

# Narratives of Resilience and Marginality: A Study of Gender and Identity in Mahasweta Devi's *Till Death Do us Part*

Ms. Shikha

Research Scholar

Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University

Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

shikhadabas1995@gmail.com

## Abstract

This research paper delves into the thematic exploration of gender identity, female resilience, and the subversion of societal norms in Mahasweta Devi's collection of translated stories, *Till Death Do Us Part*. The collection spans over thirty years and encompasses five stories: "The Divorce", "The Saga of Kagaboga", "The Poet's Wife", "He, said Pani", and "Love Story". In these narratives, Mahasweta Devi deviates from the conventional satirical and socially-critical writing style and shows extraordinary sensitivity in the portrayal of her characters. The stories are centered on the lives of five elderly women who struggle with several challenges and societal constraints. Simultaneously, they diligently explore unconventional approaches to contest prevailing norms and masculine hegemony. This research study aims to dissect these distinctive qualities in Devi's storytelling within the context of her collection, "Till Death Do Us Part".

Keywords: Marginality, Resilience, Gender, Identity, Defiance, etc.

## Introduction

Mahasweta Devi, an author from Bengal and a dedicated advocate for social causes played a significant role in shaping the discourse on patriarchy, gender inequality, and women's empowerment. Her literary works, encompassing both fiction and non-fiction, offer

a nuanced exploration of concepts and their impact on individuals. She harnessed the power of literature as a means to drive change by illuminating the suffering, struggles, and injustices faced by marginalized groups such as tribal communities and landless laborers. Her focus was not only on women but on community at a larger scale who found themselves marginalized.

Mahasweta Devi always refused to be labeled a feminist and instead identified herself as a humanist. By embracing Humanism, Mahasweta Devi implied a broader concern for the suffering of all people, not just women. In one of her interviews with a novelist Nabaneeta Dev Sen, she says, "I do not write the sufferings of women only, I write about the suffering humanity in total. I am a humanist, not a feminist".

According to her, being a dedicated humanist is the first step, and feminism naturally follows. Being an activist, Devi has always devoted herself to depict the experiences and challenges faced by tribal communities. She acknowledged that women's struggles are frequently intensified by intersecting factors such as caste, class, and ethnicity. Hence, her works highlight the need to address these intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination to achieve true gender equality.

"Till Death Do Us Part", a collection of five short stories by Mahasweta Devi, reveals a unique and unexpected side of the author, who is known for her sharp satires and critical writing on social injustices. The stories discussed in the book collectively unveil the complex dynamics of relationships, societal norms, and the enduring resilience of individuals, especially women, as they navigate through life's challenges.

"The Divorce, Talaq" is a first story in the collection that presents the story of Kulsum, a Muslim woman, who experiences emotional and psychological turmoil due to her divorce from her husband, Arshad. Initially, Kulsum was considered fortunate to be married to a caring and loving man. She had successfully settled in a village called Khidirpur, where

she got married and enrolled her son in a school. She had even secured a job for her husband at a shipping company. However, her life took an unexpected turn when her 35-year marriage abruptly ended because of a dispute over their grandson's medical treatment. This dispute led Arshad to angrily pronounce 'triple talaq', ending up their marriage.

In Islamic culture, the repetition of the word "talaq" holds significant legal and social implications. It signifies divorce in Islamic law, particularly in the context of marriage. The concept of 'Triple Talaq' has its origin in Islamic jurisprudence, which allows husbands to unilaterally divorce their wives without their consent or formal procedures. On July 12, 1861, a divorce ruling was issued by the Sudder Dewanny Adawlat in Calcutta in the case of a muslim couple, Moonshee Buzl-ul-Raheen and Luteefutoon-Nissa. The judgment stated that "talaq is simply an arbitrary action of a Muslim husband, who can divorce his wife at his own discretion, with or without any reason" (2). This statement exemplifies a patriarchal system in which women's choices and rights are disregarded, leading to their subordination and disempowerment. It grants men the power to dissolve their marriage whenever they feel, while their wives are left with little or no say in the matter. This power dynamic leaves women in precarious positions, especially in terms of financial support and custody of their children. For many women, their role as a wife is a central part of their identity. The practice of 'triple divorce' disrupts this role and challenges the vision they had for their future. As a result, they struggle to redefine themselves beyond the context of being a spouse and seek new sources of purpose and meaning in their lives.

