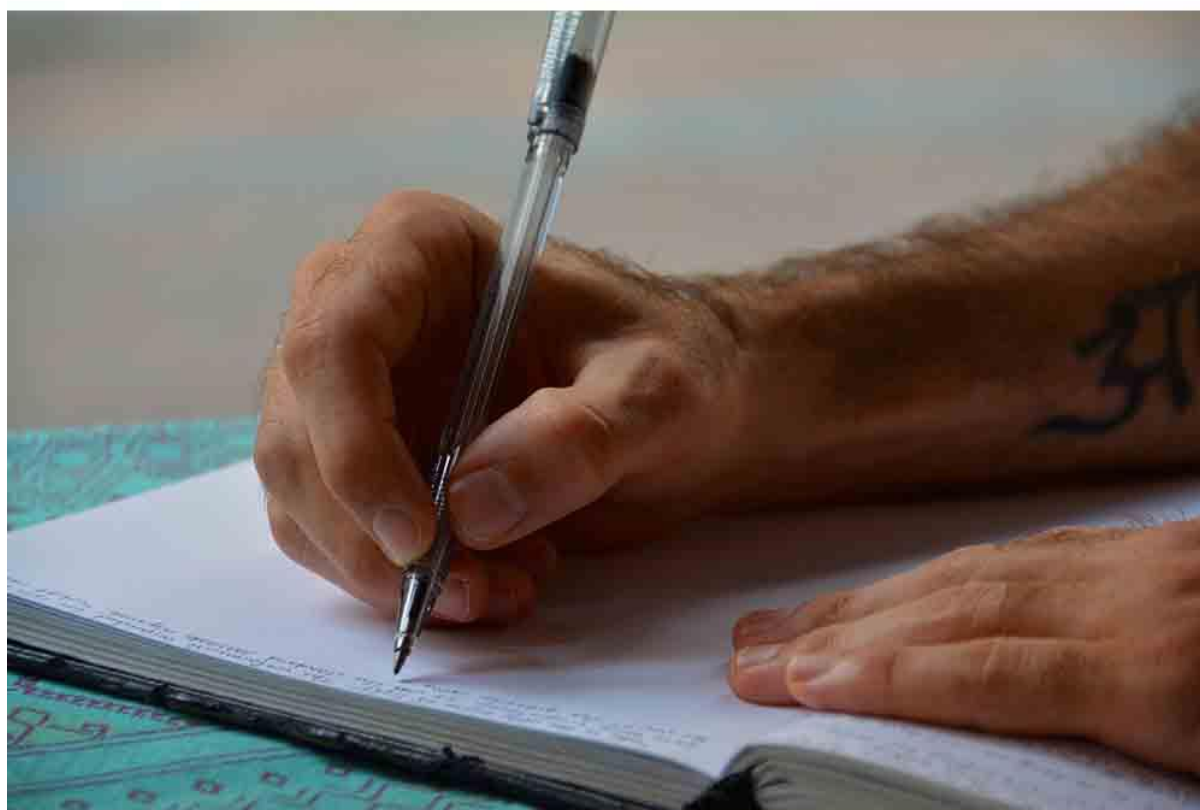


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Dr. Sucharita Sharma

Sr Asst. Professor

Department of English

IIS (Deemed to be) University

Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

sucharita.sharma@iisuniv.ac.in

The Subaltern Move: Reading Mahasweta Devi's "Dhowli"

The deteriorating socio-cultural conditions have transformed the restricted definition of subordination and subalternization. Earlier, the word Slavery was used to define the dark and brutal history of blacks who had suffered from generations under the hegemonic white society. But the meaning has widened in its scope and nature in its postcolonial state where we witness an unimagined representation of postcolonial slavery and/or subalternization. The stark depiction of masculinity in feminist writings has significantly drawn the attention of feminist theorists to form different paradigms in order to understand subject-power relations in societies. Indian women writers have contributed significantly to give voice to the unseen presence of these marginalized characters within (in)visible geographical and socio-cultural spaces, but the question arises that after a scholarly reading and analysis of women writers across cultures, are we in a position to differentiate between the conditions of black, white or third-world women? Does the meaning of rape, sexual abuse, male domination or patriarchal subordination change with geographical boundaries, race and/or culture?

