



A STUDY OF IDENTITY AND WOMEN IN DEVI'S *OUTCAST: FOUR STORIES*

B. Sathyavathi

Research Scholar,

Dept. of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad

ABSTRACT:

The paper traces multiple identities in Mahasweta Devi's work *Outcast: Four Stories*. It would make a review of the work as a literary genre by focusing on aspects such as various identities, cultural conflicts, and marginalization. The stories depict the dismal and horrible condition of four deprived female characters—Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina, and Chinta—who are deprived even by people who are typically recognised as the socially outcast. These stories of Devi may be read as a powerful articulation of the "Others" of the tribal marginalized community in the Indian society.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, Identity, Women, Outcast, Stories

INTRODUCTION:

Mahasweta Devi is an amazing author who has composed, functioned and struggled for the under privileged vigorously for almost a century. She is recognized as an author of global importance and her works translated into English are being read in a broader framework of postcolonial analysis. Her narratives are a result of the three entwined factors of her life, viz., social advocacy, journalistic coverage and artistic literature. This paper explores multiple identities in Mahasweta Devi's work *Outcast: Four Stories*.

OUTCAST: FOUR STORIES:

Outcast: Four Stories by Mahasweta Devi depicts the dismal and horrible condition of four deprived female characters—Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina, and Chinta—who are deprived even by people who are typically recognised as the

socially outcast. The author presents an image of a three-tier arrangement in the Indian society comprised of three levels or layers of identities—the foremost of the chief stream, the second of the deprived, and the third of the untouchable. At this juncture, the Mahasweta Devi searches and displays the gendered reasons situated encircling the socio-economic abuse of three women representing a backward section. Under the guise of India's democratic social structure, the author uncovers the inherent slave trade that continues to exist. Devi also makes a strong case for the terrible and hopeless plight of women who often have no one to turn to. The most heinous aspect is that these are women who are not treated as human beings and are classified as merchandise both within and outside of their own social groups. Following this, it may be mentioned that the names of the protagonists "dhouli," "shanichari," "chinta" bear the title of an eponym of Mahasweta Devi's short stories. The title of the other narration is "the fairytale of rajabasha." "rajabasha" is the name of a place. It is curious to mention that the primary letters of the titles of all these narrations are in lower case, possibly to suggest the irrelevance, banality of the tales of those miserable women to the communally advantaged. Mahasweta Devi, on the other hand, employs the initial letters of their names in higher case in the work – Dhouli, Shanichari, Chinta – feasibly to propose the significance of their persona in the tales. More thought provoking it appears to be that on the cover page and on the title page, both the writer's and that of the translator's names are printed in lower case initials. Both are women. Following this, it may be emphasized that the four tales in the text taken for the present study are instances of the concealed structure of racking women within male chauvinism, caste, destitution, and indigenous socio-politics. Moreover, these are also regarded as the parameters that are employed in taking advantage of a female body in terms of sexuality and fabrication. The female personas of these tales are 'the other' in the dialogue being tribal, females and laborers, a theme of non-hegemonic community. These tales may be identified are not produced out of an urban and civilized social order but an exhaustive research of the writer in *Ganju*, *Dusad* and *Oraon* villages and social groups deprived of a warmth of resourcefulness. Nevertheless, the actuality that is covertly connected to the authoritative structure of a social

order of middle class codes and treaties. The concept of man/woman binary conflict that one produces and second reproduces is theoretically investigated in terms of manipulation where western discerning is precisely concerned for labor of males however, females are positioned in that is ignored. Mahasweta Devi analyzes this prejudice in her tales through a search for the lives of these personas as bonded laborers. The four women Dhouli, Shanichari, Chinta and Josmina are the personas who are thrown away from their social groups; they express a traumatic image of social configurations of a social order that enforces a categorized religious and cast paradigm around them. The author correspondingly tries to disclose the slave trade in an unrestricted nation state where model states like Punjab purchase tribal people of Bengal and Jharkhand to till and labor in their crop meadows. The girls and women of these social groups are later sexually oppressed and abused by BMC and to endure have to be labors in brick furnaces where they are partially paid, partially fed and as well turned into subjects of sexual abuse. The lifestyles of these females are akin to the reason that they have to face the painful facets of socio-political and economic state of affairs.

