

Tragic Tale of Suffering Humanity : Douloti the Bountiful

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi is a literary stalwart who has written vehemently for a social cause. As an activist writer, she has explored, studied and presented an authentic portrait of the tumults of the lives of tribal community in India. Her texts present a rare critique of our socio-political-economic structure that is blind towards its own discrepancies. Douloti, the bountiful is yet another piece of work by the writer that seems to explain 'all about tribal life' – the cycle of exploitation, chronic poverty, hunger, deprivation, bonded slavery, prostitution, marginalisation, the pernicious nexus amongst the rich, powerful and power-mongering elites and so on. The present paper is an attempt to make a deep study of the work and to trace the modus operandi of exploitation, as shown by the writer, with special emphasis on how women are made to suffer differently.

Keywords : Bonded Slavery, Prostitution, Marginalization, Power-Mongering Elites, Modus Operandi.

The locale of the story is Palamau, a backward tribal region in Jharkhand/Bihar, which according to the writer "is a mirror of India" (Bitter Soil, vii)¹. A mirror indeed because it reflects the real face of the regions on the margins- a face without make-ups or filters or masks, so that all the scars on the otherwise clean and clear face are visible with untainted clarity once one embarks on the journey to explore; and with writers like Mahasweta at work, the visibility is not much difficult. Obviously, it becomes difficult to face all this for a sensitive reader and activists like the writer herself, and hence there is a sort of dissatisfaction and anger, as Devi puts it herself: "...For I believe in anger....and so I peel the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the government, to

expose its naked brutality, savagery and caste and class exploitation." (Bitter Soil, ix-x)²

The story can be studied as a rare narrative that explains many things, like- the structure and functioning of the village economy and land system, whole scenario of bonded slavery, situation of tribal women in this whole system and the way their bodies and being is ruthlessly dragged in the lucrative profit-making fun game of the rich. Analysis of these points one by one would lead to an understanding of the modus operandi of exploitation of the marginalised people and also of the real theme and motif of the story.

Consisting large number of tribal population and small number of so-called high-caste people, Seora is a typical Indian village where resources are limited and

the available meagre resources are also concentrated in the hands of the few. "In Palamau, the communities of Nagesia's and Parhais are small. The bigger communities are Bhuyians, Dusads, Ganjus, Oraons, Mundas. The village is called Seora. Its owner is Munabar Singh, A Chandela Rajput."(Imaginary Maps 19)³ How Raputs- minorities in number, became omnipotent masters of such tribal majority villages is the story that explains the beginning of exploitation. It is the story of unequal resource-allocation in pre-independence India that continued afterwards. Dulan in Mahasweta Devi's story Rudali explains this very aspect in the context of Rajput's domination in the entire region of Chhotanagpur plateau:

Raja of Chhotanagpur...sent his Rajput sardars in the sparsely populated Tahad region. He told them take as much as land is covered by throwing your sword in the air...claim as much land as you can in this way, then live it off. That's how Rajputs settled in Tahad and how they came to be masters of this region."(Metamorphosis of Rudali 94) ⁴

As Dulan further explains, Rajputs are accustomed of usurping resources in the same manner henceforth, not by throwing swords but by firing bullets at tribal people and by burning their settlements.

The colonial masters left the country in 1947 but it could not change the situation on the ground because it was mere a replacement of white skinned masters by the brown-skinned ones. The mind-set, the imperialist intent and practices remained the same. The land-holder class of such villages have everything in plenty."They have elephants, horses, livestock, illegitimate children, kept women, venereal disease and a philosophy that he who owns the gun owns the land."(Rudali, 95)⁵ Hence, by virtue of this prevalent tradition and unwritten rule, tribal community- the real stakeholders of resources is pushed to the margins and becomes ultimate losers in terms of rights over everything that is worth claiming.

