

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

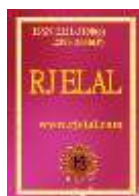
Resistance and Silence: A critical reading of a woman's journey in Mahasweta Devi's short story "Dhouli"

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Article info

Article Received: 19/08/2022

Article Accepted: 22/09/2022

Published online: 30/09/2022

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.3.272](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.3.272)

Abstract

Bengali Litterateur and activist Mahasweta Devi was known for her fierce advocacy for the marginalized- especially subaltern women whose voices remained stifled by the society. Her short story 'Dhouli' explores the silent suffering and subtle resistance of a lower –caste woman entrapped in a deeply patriarchal and caste-ridden structure. This article critically examines Dhouli's journey as one marked by both voicelessness and defiance. It highlights how her silence and her gradual transgression to sex trade becomes both a form of resistance and exploitation in a world that offers her neither justice nor dignity. Through Dhouli's experiences, the article reveals the complex intersections of gender, caste, and class, emphasizing the systemic failure of the society to protect the rights of vulnerable women and how the oppressive social norms continue their suffering.

Keywords: marginalisation, subaltern, resistance, gender, caste

Mahasweta Devi's 'Dhouli' is more than a short story-it is a document of pain, injustice and resilience. Taken from Sarmista Dutta Gupta's volume of translated short-stories titled "Outcast : Four Stories" (2002), the short story set in rural Bihar, brings sharp focus on the oppressive structures of caste and gender that unfortunately still shapes the socio-cultural fabric of India. Through the eponymous titular character Dhouli, a Dusad woman, Mahasweta Devi crafts a powerful critique of systematic marginalization against a woman on the margin while also capturing her quiet resilience and strength. Dhouli becomes a site where all the forces of oppression like caste and gender exert their full force.

Originally written in Bengali, Dhouli was published in 'Nairitey Megh' in 1979. Translator Sarmista Dutta Gupta, who worked closely with

Mahasweta Devi, successfully preserved the distinct features of the author's narrative style. She has retained the use of original words a couple of times in the translation which gave a greater sense of reality and proximity to the characters and the world they lived.

Padmashri Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) uses her stories as a formidable intersection between literature and activism, foregrounding narratives of the dispossessed and marginalized. She brought alive the horrors of exploitation against the lower castes, tribals and abandoned women whom she met while travelling extensively through the tribal belts of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Embellishment was a path she chose not to take in her literary works but preferred to present bare ugly truths in her fiction. Sharing her feelings in the

Preface to Shrestho Golpo, Mahasweta Devi wrote -
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“I have never had the capacity nor the urge to create art for art’s sake.....I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium of protest against injustice and exploitation.” (Hirpara, 1).

Caste functions as the primary axis of power in Dhouli. The social stratification of the village is rigid, with Brahmins occupying the apex and the Dusads relegated to the lowest rung. It dictates the lives of the villagers where the upper-caste society routinely prey on the lower caste without any accountability. The exploitation of the lower caste particularly of women is normalized in the village which leads to their further subjugation. Dhouli serves as a metonym for entire communities who have been historically silenced and suppressed for decades. Mahasweta Devi speaking to Gayatri Spivak had remarked, “The mainstream and the tribal cultures run parallel; they do not have a meeting point”(Vijaya 17)

The story opens with Dhouli on the verge of being ostracized by her village. The sexual liaison between Dhouli and Misrilal, the Brahmin man is seen as a transgression from the side of the girl while the boy enjoys absolute impunity because of his caste status. The upper caste male desire is legitimised as lower caste female body is considered something to be easily disposed off with-

“You’re not the first dusad girl the Mishras have ruined. Dusad, ganju, dhobi---who have they spared?” (Devi, 3)

Dhouli’s vulnerability is twofold-rooted in both her tribal identity and her gender. After her early widowhood, Dhouli’s vulnerability becomes more pronounced targeted by her own brother-in-law and other coolies in the village after she relocates to her village. Once Dhouli becomes pregnant, she is rejected, vilified by the upper caste but also by her own community, who accuse her of bringing shame.

““No one’s brought shame on Dhouli. She was in love. And she spurned the men of her own caste. We are not interested in

what happens to her. Let her do what she can.” (Devi, 23)

This clear inequality shows how deeply unfair society’s moral standards are-protecting upper caste men from blame while placing all the shame on women.

