

# Gender oppression and Sexual Exploitation in Mahasweta Devi's "Giribala", "Dhowli" and "Douloti the Bountiful"

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## Abstract

This article throws limelight on Mahasweta Devi's short narratives of women being ill-treated on basis of Caste, gender and status in "Giribala" and "Dhowli," in *Women outcastes, Peasants and Rebels* and "Dhowli the Bountiful" in *Imaginary Maps* to. Mahasweta Devi's specialisation lied in the studies related with women who belonged to minorities such as Adivasi, Dalits etc. Devi exposes how men exploited female reproductive spaces and she also shows how females are considered as a sex commodity. I state that Devi's cultural reports provides an ethnographic venue for examining how power relations shape reproduction and their decisions and how women struggle everyday to reproduce their livelihood under the levels of political duress.

**Keywords:** Exploitation, disposability of minority women, gender oppression, post colonialism.

## 1. Introduction

Literature reflects the truth about of life. It is a mirror that reflects historical, social, economic, political and cultural events that takes place around us. Fascinatingly, in such narratives, creative writing in addition reflects the imbalances/complexity that exists in individual as well as social relationships. In this role, literature becomes an observation on inequalities in the social order. These societal inequalities create inconsistency in many ways, affecting the lives of individuals.

Mahasweta Devi is a tireless activist who fought for several reasons close to her heart and fought for many marginalised groups. She was an inexhaustible writer whose well liked works include *Hajar Churashir Ma*, *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Rudali*. Mahasweta Devi's works tinted and expressed the concerns for people who are

living at the bottom of the social pyramid – including tribes like lodhas, mundas, santhals and sabars – who are at the mercy of the high influential sections of the society.

She has been working for a very long time for the social, political and economic advancement for these marginalised groups, whom she characterizes as ‘suffering spectators of the India that travelling towards the twenty first century’ (Imaginary Maps, xi). This activism is central to Devi’s perceptive of the position of a writer in the 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 addiction. I should remain accountable to myself”.

Oppression in other words domination, coercion is malevolent or unfair treatment or exercise of power, often under the pretext of the governmental influence. In Wikipedia, oppression refers to unfairness when the injustice does not target and may not directly cause problems to everyone in society instead targets particular group of people. Sexual exploitation is a non-consensual abuse for the matter of financial gain, physical pleasure or any other non-legitimate purpose. In this research paper, I specifically examine Devi’s short narratives “Giribala” and “Dhowli,” in *Women outcastes, Peasants and Rebels* and “Douloti the Bountiful” in *Imaginary Maps*, situated as they are at a point of transition between neoliberalism, to show how influential sections have penetrated female reproductive spaces of disposing them to sexualized and commoditised site. Devi highlights these gender violations in the remote and rural areas where marginalised women struggle on a daily basis to avert physical craving and desire and male pervert advances against them and their family.

According to United Nations, Sex Ratio is number of males per equal to hundred females. Sex ratio of India is 108.176 i.e., 108.176 males per 100 females in 2020. It means that India has 924 females per 1000 males. Mahasweta Devi’s reports provide information to support these findings representing how near to the ground female birth rates are directly linked to the mistreatment of female reproductive spaces. In her works, women have renounced their future female offspring to be born from a male chauvinistic society that destroys and exploits them. The reproductive and Sexual Politics in Devi’s “Giribala,” “Dhowli,” and “Douloti the Bountiful” showcases the real difficulties of how a high influential economy depletes women’s reproductive spaces, resulting in large scale of reproductive collapse.