A significant amount of literature can be read as a testimony to the depiction of female body as a site of exploitation for capitalist, biological or pleasure purpose. The truth is that a woman's destiny cannot change, not just due to the historical and age-old existence of patriarchy, but

because of her biological structure. But the emergence of postcolonial women writers has successfully shifted women characters' identity from periphery to center. The issues undertaken are of subsequent importance to interrogate the socially constructed gender ideologies formulated on the lines of ethnicity, race, class and caste. In contemporary times, women writers have subverted the question, "Is the pen a metaphorical penis"?, put forth by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Giber in the introduction to *Madwoman in the Attic*, by creating their own literary world and leaving minimal space for male characters by the art of story-telling of their own.

Mahasweta Devi is a Bengali short story writer and activist .Her major works resonate with the voices of resolution, revolt, aggression or passive suffering through silence or action, creating a platform for Adivasis and Tribals to establish their identity and make their presence seen through the course of a fabled journey. The stories force the readers to think critically with a deconstructive approach to probe into the postcolonial, historical, capitalist and feminist concerns embedded in the social, political and cultural discrimination of these outcaste and marginalized classes through the portrayal of stronger female characters who emerge as unrecognized and unidentified heroes in this caste, class and gender war waged within a very restricted and subordinated physical and psychological space. Her stories are brutal narratives which revolve around such characters whose reprisal is a manifestation of their existential emancipation, yet capturing them into physical and psychological violence, shredding her nobility, and in the end transforming her conquest to a symbol of innate womanly power.

Power, as a concept for Michel Foucault explains that subjectivity is not imposed externally; rather, the subject places itself in the position of a subject within the given sociohistorical context. " We can use the norms and values of our society in new ways and work on creating totally new forms of subjectivity, or even dispense with the subject as a mode of existence"(Taylor,7). According to Foucault, "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover

what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine to and build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political ‘double bind’, which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures” (1982a: 216). The character of Dhowli in the short story “Dhowli”, focuses on her insurgent consciousness, developing and nurturing underneath representations of sociopolitical repressions. The impact of her diminished state pushes her on verge of war with the ‘elitist bias’ and male dominating social structures, constructed to exploit the female’s body, both for sexual and productive purposes.

“Dhowli” is the story of a widow Dusad girl Dhowli, who lives with her mother (after the death of her husband in order to save her body from her brother-in-law), in a small village which is ruled by Brahmins and their caste ideologies. She is trapped in the web of words spun by a Brahmin boy Misrilal who promises to marry her, but when he is told that she has his child in her womb, he is forced by the society to leave the girl. In return, he takes a promise from his mother that Dhowli and her mother will be given enough to feed themselves to not starve in poverty. But as the fate had decided for them, the upper class devises plans to punish them by pushing them to the level of suicidal poverty. Dhowli and her mother continue to fight for their survival with meager means and try to keep the child alive by feeding whatever little they get. The Brahmin boy gets married and goes to a new town with his wife but unfortunately, he again fails to keep the promise of helping her and her family. Left with no choice in life, Dhowli decides to sell off the only commodity that is hers in the private sphere, but becomes public in the open sphere- her body, in exchange of money and corn for her family. She is changed; this is not a woman but a mother who decides. But something more tragic was waiting for her. When Misrilal comes to know this, he revengefully takes the advantage of his status and calls the village Panchayat to banish her from the village as a punishment for prostitution in the village. He cannot tolerate that Dhowli, a lower caste woman has won over a Brahmin man and proved her a failed and weak man who can only use a woman’s fertile body, but cannot keep

up to his promises and words. Finally, Dhowli is ostracized from the village, leaves the child in her mother's arms and carries the corpse of a body that has no emotions and feeling of pain or pleasure, and eyes that find no hope in the world of wolves and exploiters.

Mahasweta Devi's story initiates the question of free exercise of power that a woman can exercise in this world. Is her body an agency subject to the definitions, limitations, freedom and power of the societal and political structures? Does she have no right to love, hate, decorate or maybe use her body as per her needs? Her outlook as a subaltern woman does not exemplify the static idea of unruly action or words of subaltern struggle, yet encompasses various modes of insurgency. Still these adopted modes of resilience place her in a more respectful state in comparison to the other women of her village who had already succumbed to pressures of the society and rules prescribed for the outcaste by the Brahmin masters. Dhowli's journey begins at the bus-stop where she is standing from last four months till late night, waiting for her destiny to change, a story that has been written and rotten by the caste and class differences embedded in the society. Hopelessly hopeful, she thinks that the Brahmin boy will come back, and rises above all other external fears of physical assault as, "the unbearable pain just under her chest made her forget everything else" (Devi,231). Dhowli is determined and decides to not succumb to the plans of her birth and claim her basic rights from the society. Her decision to give birth to the child makes her similar to the fate of female characters like Tess, Hester Prynne and many other characters in the stories of Ismat Chughtai, who are left with a child in womb and thus, destined to die or exiled as fallen woman with children who are symbols of sin according to social and religious constructs, but the blessing of love for their mothers.