Tribal community is therefore left with no support or scope to fulfil their livelihood requirements. In such a

situation of helplessness and utter destitute they are forced to borrow from the rural masters and hence fell in the trap of bonded slavery. Every member of a tribal household is, in some or the other way, victim of this ruthless system:

The reality of bonded labor....constitutes the crux of the story. It is a system in which when a poor worker borrows a certain sum of money from a landlord or moneylender and is unable to repay it in cash; s/he instead agrees to provide his or her labor free of charge as a form of repayment. The agreement is supposed to last till the payment of principal and interest is recovered. (Majumdar 156) ⁶

The amount taken as loan is never so big that the whole family can be tied up as bonded labourer throughout their lives, but this happens because all landlords, without exception resort to cheating and wrong doings: "The system thrives on the established fact of the illiteracy and powerlessness of indigent workers. The worker not only does not have any say regarding the terms of agreement, he is in no position to know if even the terms that are heavily loaded against him are honestly followed by the moneylender."(156)⁷

Thus, bonded slavery is a system of perpetual and systematic exploitation of the poor, devised, evolved and maintained by constant efforts of the privileged class-caste to ensure smooth fulfilment of their selfish motifs. The chronic poverty and deprivation of the tribal masses is a sort of imposed disability by the people like Munabar Singh and is seen by them as being inevitable for their prosperity and also for the very existence of their dynasty.

Hence, Munabar Singh keeps a close watch on his subjects; no tribal is allowed to shake off the chains of bonded slavery or earn a little comfort. "First a Nagesia should'nt have money. If he does, he should not raise a roof. If you raise a roof or buy a water-buffalo, master will notice it. If you buy land master will grab it. If you buy cattle, the master will snatch them."(Imaginary Maps 23)⁸ Bono Nagesia had gone out to a city to earn and hence had somehow freed

himself from Munabar's clutches, but when he returned with some money and tried to build a house, it was burnt down to ashes by Munabar's goons, he was beaten and forced to take loan and become a bonded slave like other tribals.

Every tribal individual is somehow forced to enter into the bonded slavery system and bear inhuman atrocities. Ganori Nagesia, Douloti's father, has become Crooked Nagesia because his "carelessness sends Munabar's plough steer into tiger's belly". And thus "His back is stooped, and he has to limp on his right foot when he walks"(Imaginary Maps 33).⁹ Every villager has to live on Master's mercy and even exercise their right to vote as per his directions. Munabar's support to a candidate ensures his victory in the elections, since he controls the election results through his muscle and money power. Hence democracy is not allowed to function and no awareness regarding the world outside is allowed to reach to the grass-root level. People are strategically kept aloof of the idea of elections, democracy, political rights and even the Nation itself. Tribals are pushed at the receiving ends in terms of social, political, economic rights.

The situation of nearby cities is also the same for the subalterns. In search of better livelihood when Bono Nagesia went to a mining area in the city, there was similar story of gruesome exploitation:

Government- unine- contractor- slum landlord-market trader- shopkeeper- post office, each is the other's friend....The unine didn't do a thing. Talk to government officer, he laughs. The slum lord takes out rent. The trader and the shopkeeper will zoom down like a hungry wolf. They will falsify your account. Everyone sucks the coolie's blood. If a note comes from home, the postman doesn't give it without money. Send money home, the mail clerk says give me a cut. (Imaginary Maps 24) ¹⁰

Thus, there is same story everywhere; they become vulnerable and feel trapped in a situation where there is absolutely no other way to go. The bonded labour system hurts women differently especially when the

victim is a young girl. The trauma and sufferings of women in this system is portrayed so poignantly in the story. Numberless tortures that they go through, how this works as a close system with absolutely no exit door, the acute deprivation and struggle for survival that the individual and her children born out of repeated rapes in the brothel go through, almost all aspects are depicted in a realistic manner.