Mahasweta Devi uses Kuli's character to shed light on the harsh realities and systemic injustices faced by women, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. Following her divorce, Kuli seeks solace in her sisters, Phuli and Duli, only to discover their greed for her wealth. The story takes a turning point when Arshad and Kuli wish to reunite, but Islamic customs prevent them from living together unless she marries another man. Kuli rejects this

solution and challenges the Islamic divorce system with her decision to reside with Arshad in Calcutta, not as husband and wife but as companions.

Through "The Divorce," Mahasweta Devi questions the unjust aspects of Islamic customs, where emotions alone can lead to the dissolution of marriage, leaving women in vulnerable positions. The story challenges the age-old exploitative practice of Halala, which disempowers women by compelling them into marriages and divorces without their consent. Consequently, it grants substantial power to men, especially their first husbands. This story highlights the need for reforms in such customs to safeguard the rights and autonomy of women in these situations.

"The Saga of Kagaboga" is the second story in this collection, which delves into various aspects of traditional practices, customs, and societal norms. It narrates the story of an elderly couple named, Mohini and Sadananda, who communicate exclusively through an imaginary raven called 'Kagaboga.' In this context, 'Kaga' symbolizes 'crows,' and 'Boga' represents 'cranes.' In the story, Mohini finds herself lacking emotional support following their younger's departure. The mental and emotional unavailability of her husband leads her to choose to converse with an invisible bird, instead of her own husband.

The story begins with the childhood of Mohini and Sadananda. They playfully garlanded each other at the Utruni mela. This act of garlanding was perceived as a divine sport by the villagers, as Mohini was merely three years old when she had "taken off her string of beads and put it around Sadananda's neck" (9). As they grew older, they eventually married off to each other when reached at a marriageable age.

Soon after, Mohini and Sadananda became parents to two sons. Their elder son secured a job even before completing his education, while their younger son chose a path of criminality. He abandoned his home, which caused immense distress to his mother, Mohini.

In her time of need, Mohini turned to her husband, Sadananda, for emotional support, but her attempts were in vain, as Sadananda remained oblivious to her emotional needs.

In this 'saga', Mohini's creation of an imaginary bird as a confidant can be seen as a manifestation of her subconscious desires and conflicts. Using psychoanalytic theory, we can examine the deep-seated emotions, desires, and anxieties, exploring how the imaginary bird serves as a symbolic representation of her unfulfilled emotional needs and her struggle to maintain her emotional stability.

Mohini's mental state in the story reflects Sigmund Freud's concept of the "uncanny" as explained in his essay "Das Unheimliche." The use of an imaginary companion creates an eerie and unsettling atmosphere in the narrative, blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Freud's notion of the "uncanny" can be applied to an individual's growing discomfort and unease when something familiar becomes strangely unfamiliar.

The feeling of uneasiness and discomfort in Mohini is akin to the uncanny sensation as described by Freud, where the familiar (her relationship with her husband) starts to feel strangely unfamiliar and unsettling. As Mohini's relationship with her husband crumbled, he became and the uncanny presence of the imaginary bird became her refuge, Mohini's life took an unexpected turn when she began to daydream about constructing a new home. Mohini gained an almost unbelievable level of self-confidence in her ability to build a house. However, her joy came to an end when she learned about her husband death who passed away due to a heart attack. Sadananda's death only exacerbated Mohini's misery, leaving her in a vulnerable state without substantial support. Her situation mirrors the struggles faced by many Indian women who find themselves alone, navigating life's challenges without adequate support from their families or society.

In conclusion, Mohini's story sheds light on the pervasive stigma surrounding mental health in Indian society. The deterioration of the protagonist's mental well-being, evident in

her communication with Kagaboga, serves as a poignant representation of her internal battles. Yet, her husband's inability to comprehend or acknowledge her mental health challenges highlights a form of emotional neglect. It makes her feel neglected and deprived of a means to express her anguish or seek assistance. Mohini's narrative underscores the urgent need for greater awareness and support for mental health issues within Indian society.

"The Poet's Wife," the third story in the collection, serves as another poignant illustration of the complex challenges faced by married women in Indian milieu. It emphasizes on the sacrifices that women make to support their husbands' aspirations. The plot revolves around the central character, Prafullakamal, affectionately referred to as 'Kamal' in the story. She is the devoted wife of Suprabhat Dutta Chaudhary, an old and unrecognized blind poet. Once, Kamal receives a rare opportunity to represent her husband at a cultural program. Suprabhat, a lesser-known artist, is invited for felicitation by Tarun Sangha, an organization facing budget constraints and struggling to secure responses from more prominent artists. Faced with the refusal of renowned figures to attend, the organization reluctantly invites the blind poet and honors him. Due to his physical limitations, Suprabhat suggests Kamal's name as a representative who can attend the program on his behalf.