Foucault's theory of power suggests the omnipresence of power as he said in 1977, "it seems to me that power is 'always already there' and one is never outside it" (1980: 141). Dhowli realizes her potential as a woman who can give birth to a new life and accepts the child with the knowledge of all aftermaths and repercussions. She determinedly opposes her mother when

she asks Dhowli to get rid of the “thorn” in her womb. “How could she think of it as a thorn, when it came from their love....and not the product of greed and ruthless power”(Devi, 234)? Devi begins the narrative in the present and takes us down the memory lane of Dhowli whose innocent heart still negates to accept that Misrilal has betrayed her for lust as other Brahmin men who have slept with many Dusad, Dhobi or Gunja women of the village. The only childhood memories that she could cherish belonged to those few moments that she had spent with her father in village fair, after which her life was “the only kind of life for a Dusad girl” (Devi, 237), either of a married woman or widow.

Her mind resounds with the memories of her in-laws’ place where she was physically abused and tortured by her sick and drunkard husband, who leaves her to the mercy of his mother who accepts to keep her alive with meager leftover only on the condition that she works in order to get food at her own house. The widow becomes a bonded labour at her husband’s house, and thus begins a new journey of her exploitation when her brother-in-law arrives and starts eyeing her “budding breasts, timid eyes and slender waist”. She is again thrown to her maternal house where there is no source of livelihood for her widowed mother, except to tend few goats of the master’s family and sweep their yards. Her arrival only stamped her fate with hardships and agony as she was implored with the Misra boy’s words and gave herself in. The community made her an outcaste in its own eyes and both mother and daughter were punished in all possible ways by being starved in the village. The turn of events moved to its climax when Dhowli was punished by the lover for her free choice of selling the body for survival and met the tragic destiny of a Dusad girl.

Dhowli is neither aggressively outrageous and rebellious like Draupadi, nor naïve and defenseless like Douloti. She is betrayed by love, not abused by power; she submits to feelings and does not give up to the exploitative structure of power. The voice of Dhowli as a subaltern is little ambiguous at this stage as it is stifled at times, yet given the freedom to decide

accordingly and exercise her own desired choice. But the writer makes it very clear that despite the fact that Dhowli has succumbed to love, the upper class is not left out of the matrix of social criticism, which is the main idea behind her writings. The narrative has been weaved with the thread of emotions and feelings, yet the personal is highly shaped and influenced by political and socio-historical dimensions of caste and class geography. If the narrative begins with Dhowli, the betrayed lover waiting for her Brahmin lover Misrilal, it ends with Dhowli, a widowed mother forced to be a prostitute, who is separated from her child by the society after being expelled from the village on ironic accusations of polluting the place, which is already degradingly corrupted but remains unnoticed by the so-called socio-cultural caretakers who belong to the upper caste.

The transformation in her character, circumstances, decisions, destiny- everything is decided by the political, submerging her identity and resisting abilities to the depth of oppression. The story opens with Dhowli in her silent but subversive mode, who attempts to disrupt and deny social power structures at the bus stop. But gradually, she becomes a pure subaltern, illusioned by the prospects of happiness and love and disillusioned by reality in the form of a child- the symbol of punishment for a Dusad woman. Like Hester, Dhowli is a sinner in the eyes of her community for the sin of falling in love. The relation between Misrilal's elder brother Kundan and the Jhalo woman stands as a contrast to the relation between Misrilal and Dhowli. Kundan's mistress is given a piece of land for survival and his illegitimate son is not accused by the lower community for fear of Kundan's status. Kundan's mother is not offended by the presence of Jhalo woman despite the fact that he is married and has a wife and son. Their relation defines the dominance of power structure which operates within the private and public sphere in a small village. Juxtaposed to this, when Misrilal tells her mother that it is his child in Dhowli's womb, she replies very boastfully, "Nothing unusual about it my boy. Men of this family have had children by Dusad and Ganju girls. Kundan has three by Jhalo. It's only the

heat of our age, my boy”(Devi, 241). IIN response, Misrilal attempts to disrupt the order when he denies to leave the village and says, “Bu it’s not her fault, Mother” (Devi, 241). Both Misrilal and Dhowli are punished directly or indirectly by their own community for their submission to each other out of love.