Douloti, the fourteen year old daughter of Ganori Nagesia is the protagonist of the narrative. The narrative shows how her already miserable life worsens the moment lusty eyes of a rich-high caste man falls on her. The story especially underscores how the pattern of exploitation of land, resources and women is quite identical. Hence the connection between societal perception about nature and women needs to be understood properly in order to understand the whole phenomenon of exploitation of women. As Nasrullah Mambrol in "Ecocriticism an essay", explains "Western thought has often held a more or less utilitarian attitude to nature – nature is for serving human needs."¹¹

This, anthropocentric view is the basis of colonial and capitalist mindset that exploits all the natural resources with the purpose to gain maximum profit. It is a highly utilitarian approach that leads to patriarchal hegemony and over-exploitation of both women and nature. Women are traditionally seen as impulsive and uncontrolled like Nature and thus are considered to be subjects of utmost discipline that is to be imposed by the community that is more rational and strict. With such a mindset, androcentric attitude towards women and Nature gradually developed. In this line of thought later comes eco-feminism. As Susan Buckingham puts it, "bringing together feminism and environmentalism, ecofeminism argues that domination of women and degradation of environment are consequences of patriarchy and capitalism."¹²

The cultural eco-feminists also laid emphasis on "women's inherent and caring or nurturing nature and on a shared subjugation under patriarchal

system”(Bukingham).¹³ This patriarchal, colonial and capitalist mind-set operates in a complex and implicit manner and the writer in this text has subtly portrayed the ways in which it becomes instrumental in the exploitation of numerous Doulotis across the country.

This also leads to “the essentialist perspective, often adopting an ideal of women as earth mother/goddess”(Bukingham).¹⁴ Mother/Nature/women are expected to be caring, self-effacing and behave like one who feels proud in offering everything to her sons without complain or demand- even if her gifts are misused and she is harmed while serving her selfish, ever-demanding sons. Thus, there is open plunder of dault i.e. wealth causing “shared subjugation” of land and aboriginal women:

“The boss has turned them into land

The boss ploughs and ploughs their land and raises the crop.

They are all Paramananda’s Kamiya...” (Imaginary Maps 60).¹⁵

And as Mary Cappeli puts it “The prostitute’s song demonstrates their isolation from a post-independence India that has turned a deaf ear to their suffering.”¹⁶ Douloti comes into picture when her father is hospitalised. She takes care of her father along with her mother and is quite disturbed by the inhuman behaviour of the master- Munabar Singh. A caste Brahmin Paramananda often came to see them and Douloti who was too young to understand the ‘ways of the rich people’, narrated all her plights to the man whose heart seemed to be wet with compassion for the young tribal girl and her poor father. “How the brahman Paramananda tried to show compassion to Crook Nagesia, the kamiya. And what compassion in Munabar Chandela. The kingdom of heaven descended on this sinful earth”(Imaginary Maps 49).¹⁷

After sufficient show of goodwill Paramananda comes to the real point. He gives a proposal of setting Ganori free of his bonded slavery by paying the required money to Munabar Singh and also offers to marry his

daughter Douloti. Despite all the protests from the father himself, the ‘deal’ is finalised- the deal of sale and purchase of a tribal girl between the village-owner Munabar and the supposed well wisher Paramananda. He (Paramananda) was actually owner of a brothel. Douloti is taken to a brothel by this man. There, she is first reserved for a wealthy and valued customer Latiya, who desperately wanted a virgin untouchable girl. Later, after few years when he lost interest in her body she was allowed to take clients on daily basis. The investment done on her clothes and accessories was, as per rule, added in the original amount.

Douloti, like other bonded whores, continued to pay the interest of lone through her body, facing repeated brutal rapes, taking twenty to thirty clients daily and letting their ill-fed, skeletal body be torn by claws of hungry bestial men, every now and then. This continues for decades, the fourteen year old Douloti, is now 27. And due to her stay in brothel Paramananda has earned much more than what he had spent on Douloti. But she is finally allowed to leave the place only when her body starts showing clear signs of some serious ailment. The owner orders her to go and take a treatment on her own and come back only when she is again ready to take clients.

Thus, she is exploited in the best possible manner in order to extract all that her female body could offer and then, like other prostitutes, she is left to die a terrible death. Her venereal disease is incurable, having known this full well, she tries to go back to her own village for once, but on her way to it, her body collapses completely. Thus, Douloti, the once bountiful girl, is reduced to hollow stinking skeletal corpse.