Understanding the profound significance of the honor bestowed upon Suprabhat, Kamal selflessly takes on the responsibility of representing him at the award ceremony. She even assists him in preparing a compelling speech that could lead to his recognition and lifetime pension. The poet pays meticulous attention to the language used in the speech to ensure that the absence of the speaker does not have a noticeable impact on the audience.

Despite their impoverished circumstances, Kamal borrows a saree and brass jewelry to present herself with dignity at the event. However, upon entering the program hall, Kamal found her presence very insignificant. While other dignitaries receive attention and recognition, she feels like an inconspicuous observer sitting on the dais. The presence of a

huge crowd at Tarun Sangha, eagerly awaiting performances by renowned figures like Pamela, the singer with a voice likened to Lata's, and Sumantra, the football player, further emphasized her marginalization.

When given the opportunity to deliver the speech, Kamal faces interruptions from an organizer who asks her to make her speech shorter, which undermines her role and importance at the event. This situation highlights the challenges and disrespect that women like Kamal often encounter when they step into spaces traditionally reserved for men or when they try to assert their own voice and agency.

As Kamal begins delivering her speech, a wave of excitement erupts due to the arrival of Pamela, causing the organizer to abruptly halt Kamal's speech. Instead, he presents her with a memento in the poet's name. Disheartened and disappointed by this disrespectful interruption, Kamal decides to leave the program and returns home to her husband, shutting the door on the ungracious world outside. Her decision to receive the award on Suprabhat's behalf exemplifies her unwavering support and dedication as a wife, highlighting the strength and resilience of women who often put their own dreams and desires on hold to become pillars of support for their husbands.

When Suprabhat inquires about the events of the day, Kamal, in a gesture to protect her husband's feelings, breaks down in tears. To shield him from the harsh reality of her experience, she insists that her tears are a manifestation of overwhelming happiness. Despite being disregarded and mistreated at the program, Kamal carries herself with grace and maintains her composure, ensuring that her husband is shielded from the difficulties she faced.

In the story of "The Poet's Wife", Kamal's character and her actions can be analysed through Judith Butler's concept of 'Gender Performativity'. Kamal's role as a devoted wife and her willingness to prioritize her husband's ambitions over her own desires exemplify the

performative nature of gender roles. She adheres to these norms by taking on the responsibility of representing her husband at the cultural program and even assisting him in crafting a speech. This reinforces the idea that gender identity is not an inherent quality but rather a series of certain acts and practices. Her actions reveal how deeply ingrained these gender performances are and the extent to which women like Kamal often conform to these roles, even when faced with challenges and disrespect.

The fourth story, "He, Said Pani," dives into the life of the central character, Anandi. She embodies vulnerability and faces numerous challenges in a society that lacks empathy for her struggles. "Anandi's life was full of sorrow... She was the one who worked as a part-time maid, she was the one who managed all the cooking and cleaning, she did everything" (page 50). Anandi's life is marked by hardship and loneliness, particularly because of her son Bhupi's and his drug addiction. His addiction becomes so overwhelming that even his wife leaves him, further intensifying Anandi's sense of isolation and despair. Despite these challenges, Anandi shows remarkable strength and unwavering determination by working tirelessly to earn a living to support herself.

To escape her unfortunate circumstances, Anandi seeks solace in the company of Mestiri, an elderly carpenter who often visits her home. Mestiri has experienced two failed marriages and was abandoned by both of his wives. He also has two daughters from his second wife, both of whom were married and subsequently separated from their husbands. As the sole breadwinner for his family, Mestiri faces the challenging responsibility of providing sustainability to several people in the house, including his two wives, daughters, and numerous grandchildren. This stark reality of Mestiri's life affirms his own struggles and adversity.

Both Anandi and Mestiri share similar experiences of suffering, which forges a strong emotional bond between them. Their friendship provides an escape from their respective

hardships and allows them to share both their joys and sorrows. However, their companionship was viewed with suspicion and became the subject of objection by the people around them. The societal norms and judgments restricted Anandi's freedom to form any relationship or find emotional support from anyone. It reflects the constraints placed on individuals, especially women, in seeking connection and solace in a judgmental society.

