



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Douloti as a Debt-Slave in "Douloti the Bountiful" by Mahasweta Devi.

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Mahasweta Devi is one of the major contemporary writers who have made significant contributions to Indian literary and cultural studies. Devi makes wonderful use of her creative energy to extend an artistic expression to the sordid realities of poverty, exploitation, bonded labour, hunger, class and caste exploitation and death in Indian society. Devi profoundly writes for the women issues also, though it is another fact that she doesn't claim to be a feminist writer. Profound humanism, combined with a deep rooted love and understanding for the suffering humanity, is the focus of Mahasweta Devi's literary oeuvre. Through her writings, she tries to portray the life of ordinary men and women, especially the tribal people of India. The *Adivasis* like the *Santhals*, the *Loadas*, the *Shabars*, the *Oraons*, the *Mundas* etc. of West Bengal appear realistically, with all their blood and skin, in her plays, novels and short stories.

Mahasweta Devi, as a writer, does not believe in the world of imagination alone. Basically she is a social activist and her writings are an extension of her social activism. She explores the tortured consciousness and split personalities of the oppressed and the exploited. She leaves no stone unturned in raising her voice against the atrocities done to the poor and the *Adivasis* who are quite innocent and illiterate people knowing almost nothing about their rights. The writer also targets the welfare policies being undertaken by the Govt. to raise the standard of life in the most backward and undeveloped tribal regions of West Bengal. She acts as a guardian to this suffering tribal community and takes it her duty to bring to light the unholy nexus of bureaucrats, feudal lords and politicians who are responsible for the wretched life of tribal community. In the name of tribal welfare, the Government approves development projects. The tribal land is acquired in the name of these projects but ultimately what happens is that the money goes directly into the pockets of those enjoying political patronage and the bureaucratic

powers. Forest is the home of the tribals and once this very home is destroyed, it poses a direct challenge to the existence of very forest people, leading to their exploitation and oppression at the hands of the influential masters.

Oppression creates injustice – social, political, economic and religious. Oppression, sometimes, may not be the direct form of the torture and exploitation. People are not always oppressed by the powerful groups with bad intentions. Even a liberal society can have a systematic restriction on its people and, in a way, limits their freedom. The selected groups of a few privileged people can exercise restriction and barrier in the form of customs, norms, habits and symbols that oppress a group of selected people. Irrespective of various definitions of oppression given by various scholar since times immemorial, one thing that is common to all definitions is that oppression makes other people less humane and it certainly dehumanizes them. It also means unequal opportunities denying human beings to use their full potential.

The voluminous works of Mahasweta Devi are 'telling tales' of the exploitation of the marginalised and dispossessed groups by the ruling and dominant castes. This oppression is further aggravated by greedy bureaucrats and cunning politicians. The literary representations of oppressing circumstances in which Devi's victim-protagonists are placed, are not mere a record of oppression. In fact, Mahasweta Devi deciphers the code of courage and resilience with which these survivors retaliate and bounce back. The repressive situations don't cripple them permanently. The violation of human rights, custodial rapes, forced labour, poverty, prostitution, exploitation due to caste and class hierarchies etc. do not deter them from achieving their aim, i.e. survival at any cost. Nowhere, even for a once, Devi's daredevils surrender to oppressive conditions. They win even in their deaths. They show phoenix like capabilities of rising from their ash. The state and its long list of rights fail to protect them from the cruel hands of their oppressors. But the dignity of life is ultimately protected by the strength of indomitable will power. Mahasweta Devi scribbles their odyssey and hails the power of life-force of her real heroes.