The foremost of these narratives is aptly illustrated "Dhauili" in *Outcast: Four Stories*. It is a serious observer of a tribal 'dushad' woman's reflection, vengeance, and opposition. She is a victim of unceasing caste, class, and gender assault, making her existence a never-ending pursuit for subsistence. Dhouli, a tribal girl from an undisclosed rural community in Jharkhand's Taharr district, is an example of how a tribal girl from a lower caste is forced to become a mother and transformed into a kept woman by the society's ostensible owner. The tale depicts the dejected and painful predicament of a 'dushad' (untouchable) young widow woman who is lured and made pregnant by Misrilal, the son of a rich, high caste, Brahmin named Hanuman Misra. Misrilal gets rid of the responsibility and answerability of the baby and its mother by getting married to another woman pertaining to his social group and settles down in Ranchi, a faraway Indian town. Subsequently, under the conditions Dhouli and her child are compelled to famish for want of food. The central character of the story is forced to trade her body so as to sustain her body and spirit in concert for the

sake of her son and for herself. Misrilal is observed returning and forcing her to abandon the commune and move to the town to turn into a prostitute. It may be remarked that this tale of 'dhouli' incorporates the aspect of oppression of a female – an untouchable widow. The narrative may be identified starts with a subaltern setting of these terrible actualities that the narrator writes, is intensely discerned by Debashish Chattopadhyay in his article that "an ambience of marginalization, which is intensified later on, is suggested by the use of words like 'poor, rundown buses for poor, run down people'." At a different level, the term "'buses', a clear signifier of modern life style and civilization, fixes the nature and role of the people of the 'Other world' as these buses are explicitly defined as rejected vehicles fit only to ply to a world where the 'metalled road ends.'" (107)

It may be emphasized that most of the words and promises mentioned by Misrilal go futile since he gets wedded to his own caste woman and rebukes Dhouli being a "keep" and not attempting suicide. This gendered partiality and feudal structure of Indian culture particularly marginalizes females in their own community and drives to leave the dwelling to practice prostitution anywhere else. The character, Dhouli, as already mentioned is forced to leave the community by the 'panchayat' and hence goes to Ranchi. It becomes obvious that as the central character "cannot practice prostitution in this village. She can go to some town, to Ranchi, and do her work 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." (31)

For existence, the central character has to be a prostitute for the reason that the Misras hindered every type of assistance from the locals. On the other hand, the authority of resistance against this embarrassing degradation that is seen when she refutes being a "keep" of Misrilal's brother-in-law and indicates to be a proficient prostitute in a town. Following this, it may be commented that when the central character is compelled to take up whoredom for subsistence in the village her predicament is the same, as she has no communal and emotional perception against the dominating class. Nevertheless, in conclusion she

deconstructs this dualism of dominance by condemning the proposition and turns out to be engaged in a socially ostracized profession rather than being a “keep” in the village. It has been pointed out by the author that “When you are a kept woman, you’re all alone. But now she would be a part of a community. The collective strength of that society was far more powerful than [an]individual’s strength.” Further, “those who had forced her to be a whore were the ones who controlled the society. They were the most powerful!” (*Outcast* 32)

In the second story of Mahasweta Devi titled “Shanichari,” an Oraon girl is marginalized in her own community, in a similar way as Dhoulis was, for returning impregnated with a dikus (an upper caste) child. It was Gohuman, a woman of middle-age, who had sold Shanichari in West Bengal’s Barasat area to a brick kiln owner. It was there she not only endured sexual and economic exploitation leading to her unwanted pregnancy. Consequently, she was asked to return to her native place, but she faced social ostracism in her native village. A similar story could be seen in “the fairytale of rajabasha,” where she imposed ostracism on herself and leaves the world by committing suicide as a result of the affair between her husband Sarjom and Josmina. The tragedy is the two women were sold in Punjab to a landowner. In this distant place, Josmina meets the same fate as that of Shanichari. However, Josmina somehow manages to return home eventually albeit with a hope of starting the life afresh. Alas! her hope is dashed when she finds herself pregnant because of the Punjab landlord. Subsequently, Josmina gives up her own life to rescue her husband from being banished from the community. Though these stories may appear unrelated yet one finds “Otherness” played out in their lives. The story of “dhoulis,” creates ambience of an “Other world” in its opening scene, the subaltern’s world of where light seldom penetrates: “The bus left Ranchi in the evening and reached Taharr around eight at night. ... The world beyond and the wide, metalled road ended here. Rohtagi Company’s bus was the only link between Taharr and the rest of the world.” The narrative continues, “They used poor, rundown buses for poor, rundown places like Taharr, Palani or Burudiha. The service was suspended during the rainy season as buses couldn’t play on unmetalled roads. Taharr would be completely cut off from the rest of the world during the monsoon

months.” (1) In a way the civilized world is symbolized by “metalled road” in the initial paragraph, at the concluding paragraph remains apathetic to the ostracism of Dhouli from her own subaltern community. Devi skillfully shows through her narrative that the “Otherness” label is forced upon her characters by their respective society--politics and hegemony of the upper class.