In the story "He, Said Pani," Anandi's life takes an unexpected turn when Mestiri suddenly collapses and passes away while at her home. What becomes painfully evident is the callousness of the people around her, who promptly hold Anandi responsible for Mestiri's death simply because he had asked her for 'Pani' (water). The lack of empathy and compassion from those around her, leaves Anandi shocked and emotionally shaken. She struggles to comprehend the accusations levelled against her and is perplexed by the notion that she could be blamed for Mestiri's demise. Her attempts to clarify that she had simply offered him water, a simple act of kindness, were disregarded by people who rushed to make hasty judgments.

In the poignant narrative "He, Said Pani," the protagonist Anandi, embodies both vulnerability and resilience within a society that demands relentless management of impressions. Drawing upon Erving Goffman's concept of 'Impression Management', Anandi's life is a constant performance on society's front stage, where she fulfills the roles expected out of her—a part-time maid, a caretaker, and an enduring mother. Her stoic determination to maintain these appearances while juggling her myriad responsibilities highlights the heavy influence of societal norms and expectations. Her relationship with Mestiri, the elderly carpenter, becomes her brief escape to their private "backstage", where they can be more authentic and can share their true struggles. Yet, this companionship is viewed with suspicion and objection by the judgmental people around them.

"Love Story," the final story in the collection, presents a stark contrast to the conventional notion of a love story filled with passion, fulfillment, and happiness. Instead, it sheds light on the suffering and injustice experienced by Kusum, the protagonist, due to her unwavering devotion to love. Much like Anandi and other characters in the collection, Kusum must navigate restrictive societal norms and face judgment and criticism for her unconventional relationship with a male companion.

"Love Story" by Mahasweta Devi, Kusum is an opera singer who shares a romantic relationship with a playwright. Although they are not married, their connection runs deep, with Kusum frequently performing in the playwright's plays as an opera singer. She dedicates thirty years of her life solely to attending to the playwright's medical needs, selflessly putting her own well-being at risk. Despite her unwavering support and dedication, she has never been acknowledged as anything more than a mistress.

The story takes a tragic turn when the playwright suddenly passes away, and his family emerges to claim their love for him. His daughters, friends, and even sons-in-law, who had not visited him in the past three decades, now pretend to have had a close relationship with him. They take control of the playwright's body and organize a commemorative event without inviting or consulting Kusum. Despite the injustice she faces, Kusum stoically accepts her exclusion from the events surrounding the playwright's death. This societal rejection of their bond leaves Kusum feeling isolated and humiliated, highlighting the profound impact of societal norms and judgments on individuals who challenge traditional expectations of love and relationships.

The further exploration of Kusum's plight in "Love Story" reveals the heartbreaking reality of her situation. Initially, when she is approached to participate in an opera performance, there is a momentary sense of joy and solace as she contemplates the people who still hold her singing in high regard. However, this event exacerbates her misery when

she realizes that she is being used as a mere object for a publicity stunt. Her singing is not valued or appreciated; instead, she is regarded as a convenient means to collect funds quickly. The long-term relationship she had with the playwright is seen as objectionable, and in the end, she retreats to a dark and lonely place, trying to stifle her sobs.

The narrative of "Love Story" fundamentally highlights the marginalization and mistreatment of women in society, where their relationships are often contested, disregarded, or ignored, while similar actions by men are hardly questioned. Kusum becomes a victim of societal norms and prejudices, with her identity and relationship outrightly dismissed, reducing her to a peripheral position. The story raises important questions about recognition and the value attributed to women's roles and contributions. Kusum's narrative serves as a poignant criticism of a society that fails to acknowledge and appreciate women's love, sacrifice, and emotional labour.

The analysis of Mahasweta Devi's collection of stories beautifully captures the common thread of resilience and struggle that runs through the lives of the women protagonists. These women face diverse challenges, injustices, and societal norms, yet they all share a determination to confront and resist these adversities. From Kulsum's defiance of the Halala practice, which goes against her agency and rights, to Anandi's silent endurance of blame, Mohini's unspoken pain, and Kusum's unacknowledged love, these women challenge societal expectations and norms, each in her unique way.

The stories serve as powerful reminders of the importance of recognizing and valuing women's agency, contributions, and emotions in a world that often marginalizes and silences them. Through the journeys of these women, the collection highlights the pressing need for societal change and the acknowledgment of women's rights, dignity, and voices. It stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of women who persistently fight against the odds and

strive for a more just and equal world. In these stories, we find inspiration and a call to action to support and empower women in their quest for justice and equality.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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