Bonded labour is another social evil against which Devi has brandished her creative pen. It is also very much linked to caste system as untouchables are denied of basic education, occupation and right to land. They depend on upper caste Hindus for their survival. They have been reduced to a status of slaves. According to an estimate made by *Gandhi Peace Foundation* and *National Labour Institute* (first ever survey of bonded labour in India), "Out of the 2.6 million bonded labourers, tribals formed over 18 percent and the scheduled castes 66 percent. Together they accounted for nearly 88 percent of those in bondage." (Ghatak xix). The UPA Government celebrating its nine years in office in 2013, had put out a print advertisement headlined as "Thanks to MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), No Bonded Labour any more". Yet, surveys by Civil Society Organisations and researchers show that even 47 years after Parliament passed the *Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976*, bonded labour exists in India. (*The Economic Times Policy*) "Bonded Labour System still a Reality". Urmi A Goswami, ET Bureau, Aug 12, 2013).

Commenting on the dehumanizing system of bonded labour, Maitreya Ghatak observes:

Under the bonded labour system a person loses his status as a free labour and virtually becomes a self labour under a person from whom he has taken a loan, the amount of which may appear to be ridiculously small. He forfeits the right to sell his labour or the products of his labour in the open market. He, or a member of his family, has to work under the creditor-till the loan is repaid. But the wages are absurdly low and the rate of interest astronomically high (*Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*).

The system of bonded labour was abolished from the country with effect from 25th October 1975, under the *Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976*. The Act envisages release of all the bonded labourers from bondage and simultaneous liquidation of their debts. The responsibility for identification, release and rehabilitation rests with the State Governments that are the implementing authorities under the Act.

As a social activist, Mahasweta Devi has an insight into the pathetic lives and struggles of the marginalised and oppressed communities. Palamu, the poorest district of Bihar, has been *Karambhoomi* of Mahasweta Devi. In "The Author in Conversation" in *Imaginary Maps*, she says:

In such backward, feudally oppressed districts, the bonded labour system survives. The bonded labour system was introduced by the British. They created a new class, which took away tribal land and converted the tribals into debt bonded slaves. The present Government of India had to introduce, in 1976, *The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act*. You will be surprised to know that from Kashmir to the Indian Ocean and from East to West, in every state, there are districts marked as 'bonded labour districts' because there are more than forty thousand bonded labourers in each of them (*Imaginary Maps* p.24).

The efforts made by the Government to eradicate this social evil fail miserably as the rehabilitation and relief is disbursed through the officers who are perpetrators of this evil. The land generally given to them is infertile and without any irrigation facility. With the result, the released labourers again fall into the clutches of moneylenders.

The traditional agricultural bond slavery has reinvented itself to adapt to modern economy. New form of bondage has emerged. It has spread beyond agriculture and is prevalent in small eateries, brick-kilns, *agarbatti* units, looms, cracker industries, mines, construction and in our homes as domestic labour in the heart of metros. Mahasweta Devi's "Douloti the Bountiful" is one of the three stories in the collection named *Imaginary Maps*. It is a critical inquiry into the exploitative system of bonded labour and prostitution. In Post-colonial India women like Douloti are sold like commodities. The independence is a myth, a lie for them. They are oppressed, exploited and left to their fate when not in 'use'.

In "Douloti the Bountiful" Douloti gives a realistic picture of oppression and torture imposed on women's bodies. Douloti, a tribal woman, is sold as a prostitute to a wealthy landlord on the false promise of marriage. Douloti is plundered by various males. The text brings to surface the sexual exploitation, bonded labour and prostitution along with economic exploitation of country. The independence has no meaning for these *Kamiyas* as they find that bonded labour runs into their generations. No law can save them from 'fate's decree'. The brothels thrive and do a brisk business in independent India. The colonial legacies still continue to flourish in post-colonial India. Douloti is forced to provide cheapest labour for sex industry.

Douloti's father, Crook Nagesia, is a *Kamiya* of Munabar Singh Chandela, the owner of Seora village. Poverty rules the region where women are treated as commodities, sold in the flesh market like a piece of meat. The Government does surveys in order to help the tribals, but sociologists blame the labourers and their primitive traditions for their indebtedness.