In “the fairytale of rajabasha”, Devi, not only provides a true and striking portrayal of the exploitation of tribal couple Josmina and Sarjom but also depicts particular obvious natural reactions of the tribal masses enduring poverty at its lowest and behavioral pattern of those affluent persons hailing from the mainstream. The narrative starts with the description of an arrangement of a tribal celebrations at the time of marriage of Josmina and Sarjom, and we hear SuraJonko saying: “Not just turmeric and salt, let’s cook it [the meat] with onions, pepper and other spices” and the unstated sentiments of them are revealed by the narrator: “Great fun, great food” (57). Being in poverty and deprivation, the couple are very joyful: “Josmina collected roots and tubers from the forest. Living off just these and ghato made of makai, she looked gorgeous. A new mother, the curves of Josmina’s body filled out like the gushing Koyena in the months of rain. There was much happiness and peace in this first chapter of the fairytale of Rajabasha” (59). Later on, when the couple return to their village after being slaves in Punjab, Devi states the least that a subaltern needs: “Within no time everything became as it was before. It was so refreshing to bathe in the waters of the Koyena. So peaceful to boil some makai at the end of the day and cook ghato in the evening.” Further, “To sprinkle salt on it and eat off leaf plates. So pleasant to sit by the banks of the river, washing pots and pans while chatting to girls you’ve known all your life.” (78)

On the contrary the excitement of the couple while being in abject poverty, Devi’s showcasing of Sahu’s sadness despite being affluent is worth noting: “He had two fine houses in the districts of Monoharpur and Raikera. And two wives [in contrast to Sarjom’s one hut and one wife] in those two houses. Now his first wife, who lived in Rajabasha, was pestering him for a pucca brick house.” (59)

Just to satisfy his first wife’s, Nandlal sells Sarjom and Josmina to an “adarsh kisan of Punjab.” Here Devi demonstrates that at the heart of the

problem of the marginalized lies power-dynamics of the master-slave relationship between lower caste and upper caste of the village wherein the former is treated by the latter only as a commodity or labor, similar to bonded labor. Therefore, Punjabi agriculturalist Niranjan Singh, while buying the couple, "pinched Sarjom's arm and shoulder muscles," and a moment after when Josmina, "gaping open-mouthed at everything around her, put a nipple to the child's mouth," Niranjan reflected: "Feed her for a week and these goods will be just right." (66) In the entire narrative, Devi tries to imply that the people of subaltern category are no less than "maal," "goods," "commodities", "jungle jaanwars", "forest animals", for those who at the helm of affairs or enjoy higher position in the social hierarchy: "To Niranjan, she [Josmina] was just fresh meat; dark, jungle [savage] flesh which he had paid for. They bought it all up, everything. Everything that belonged to the Josminas" (72). Hence, the master treated the laborers worse and subjected them to harsh labor of sixteen to eighteen hours a day, stripped them and abused them in front of their loved ones, and put them under confinement at night: "It was his [the master's accomplice, Harchand's] job to keep the buffaloes, cows and bonded labour under lock and key" (68). At last she finds some freedom from the slavery but it lived for a very short period. After returning to their village, Josmina was shattered to realize that she is impregnated with the Punjabi's child after he raped her. She could not digest the fact that her own community of tribals would forsake her or even punish the family. In addition, knowing well that the family would be ostracized by the community, she finds the ultimate solution in drowning herself in the Koyena river.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, it may be said that these stories of Devi may be read as a powerful articulation of the "Others" of the tribal marginalized community in the Indian society. To a question posed by Gayatri Spivak in her work, whether the subaltern can speak, one can definitely say after reading works of Devi that subaltern do speak. Moreover, Devi is vocal when it comes to speaking about the marginalized. In fact, she speaks about the marginalized individuals from the

communities that are themselves marginalized.

(Note: This study is carried out as part of doctoral research.)

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