## 2. “Giribala”

In “Giribala,” we witness how a female’s reproductive system has turned out to be a political space of social activism. The influential sections of the society subordinate women’s lives to years of exploitation and gendered torture and never ending poverty. Devi’s reports of the sale of young girls into prostitution showcases evidence of the deep-rooted history of gendered violence aimed at young girl. In this short story, Devi’s protagonist Giribala is only 14 years old when she was married to an inhuman Aulchand: “A daughter born, to husband or Death, She’s already gone” (Devi, 1990, p.247). In this commodity exchange Giribala’s

father paid Aulchand “eighty rupees and a heifer before he got married to her”, “After the birth of her fourth child, a daughter she named Maruni she asked the doctor at the hospital, where she went for this birth, to sterilize her”(Devi, 1990 , p.276). Her requests for sterilization show how she was brutally exploited by her husband. When Aulchand threatens her to tell him why, it becomes clear that Giribala don't want another child to be denigrated in a society where, “having a daughter only means to raise a slave for others” (Devi, 1990, p. 276). Giribala's uterus was cut off permanently on strike from further patriarchal intrusion in a country where daughters are considered as disposable secondary skins. This work clearly shows the gender discrimination faced by Giribala.

Patriarchal society with more male centric thoughts force a family to have a male child with old beliefs like family nomination, lack of education makes them unable to follow right attitude towards it. And female is considered as more prone to harassment and weak sex who needs protection. In this narrative the sexual commoditisation of young pubescent girls comes to limelight when Aulchand marries of his “scared 12 year old daughter,” for “four hundred rupees in cash” while Giribala is away visiting her parents. Later, Giribala learns: “There were five girls like Bela taken there to be married to five strange men. The addresses they left are fake ones. This kind of business is on the rise” (Devi, 1990, p.281). Here, we witness corrupt gendered economic structure – the selling young female beings for survival. Here, Giri's bela had become another victim of a fake business venture of “procuring girls on the pretext of marriage” (Devi's 1990, p. 281). Devi criticizes the little help done by police in this critical circumstance. They blame it on the father and the fact that “Poor Bela had this written on her forehead” (Devi, 1990, p. 281).

“A daughter, until she is married, is her father's property. It's useless for a mother to think she has anything to say” (Devi, 1990, p.281). Here we co-witness how young pubescent girls have become sexual commodities to be exploited and tortured. In this critical situation she tries to save her second daughter from the inhuman. Giribala married off her ten years of old; Pori into what she believed at the time was a way to protect her from the same fate of her first daughter Bela. Trusting Mohan, a family friend, to find her daughter a match a before Aulchand interferes, Giribala, unknowingly, delivers her second daughter into a large scale prostitution ring. Mohan was in a business, procuring girls for prostitution in the big cities, where the rich businessmen and high influential people's want to satisfy their newfound appetite for childlike bodies.

From 2011 to 2012, there was a 26.3% decrease in girls imported to India from another country. Karnataka had 32 cases, and West Bengal had 12 cases, together accounting for 93.2% of the total cases nationwide. From 2011 to 2012 there was a 5.3% increase in violations of the immoral traffic (prevention) Act, 1956. Tamil Nadu had 500 incidents, accounting for 19.5% of the total nationwide, and Andhra Pradesh has 472 incidents, accounting for 18.4% of the total nationwide. . Indian demographer Ashok Mitra writes that: “In the last thirty years after Independence Indian women have increasingly become an expendable commodity, expendable both in the demographic and in the economic sense. Demographically woman is more and more reduced to her reproductive functions, and when these are fulfilled she is expendable. Economically

she is relentlessly pushed out of the reproductive sphere and reduced to a unit of consumption, which therefore is undesired.” (Qtd. in Mies 1999, p 123)

Siddharth Kara’s *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery* similarly narrates a disturbing account of how young female girls have become a commodity in India’s sex trade. In this text, Siddharth Kara interviews an owner of four brothels in Mumbai “each with approximately four hundred women,” detailing how the brothels comprise “prostitutes from various places. Sometimes *dalas* brought batches of them to Kamathipura and auctioned them; other times he frequented a market north of Mumbai where women were brought from Nepal, Bangladesh, and other regions in India for sale” (Kara, 2010, p. 53). Kara’s reportage further notes that the sexploitation of young females are a daily occurrence as “Every minute of every day, the most vulnerable of women and children in the world are raped for profit with impunity” (2010, p. 3).

Unfortunately, we see in the case of Devi’s “Giribala” how people’s poverty leads them to do such barbaric things to their own daughter. Aulchand scolds Giri for sterilizing her womb. “Foolish woman, you shouldn’t have done that operation. The more daughters we have, the more money we can have” (Devi, 1990, p. 288). Stimulated by survival, Giribala leaves Aulchand “to work in other people’s homes in order to feed and raise her remaining children” (Devi, 1990, p. 289).