And the sociologists travel around Palamu and write in their files, every sonofabitch is becoming *Kamiya* because of wedding funerals-religious ceremonies. That the peasant is becoming the Kaluk's *Kamiya*, this the sociologists avoid rather skillfully. These servants want government support. The government wants the *Kaluk's* support. Land-lender, this is new agri-capitalist caste. This caste is created by the Independent Government of India (*Imaginary Maps* p. 49).

The landlord, moneylenders and government officials, all want the *status-quo*. The rich can manipulate the law as per their wish. Ganori knows that even when the laws are there, the rich and the powerful like Munabar can buy the law. Munabar is a government servant who has contacts with the top officials of the government. Douloti is thrown into the flesh trade by Parmanand Mishra. He presents her before Latia Sahib, an elite contractor with an unending sexual urge for Harijan girls. Parmanand said, "Take a look, Latiaji, village girl, Harijan, unmarried and is still a virgin"(58). Latia Sahib, a typical postcolonial exploiter, rapes Douloti repeatedly till she faints. His attraction for Douloti lasted for three years. Then she is sold to another elite customer. When Douloti enters the brothel, Rampiyari warns her, "They'll eat the fruit of your womb(59)". This warning has several layers of meaning. It suggests the pitiable conditions of prostitutes – their forced abortions and exploitations of their children. Both tribal land and tribal women are subjected to exploitation. Women, like land, are property to be used maximum. The prostitutes are not allowed to keep their earnings even. The author portrays it in a very heart-touching manner.

Parmananda takes every bit of their earnings monthly. Does not give any money in the name of clothing, cosmetics or medicine. Sometimes ten clients come daily as well. And in Madhapura there is a huge market twice a week... At that time thirty clients enter daily in every woman's room (*Imaginary Maps* p.62).

The women have to borrow money from Rampiyari. Parmananda is very happy because "in the bond slavery trade, the bonded labour system, the recourse to loans is the general regulator". Somni's husband borrowed two hundred rupees to get land and in a year it became four thousand rupees. Her husband sent her in the brothel to repay the amount. These prostitutes are left for begging as they age. Their children, if they are boys, turn beggars, and if they are girls become prostitutes. Their condition is pitiable. When Douloti meets Uncle Bono in the fair, he talks of the abolition of 'Bonded Labour System'. But Douloti is fully convinced that this evil cycle will never end. She asks:

"Who will stop it? Big contractors, government officers, they all come. They all help the dog" (*Imaginary Maps* p.73)

In fact, the male characters are equally helpless. They feel cheated because the compound interest incurred on the borrowed amount went up to thousands for one hundred rupees only. Uncle Bono, Mohan Srivastava-the school master and Father Bom Fuller, all bring false hopes for Douloti. The exhausted Douloti develops venereal disease and goes to hospital where she is referred to another hospital. She decides to go to Seora-her birth place. But even before she reaches Seora, she vomits blood and lies 'spread ealged' across the map of India outside the Basic Primary School. 'Douloti is all over India', comments Mahasweta Devi exposing the eternal truth.