According to Foucault, Biopower is able to access the body because it functions through norms rather than laws, because it is internalized by subject rather than located in a single individual or government body(Taylor, 43). In contrast to this kind of sovereign power, Foucault makes note of biopower which “fosters life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault 1990:138). He writes:

Power would be no longer dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself: it was taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body. (ibid 142-3)

The concept of Biopower can be thus understood as a form of control over life and it operates both through individual or group control. In this story, Kundan and his family first decide to kill Dhowli and her mother, but Hanumanji Misra cunningly advises, “Kill them. But not directly, starve them. Take away the job”(240). Not only the Misras, but even her own community contrives to sexually regulate and dominate her life under the name of their ideologies.

All the Dusad- Ganju boys, the coolies, and the labor contractors were now watching how things would settle. If the Misras would support her and the child with a regular supply of corn or money or a job, then they would leave her alone because they did not want to annoy the Misras if they wanted to live in their

domain. If not, then they would turn her, a widow with no one but an old mother and a baby, into a prostitute for all of them to use. (Devi, 242)

The story is not just about Dhowli's subaltern state, but also reveals how the Brahmin family makes their survival impossible by starving and accusing them of theft. The mother and daughter try some meager jobs to feed themselves and the child with whatever scarce they are paid. But situations were getting worse as the hardships accentuated and "all that seems real is the baby sleeping in her lap and the constant worry about food"(Devi,247). When she thinks about the future and questions the survival means, her mind sternly refutes any thought of the common destiny of such fallen women of their village who "open doors at night for corn, a sari from another and some money, when pebbles are thrown at doors"(Devi, 248). She is bold enough to call and talk to Misrilal when he comes for his marriage and tells him, "I spit on your love. If you had raped me, then I would have received a tenth of an acre as compensation. You are not a man. Your brother is. He gave Jhalo babies, but he also gave her a farm and a home of her own. And you? What have you done?"(Devi,249).

Dhowli's attempts run futile as he never helps her or keeps to his promises. She decides to become a prostitute at Valatod at her aunt's place, but comes back in vain. Every night she tries hard with her undaunted courage to keep her dignity intact within the private sphere of her four mudded walls. But the serenity of the forest again becomes her foe when she decides to embrace death but in turn is caught up by symbolic death in the presence of the coolie supervisor to whom she agrees to open the doors at night, but decides the bargain for money and corn, not on credit. Dhowli again agrees to gift her body, but earlier when she was defeated by Misrilal in the forest, it was a woman who gave to her emotions and love; this time it is a mother who is psychologically dead with no emotions and feelings, but a commodity to sell to keep her son alive. It is a new realization of her own power as a woman and mother when:

Dhowli and her mother start having two full meals a day. After the customer leaves, Dhowli sleeps well, better than she has for a long time. She never knew it would be too easy to sell one's own body, without any emotion, for corn and millet and salt. If she had known, they could have had full meals much earlier; the baby could have been better fed and cared for. It now seems to her that she has been very stupid in the past.(Devi,253)

In the words of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the process of moving away from a territory is understood as the concept of deterritorialization, where it could be social, linguistic or conceptual form of territory. The vectors of deterritorialization function within these structures through the process of reterritorialization(509), a process in which the deterritorialized elements rejoin to form unknown relations while modifying the old or assembling new components. Dhowli's body and its beauty was earlier the source of honest appreciation and admiration of Misrilal, which she had given only to the hopeful prospects of love. But now, the same body was viewed as a site of physical pleasure for lower caste men of her society, which could be easily sold as an object for economic sustenance for herself and her family. As a subaltern her collective identity is diminutive, yet she moves from passivity to freedom when she moves beyond the psychophysical premises of the forest which, "in the early afternoon is primitive, gentle and comforting. The Misra boy's voice was imploring, his eyes full of pain and despair. Dhowli was unguarded in mind and body. She gave in"(Devi,239).

But, she wins and losses at the same time. Her decision to be a prostitute makes the Brahmin family a laughing stock as all their attempts to punish and revenge the family go outwitted and in vain, and Kundan observes it with rage and further plans to destroy her completely. Shanichari retaliates angrily at Kundan with the truth when he questions if the village women are willing to drink the water from the well that she touches and replies defiantly, "Your brother forced her to become a prostitute. How would your brother's son have

lived if she did not? Everybody seems to be happy now, including your friend and business partner the contractor. His coolies no longer have to stray very far from the fun”(Devi, 255). Kundan’s Brahmin pride and his upper caste ego is hurt and he goes to Misrilal with all venom to work his plans through his brother and attacks his “cowardice that now brings the business of selling flesh to the village, right under our nose”(Devi, 254). He is happy to find that Misrilal turns pale at this news, which states that he is still in love with Dhowli. He manipulates this pride in his love and faith in Dhowli’s miserable state as a weapon to demolish Dhowli’s identity and silent, yet subversive and rebellious decision to become a prostitute in their village. Kundan shakes his brother to his true position of a Brahmin man and Misrilal “must be taught how to keep the untouchables under foot, sometimes acting kindly but forcefully like a man. Otherwise, it is too large an empire for Kuundan to control all by himself- so much from land and orchards, so many illegitimate children and so many fertile untouchable women, so huge a moneylending business” (Devi, 254). He further takes the killer move and questions his masculinity and feebleness:

She became the mother of a son by making a Brahmin fall for her. And now the entrance that was once used by lion is being used by the pig and sewer rats.....She is making us Brahmins the laughingstock.....You’re not a man! You couldn’t stand up to Hanumanji and tell him that you wanted her as your kept woman.... I spit on your love. You are no man. You made people spit at the Brahmins.(Devi, 255)

In order to know the truth Misrilal goes to the village but Dhowli is unaware of the last blow to her destiny and opens the door at night at the sound of pebble. This time it is Misrilal standing as the judge of his fate, who questions him with anger, rage and frustration at his failed masculine and caste control over a feeble Dusad woman who defeats and crushes his love under her willing prostitution. When he tells her that death would have been better than this life, she

retorts, “At first I wanted to do that. Then I thought, why should I die? You’ll marry, run your shop, go to the cinema with your wife, and I’ll be the one to die? Why?” (Devi, 255) The encounter between Dhowli and Misrilal ego- that boasts of his power of love, caste and masculinity within the sphere of his knowledge- is called into question. Her body, on which she thinks she has the right, becomes the site of articulating her revolt and anger as a subaltern. Dhowli’s resistance can be defined as “everyday resistance” as according to Scott it is an activity that she uses as an exploited to both survive and undermine repressive domination. But somehow in the narrative, their resistance, which was an attempt to validate the existing patriarchal order, seems to bring the wrath of their community. With his freedom and response, she nullifies Misrilal’s hold on the conscious self whom he has loved. Misrilal, at the moment confronts an altogether different self, who sends a wave of fear in his heart by threatening his identity by her resistance.

“Foucault’s analysis is also an experiment with power attempts to describe the historical limits that are imposed on us, but it is also an experiment with the possibility of modifying and crossing them: relations of power always incorporate relations of resistance and points of recalcitrance”(Taylor,93). Although for an individual it is difficult to move beyond the periphery circumscribed by the society, yet a human being can always undertake a subversive mode within its own power to destabilize or combat the imposed power structures. In Foucault’s view, individual body is not always a site of exploitation and a symbol of docility and passivity functioning under dominant discourses and techniques of power and oppression, but also a space within which operates certain modes of resistance and resilience against such. “The body is a locus of resistance and freedom”()

Misrilal recollects his shaken courage, returns that night from her house and promises her to prove that he is a Brahman man. Next day, it is decided in the Panchayat that she will leave for Ranchi and work there as a registered prostitute. She boards the bus, but she is a completely

changed Dhowli, with residues of love but devoid of any pain, hope and emotions, with an ironic smile of self-pity on her face as it would have been better for her to stay with her husband's brother as a whore in the private household sphere, not publically. There is an ironic satisfaction on her face, the only real promise that can be offered by Misrilals, Kundans and Hanumanji Misras to many Dhowlis. The climax and the sentence of judgment on Dhowli's life serves as a mockery of the system and the "brass trident atop the temple in Misra's house", symbolic of the religious and cultural order that has created the hegemonic caste structure, and Dhowli's future is decided by the people who form a part of the mainstream politics and frame laws and policies that neglect all, and every dimension of their existence, stifling all voices of her dissent and verdict.

Mahasweta Devi posits a very important question that cuts across many other cultures and goes beyond caste, class and gender roles. She questions: "Isn't the society more powerful than the individuals"? and shakes the readers to the fact that be it a male or female, the identity is always shaped and influenced by the society's various modes of regulation and the matrix of its workings. Be it Misrilal, Kundan, the coolie supervisor or other men of the Dhobi, Dusad and Gunja community, their indifference and subordination of many Dhowlis and Jhalos is representative of the power accorded to these by the social and historical functioning of their society. If Misrilal is pulled back to his Brahmin status, Dhowli is pushed to her tragic fate where she has no choice, but to remain in the defeated realm of the society as her venom and resistance was against the lover who was a part of that heinous system where a subaltern is pushed to precipice.

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