Mahasweta Devi further reveals that the ostracism for Dhouli is not just social but economic too. Dhouli and her mother could barely make their ends meet. The Mishras drove Dhouli to prostitution after depriving sources of livelihood from them.

“she has sinned. She’ll suffer for it. They’ll both starve to death, mother and daughter....It’s always the fault of the women. For not considering a Brahman’s order, she’s even more to blame.” (Devi, 14)

The coolies had waited to see if like other dusadin girls, Dhouli would be provided for by the Mishras. The absence of any form of sustenance for Dhouli from Misrilal and his family emboldened other coolies to ask Dhouli for sexual favours as she was the fallen woman.

However, Mahasweta Devi does not portray Dhouli as a broken figure but emphasizes on her attempts at survival, her refusal to die and disappear. In the story, Devi instead presents Dhouli as a portrait of resilience amidst ruin. Dhouli does not openly challenge her oppressors. She does not respond not because she lacks words. Her silence was her ‘voice of dissent’. In the story it is essential to focus on her silence as resistance as it helps reveal the deeper structures of oppression in the society. Her refusal to plead, protest was an act of disengagement from conformity. The society had always denied Dhouli, a dusad girl any meaningful agency to express herself. Language was manipulated by the powerful. So her silence is what the upper-castes never expected. It disrupts the expectation placed on a woman of her caste set by the society. So her refusal to leave the town before Misrilal’s marriage was a way of occupying her own space which the society was trying to deny her. She was reclaiming her visibility by her silent existence.

The female body in Dhouli is a site of desire, control, punishment and eventually of resistance. After her

widowhood, Dhoulī had never encouraged any dusad man. But she had to face unwanted solicitation-from her brother-in-law and Misrilal, the brahmin's son once she was back in Taharr. Unfortunately, her pregnancy and subsequent rejection by Misrilal emboldened other coolies to seek sexual favours from her. As Dhoulī entered prostitution, Devi has very clearly presented it as a grim economic necessity due to the systematic neglect and marginalization of the lower castes. She becomes what the village condemns her to be stripped of every ounce of dignity. But this indignity was brought on because Dhoulī had to earn money to avoid slow starvation and death. Yet within this dismal transformation there was also resistance. By openly occupying the role of prostitute, Dhoulī defied the moral code of the village that tried to erase her through her defiled body. She created her own space however degraded and repulsive it appeared to be.

"Dhoulī had learnt to survive, had bested his attempt at vengeance." (Devi, 29)

Instead of starving to death, Dhoulī became the coveted female in Taharr. Her choice to turn to prostitution was a stand against the hypocritical morality of the society that used it to subjugate her. Her decision created an unease among the upper caste as she refused to hide. It was a way to reclaim back the control of her body from Misrilal. It was no longer a property to be misused by the upper castes but something that she would use it in her own terms for her survival.. The preoccupation of the town with maintaining its moral codes stood exposed as most of her clients were people who worked with the Mishras. And the people who expelled Dhoulī for her 'immorality' were the same people responsible for perpetuating the conditions that forced her to become a sex worker.

Dhoulī's turn to prostitution is not her moral degradation. Here Mahasweta Devi shows it is the failure of the society to protect the rights of the marginalized woman. When a woman from a marginalized community is abandoned, the society does not offer justice but pushes her towards depths of desperation. Prostitution is not romanticized but it is shown to be the only option available to Dhoulī.

Her pregnancy is seen as her transgression, not as violence towards her. In branding her as a sinner the society deliberately upholds the caste system and dismisses the existence of any kind of marginalization by the upper castes.

Mahasweta Devi shows that Dhoulī's oppression is not only as a woman but also as a tribal woman. The story does not offer easy resolutions or heroic triumphs but is an honest portrayal of a woman's struggle to exist. Within a world of oppression, Dhoulī tries hard to assert her individuality by refusing conformity. She protests not by speaking but through her quiet existence. For Mahasweta Devi it was essential as a writer to bring out the truth about people struggled to survive at the margins of the society and admitted many times that, "without the realization and representation of the mechanism of exploitation, she loses half the purpose of literature".(Gupta 21). In writing Dhoulī's story Devi creates narratives of those whom history has always neglected.

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