### 3. “Dhowli”

In “Dhowli,” Dhowli a young “untouchable Dusad girl,” is impregnated by an upper caste Brahman and left to fend for herself (Devi, 1990, p. 186). “Dhowli scrubbed their brass plate till it gleamed like gold. When her mother was away, she looked at her face init...she saw that her face was beautiful, but a beautiful face was, useless for a widow because she could never marry again”. This shows how her life was miserable as an untouchable. She couldn’t live according to her wishes because she belongs to the lower class of the society. Dhowli’s unhappy marriage. Misra boy in her life and her decisions after the Misra boy left her all play a role in her caste life as an untouchable.

After her husband’s death she was eyeballed by her husband’s brother. So returns to her home. She had an unhappy marriage; he even used to beat her. She even accepted to eating daily leftover food. She also reminiscences her fun times with her father. Devi writes that the sexual taking of young Dusad girls is nothing new in this village as the high influential (Misra) **landowners** are accustomed to treating girls as prostitute. Misra boy started eyeballing the Dusad girl. Dhowli resigns herself to her fate as, “All the Misra men do that, and there is not a thing that the Dhowli of the world can do to stop it” (Devi, 1990, p, 191). Dhowli was impregnated by an upper class Brahman. Frightened Dhowli’s mother asked her to abort the baby. But Dhowli refuses to abort the baby.

We can see the attempt to remove the womb as social factory for reproduction. Dhowli's mother is quite aware of the situation of young girls and objects to let her daughter produce sexual labourers for high influential people's inhumanness and for their enjoyment. After Dhowli gives birth she and her mother and children starved out of existence. Dhowli's resentment turns towards God: "You ruined my life, turned it to ashes, and you can't even hear the hard truth? Is it being rich that makes one so tender-skinned?" (Devi, 1990, p. 200). Dhowli further questions "What will she do then? Will she end up opening her door at night when the pebbles strike the door? For a few coins from one, some corn or a sari from another? Is that how she must live?" (Devi, 1990, p. 198).

Dhowli had no other way except prostitution. When a suitor comes to her door, she lets him in "The man has brought corn, lentils, salt and one rupee. Dhowli pays him back with her body, to the very last penny" (Devi, 1990, p. 202). She decides to go to Ranchi and register herself as a prostitute. Through Devi's reportage we understand still many except women to follow old Indian tradition of self-sacrificing. A woman doesn't have autonomy over her own body.

Unfortunately, we can also witness how a legal system is also fabricated by male privilege. The village Panchayat threatens to burn her house down if she doesn't leave the village. Dhowli is banished from the village. As she decides to be a prostitute, she got a freedom to decide what she wants. She states: if she was married to someone else she would have been a whore individually, only in her personal life. Now she is going to be a prostitute by occupation. She is going to be one of the many prostitutes. Readers left decide whether Dhowli's claim of freedom over her sexual behaviour is a right way to resist against the exploitation. Maria Mies observes that "The concept of autonomy, usually understood as freedom from coercion regarding our bodies and our lives, emerged as a struggle concept in the context of body politics, the sphere where women's oppression and exploitation was most intimately concretely experienced" (1999, p. 40). Her decision making freedom to use her body for money, might appear to be an act of autonomy. Marx referred to this as the "the democracy of unfreedom". Before she had to obey a single master, but for now she will have many masters.

#### 4. "Douloti the Bountiful"

Devi examines of the cycle of ill-treatment of douloti, a fourteen year old young girl who dies at the age of 27. After many years of exploitation her "tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease" spread over the "map of India" on the day of Independence of India (Devi. 1994, p. 93) Described as a "parable of post-colonial India, a parable addressed to whatever/whoever professes to be the nation," (Sen & Yadav, 2008, p. 86). In "Douloti," Devi additionally explores the utilization of the female reproductive space, this time focusing on the new flesh in the Himlayan District of Uttar Kashi, this which she calls fictionally as Seori. Male in a family sells their wife and daughters to the moneylenders, while they are not able to pay back the



sum unpaid. Once their ladies are sold off in the capital, they have only paid the interest on their loan; they were by no means fully able to free them from upper-caste moneylenders. The family structure in India is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal.

