionary Father Bomfuller. Throughout the process, as he moves from one place to
another, he learns new things and acts accordingly. At the same time, for the likes of
Father Bomfuller and Mohan Srivastava, Bono acts as an eye-opener towards certain
harsh realities. For instance, he tells them that the lower castes are indeed compelled
to borrow money from the upper castes at certain times, but the reason that they are
not able to pay it back is because they have no land. As a result, they are forced into
bond slavery, and the vicious circle continues. It is therefore no wonder that an initial
loan amount of Rs.350 has generated a profit of over Rs.40,000 to the likes of
Parmanand Misra, Munavar and Latia. These characters are diametrical opposites to
the likes of Bono. As members of the exploiting castes, they are united in their right to
exploitation. And as seen in Senanayak and Ramavatar, the names and associated
motifs further reinforce the ideas of hegemony and patriarchy. Parmanand Mishra
calls himself, Sankatanarayan, literally, the one who will save against ‘sankat’ or
harm; Hanuman Mishra is the priest who sets Parmanand against Douloti, while
Munavar calls himself the cream-white creation of God. By reworking and reversing
the meanings traditionally associated with these divine names, Mahasweta once again
locates the roots of exploitation in age-old traditions. In their brazen projection of
themselves as Gods and divinity, these characters insist that exploitation is their
divinely ordained right from the time of their birth. And the government machinery or
the system actually reinforces such divisions:

Government contractor-slum landlord-market trader-shopkeeper- post office
– each is the other’s friend.  

Father Bomfuller, Mohan Srivastava and even Prasad Mahato too, to some
extent are embedded within these very traditions. As Jaidev writes:

153 Jaidev. op cit. p. 35
154 Gayatri Chakraboty Spivak. op cit. p. 24
As a system, exploitation retains some degree of flexibility. The Gandhian missionary from Delhi is an irritant, but is persuaded to preach status-quoism. Father Bomfuller's report can be a threat to the landlords, but then some cooperating officials bury it under a heap of files in new Delhi. The VIP clients apparently pay nothing to Parmanand Mishra, but their patronage means safety to him. Thus, as Bono suggests, the answer to such deep-rooted problems cannot lie in the good intentions of individuals. There has to be a much more far-reaching solution. And it is this realisation and understanding, along with his actions that elevate Bono to a much higher level, as an agent of empowerment, Gramsci's organic intellectual.

Therefore, the stories of Mahasweta Devi attempt to depict the situation of women living on the edge – the most outcast and marginalised sections of society. Most of these tales are bleak, and offer no ray of hope and respite for women against the sustained oppression that pervade barriers of caste, class and gender. Many of the stories are narrated through a third person voice, that look on the happenings as an 'outsider' – a critiquing voice that locates and historicises the roots of oppression in the structures of society that has traditionally favoured the men. Mahasweta Devi makes no disguise of her contempt for the urban, educated, middle classes, content to stay within their cocoon and pretend an educated knowledgeable discourse on the tribals, the dispossessed landless labourers. She takes a snipe at metropolitan cultures in which media doyens prefer to give more space to choli ke peeche, or in more contemporary days, various controversies regarding film stars and artistes rather than hard, bleak news. She writes:

What is there was the national problem that year. When it became a national issue, - the other fuckups of that time - Crop failure- earthquake, everywhere clashes between so called terrorists and state power and therefore killings, the beheading of a young man and woman in Haryana for the crimes of marrying out of caste, the unreasonable demands of Medha Patkar and others around the Narmada dam, hundreds of rape – murder lockup torture...non-

155 Jaidev. op cit. p 31
issues...failed to reach highlighting in the newspapers. Much more important than this was choli ke peechhe.156

Strangely, many years later all these issues are still very much in the news. This is also a pointer to the fact that society has hardly changed. The urban middle-class elite, man or woman, in postcolonial times is either like Senanayak, knowledgeable, but confused as to how to execute theory into practice, or like Sheetal Mallya, ill-informed on history (She links ‘gangor’ to the River Ganga, although actually it is derived from Gangauri). It is this same middle class that uses the tools of power under their control to ‘decide’ what is best for people, even though they may know nothing of the reality of this section of society. “The tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel the mainstream simply doesn’t understand the parallel.”157

Conventional historiography has marginalised the contributions of tribal communities in various struggles, from the pre-independence period to the Naxalites – the rebellions of Birsa Munda, Titu Mir, Majnu Shah have generally remained as postscripts and footnotes. And that is the reason for such “yawning gaps”158 in the understanding of the postcolonial, urban intellectual. As a writer and activist, Mahasweta Devi repeatedly stresses on the role that history has to play in cultivating understanding, and that is the reason that she has repeatedly tried to “resurrect” histories, “as if they were within less than contemporary,159 whether ancient history from the epics or more contemporary histories such as the Naxal Movement:

The history of the past and the history of the present, both constitute history.
There are some histories that are for all times...I have never had the capacity
nor the urge to create art for arts sake...I have found authentic documentation
To be the best medicine for protest against injustice and exploitation.160

Mahasweta Devi sees herself as documentor of tribal exploitation and expression. Her undoubtedly deep knowledge of tribal customs, practices, constraints, limitations and marginalisations comes from a close contact with these communities, and a continuously learning process. Unlike Bessie Head and many other writers, she

157 Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. Imaginary Maps. p. ii
158 Mahasweta Devi. Interview Outlook magazine. April, 2005
159 Samik Bandopadhayay. op cit. p.8
160 Ibid., p xi
is not herself a victim of these modes of oppression. In fact, located as she is in the upper strata of society - in terms of both caste and class - her gendered marginalisation is significantly less. Her audience too is largely from this section of society, a fact that she is acutely aware of. Her idea is to disrupt the romantic motion of the Indian village, frozen in time, destroy the motions of middle class sensibilities that seeks to satisfy its conscience by occasionally handing over used garments or left over food to the servants, realizing however that "it was as meaningless as trying to conceal a crack in a grimy wall by putting up a pretty calendar." 161 It is however a significant point that the tools of resistance that she depicts - Dulan, Bono and a few others, are all men. Patriotism has seeped in here too. Thus, ultimately, even Mahasweta Devi is a member of the educated middle class, she is marginally ahead of her contemporaries by making an attempt to do something to reduce their plight. Her fiction demonstrates beyond question the possibility of a non-Dalit writing the Dalit and the disposed. Yet, all her tales are narrated by an omnipresent narrator, who notices the strands of oppression but is not directly involved, rather like a journalist than an author, who sympathises and documents happenings, but suggests that not much more can be done, until the collective consciousness of society is raised and incited into reversing the age old paradigms of caste, class and gender hegemony towards a more egalitarian society. Till that happens, the women will continue to suffer, the men will continue to be villainous; even comparatively positive male characters like Dulan are conceptualised within the formalised societal structures - solutions are hinted at but not offered - because Mahasweta Devi too, to some extent, ultimately remains limited by the constraints of middle class sensibilities and language.