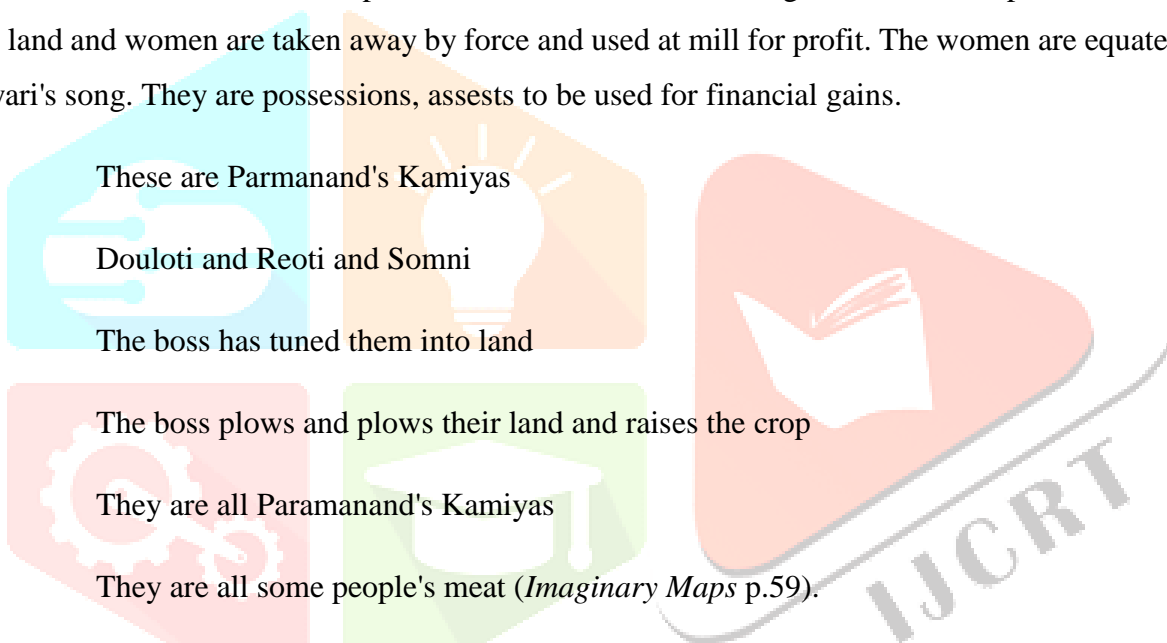
The Independence is a lie, it is meaningless to a vast majority of people of India. The women, like Douloti, are being exploited everywhere. Every city has famous 'Red Light Areas' where the women live in dingy, small rooms, giving 'their contribution' to the fastest developing economy of the world. For the prostitutes, the *Kamiya* whores, the Independence means nothing except the continuing and increasing exploitation. Douloti dies on the chalk-dust map of India; and in the narrator's words, "the conclusion of the fairy tale is life bloody, pain-filled life. (*Imaginary Maps* p.50). These women have to bear the burden of gender; the pain of being women. The male chauvinistic and hegemonistic behavioural tendencies shaped by capitalistic economic structures are revealed in the sexual attack on women.

The worst affected from bonded labour are women and children. Sanichari, Douloti, Lachhima and others are victims of bond-slavery. In "Douloti the Bountiful" Ganori Nagesia is a bond-slave of Munabar Singh Chandela who "Keeps *Dusads, Ghasi, Nagesia, Munda Lohar, Oraon, Bhyian, Chamar, Parhia* all tribals as *Kamiya*" (20). Ganori Nagesia took a loan of three hundred rupees and became a *Kamiya*.

In fact, at first Ganori didn't think that becoming a *Kamiya* was special misfortune. He has been seeing *Kamiya* all over since birth. It is fate's decree to become a *Kamiya*... On a high caste – boy's forehead he writes property, land, cattle, trade, Education, Job, contract. On the Outcaste's forehead he writes bond slavery (*Imaginary Maps* p.22)

The master puts an ox yoke on his shoulder, because the master's young ox was eaten by a tiger in the forest on account of Ganori's carelessness. While pulling the cart with an ox yoke on his shoulder, Ganori lost balance and axle plunged into his back. He spends three months in Tohri Hospital. When he comes out his body is misshaped and he becomes 'Crook Nagesia'. A Brahmin pays his debt and releases him from bondage but in exchange for Douloti whom he promises to marry. Paramanand, the Brahmin, Keeps a hawk's eyes on poverty stricken bond labourers. By paying the debts, he has established a lucrative bonded labour trade of prostitutes. Douloti, only thirteen years old, is thrown into the flesh market business of Madhopura. Bonded slavery is transmitted from father to daughter. "Douloti has taken the yoke of Crook's bond slavery on her shoulders.. she will repay the bond slavery loan as a beggar" (73). But she pays with her body, unlike her father who pays through labour.

First Latia Sahib, a pitiless contractor, and then Singh Sahib, she is passed on like used item. *Adivasi* land and women are taken away by force and used at mill for profit. The women are equated with land in Rampiyari's song. They are possessions, assets to be used for financial gains.