Devi confirms the same ethnographic accopunts narrated in “Giribala” and “Dhowli” that the juvenile flesh of pubescent daughters is a marketable product on the sexual market place. She further comments on government officers how they exploit the poor through faith system, the people of Seori believe that they have been subjected to bonded labour “because of their sinfulness” (40), because “the West Wind” (42) entered home country. The helplessness of the diverse regions and places in India to be on familiar terms with “Mother India,” and “all independent India’s free people,” shoes however within the country there is a room for falsification and misconception with intention to be manipulated for personal Gain. By narrating the true stories she displays the situation of fresh “virgin unwounded hymen,” Devi shows how government officials and commercial interests collude to violate the “naked Harijan woman’s helpless body” (1994, p. 58). Contractors, government Officers, Lawmakers, policemen-“they all come” for virgin flesh and so Devi asks, “Who will stop it?”

The lower class(caste) have been turned into “Land”. The upper class or caste men plows and plows their land and “ plows their bodies land”(59) until it is battered and ravaged to “quench the hunger of male flesh” (1994,p. 61).

Devi’s Doulati is furthermore often tortured by unsatisfied sexual hunger of the male upper caste in which she is “bloodied many times all through the night”to the thud of “grunt, grunt” (1994, p. 58). We see women caught within an invasive style, of slave relations that shapes all its members.

Within this terrible system, Devi also states that many social scientist who wanted to research and “write everything down,” and then get into their cars and “buzz off to town” while the objective of research remains supine and motionless in her same place, her body continually ploughed and tilled like a ravaged land (1994, p.20).

A number of prostitution related activities including soliciting in a public place is unlawful. There are however, many brothels illicitly operating in Indian cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and Chennai. UNAIDS estimates that there were 657,829 prostitutes in the country in 2016. The law is inapplicable on prostitution itself. The primary law dealing with the status of sex workers is the 1956 law referred to as The Immoral Traffic Act (SITA). Under this law, prostitutes can practise their trade privately but cannot legally in open. A BBC article, mentions that prostitution in India is illegal; the Indian law does not refer to the practice of selling one’s own sexual service as “prostitution”. Over the years, India has seen a growing consent to legalise prostitution, to avoid exploitation of sex workers and their children by middlemen and in the wake of a growing HIV/AIDS hazard. (Source: Wikipedia)

In 2009, the Supreme Court ruled that prostitution should be legalised and convened a panel to consider amending the law. In 2011 the Supreme Court held that “right to live with dignity” is a constitutional right and issued an order relating to “creating conditions for sex workers to work with dignity”. However in 2012 the central government made a plea to the Supreme Court arguing that sex workers should not be allowed to pursue their trade under the constitutional “right to live with dignity”. Government counsel contented that any such endorsement by the court would be ultra vires of ITPA which totally bans prostitution. . (Source: Wikipedia)

## 5. Conclusion

These kinds of issues have frightened many mothers across the world. Mostly many tribal and marginalised groups of women are only affected by high influential people or by upper caste people. Women to stop the exploitation against them decide to take off their wombs. Many do this. They find this way as an escape for their future generation who will be exploited by upper caste people. One child disappears every eight minutes according to the national Crime Records Bureau. Some figures in India. According to a report by the national human rights commission of India, 40,000 children are abducted each year, leaving 11,000 untraced. NGO's estimate that between 12,000 to 50,000 women and children are trafficked into the country annually from neighbouring nations as part of the sex trade.

Mahasweta Devi explains the meaning of female disposability by personalizing accounts of how marginalised groups of women have been rendered weak by capital's intercontinental reach. Through a close up revelation of Devi's reportage in “Giribala”, “Dhowli” and “Douloti the Bountiful,” this essay helps to put in to a greater perceptive of how global capitalism has persistently occupied, commodified, and sexualized the young female body by turning it into a land of reproduction.

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