Rampiyari's painful song has serious implications. Only the names given to bond slaves change but the oppression continues unabated. The agricultural exploitation of land and sexual exploitation of women go hand in hand simultaneously.

The fathers and husbands send their daughters and wives to pay the debt incurred by them. Rampiyari, the caretaker of the brothel, ridicules the ignorance of such fathers:

"your fathers! they blow me away. The animal says marriage, he'll marry a *Dusad, Dhobi, Chamar, Parhaiya girl/ Brahamans?* Who burn *Harijans?* They catch you to make you a *Kamiya* (59). Somri, another girl in the trade, is sent by her husband to pay his debt.

The story of Douloti ends on Aug. 15, 1975 with Douloti dying of venereal disease and hunger. She earned over forty thousand rupees but all this money has been taken away by her owners. Both Ganori and Douloti are *bandhua* slaves. Rejected at Tohri hospital, she decides to go to her birth place, Seora. She is too weak to walk and falls "spread ealged" (94) across the map of the India drawn outside the Basic Primary School in Bir, a village. Douloti is found dead on the map of India by the people of the village and school teacher, Mohan Srivastava, who was preparing to hoist national flag on the Independence Day.

Filling the entire Peninsula from the Oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread-eagled, *Kamiya* whose Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomitted up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in India of People like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India (*Imaginary Maps* p.93).

The poor and exploited people inhabit a vast portion of India. Independence has brought change only in the life of the rich, the poor children only sell paper flags and work as usual on Independence Day. The modern economic policy of globalisation, industrial revolution and urbanisation has resulted into the haphazard expansion of cities, ever growing unemployment, loss of land for farmers, large scale migration of labourers from their native places, discontent among youth, ever increasing number of urban poor in the cities etc. In the middle of the novella, Devi comments:

This bonded labour system prevails all over India. In Andhra the people of *Matangi, Jaggali, Malajangam, Mahar* and other castes become *Gothi*. In Bihar *Chamar, Nagesia, Parhaiya, Dusad* become *Kamiya* or *Seokia*. In Gujarat the *Chalwaris, Naliyas, Thoris* and other become *Halpati*. In Karnataka the low birth become *Jeetho*, in Madhya Pradesh *Haroyaha*. In Orissa *Gothi* and in Rajasthan *Sagri*. The *Chettyrayats* of Tamil Nadu keep *Bhumidasas*, in Uttar Pradesh the *Bhumidas* is called *Maat* or *Khandit Mundit* or *Sanjayat*. Bonded labourers are thus known by different names in different regions. The system is slavery and outcastes, the *harijans* happen to be its victims (*Imaginary Maps* p.61-62).

The issue of economic exploitation, the war between 'have' and 'have-nots' remain at the core of all exploitations. The dominant classes maintain their hegemony because of their control over the means of production. The wealth remains concentrated within few hands. Even the land reforms remained on paper. It could not bring justice to all. But Devi's stories do not present the victims. They resist and their violence can be seen as an awareness of their due rights. Only organised struggle can bring desirable change in the system. As a social activist, Devi has seen the potential of collective effort.

The multilayered oppression, to which the subalterns are subjected in various works of Mahasweta Devi, do not leave the reader depressed and shocked. He may feel sad and dejected, but the indomitable determination, the resistance of the underdogs, their collective strength and struggle certainly bring a smile full of hope on their lips are not mere narratives of individuals' saga of sorrow, but these are heroic tales of adventure and courage of a whole group of the oppressed all over the world irrespective of their caste, class, race, ethnicity, nationality or gender. These are epics of courage which will continue to inspire the suffering humanity in times to come.

Albert Camus claimed in his 1957 Nobel Prize speech that "the sympathy of the artist should lie with the victim". Mahasweta Devi not only draws the sympathy of the readers but also shakes the readers out of their comfort zones and exhorts them to action. Martin Luther King also once said that "the ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by good people". Devi's characters break the silence, her fiction gives voice to the oppressed. They speak, they cry, they howl.

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