This life and death of Douloti is symbolic in many ways- (i) It shows how men of high caste/class mercilessly exploit the tribal community and especially their women and use them ruthlessly as sex slave, deriving sadistic pleasure,(ii) The parallel between exploitation of land, natural resources and women has been successfully drawn. Tribal men and

women are considered to be properties of the landlords. And even today whole government machinery has not been completely successful in protecting them or providing any sort of empowerment,(iii) Douloti's well-planned exploitation and her tragic end on the day of independence is symbolic of failure of the very idea of independence, since such a huge segment of population does not have any clue of what this word called 'freedom' actually stands for. The writer also presents it as a sort of failure of idea of 'nation', since the aboriginal population has continued to live on the margins and is cut off from most of the positive changes taking place in the nation.

This failure is obviously not visible to the main-stream and this lack of visibility is what Mahasweta Devi tries to underscore in her works. At the end of the story Devi juxtaposes the ideal image of a liberated nation with the real dead body of an innocent bonded whore, who died while many other talked about abolishing bonded slavery. The preparations of celebration are in acute contradiction with the situation on ground, where breathless body of Douloti is spread in the courtyard of the school that is ironically preparing for celebration.

Devi also underscores the trench of divide that separates the suffering India, with the India burgeoning with surplus. This divide creates a clear binary. It is so deep that one segment becomes utterly alien to another; they are unable to communicate with or understand each other. What is disaster for the main-stream is a ray of hope for penny-less marginal. Again, what defines progress for the main-stream is an ill-omen for these enslaved whores. For instance, famine is something that beggar-turned whore Somni eagerly awaits for because only in those 'hard' times her children-born out of repeated rapes in the brothel-could enter the mission and get sufficient food.

Emblems of 'development', i.e. new roads, railway tracks, infrastructure meant devastation for these tribal women for it brought more hungry clients,

increase demand for virgin, untouchable girls and more exhaustive labour for women already being exploited in brothels. This inversion of meaning and definition of normally accepted facts is a remarkable aspect that Devi puts forth through the story.

The very name of the protagonist is symbolic like that of Jashoda and Draupadi in other stories by Mahasweta Devi. Jashoda in Breast Giver pays the cost of being a 'good' mother and wife. Dopdi in the story Draupadi is made to suffer like heroine of Epic Mahabharata. Similarly Douloti is made to suffer because she is bountiful and she has those things in plenty that is in great demand in predatory, patriarchal prostitute trade. The name 'Douloti' in Hindi language is derived from the word daulat i.e. wealth. And the story is all about this loot and the mechanisms of its loot.

The systematic exploitation of the untouchable women goes on unabated despite numerous laws and efforts about human rights of women theoretically gaining prominence in public debates and state policy. Eventually, the distance between the main-stream and the margins continues to grow. There is trust deficit and also lack of understanding. This is why even the most concerned activists seem to be unable to understand the urgency and gravity of the situation. Thus, all the efforts that suggest 'reform' or 'welfare' initiatives are categorically denied by the writer by showing how all the people offering possible solutions either fail pathetically or withdraw themselves at the end- be it the missionary man or the school teacher or the tribal activist or Douloti's own uncle Bono Nagesia. They could not bring any change, could not protect even a single Douloti.

For instance, Mohan Srivastava who believed that formation of a law could abolish bonded slavery, "with all his sympathy....remained a schoolmaster at the basic primary school in Bira village, Tohri Block"(Imaginary Maps 89).¹⁷ Father Bomfuller, who had started a survey on the 'the Incidence of Bonded labour' in Palamau district and through his work aimed "to build a case for abolishing the bonded

labour system legally...” (Imaginary Maps 86),18 finally left for Delhi. His “survey report reached Delhi and was imprisoned in a file.” Similarly, tribal activist Prasad Mahato, when all his hopes from Father Bomfuller and Mohan Srivastava bore no fruit, left Gandhi mission and Harijan association and joined Liberation Party.

Bono Nagesia, who had first-hand experience of inhumane suffering under the bonded slave system and who was most desperate to help Douloti and others also joined Prasad Mahato. All this happened while Douloti continued to pay the cost of these delayed actions and inactions, finally leaving her corporal cage. “Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spreadeagled kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs.”(94) 19

This was the end of Douloti and the narrative as well but it could not end everything. Since, “Like a flag, Douloti’s thin body flutters as the vain glory of victory and questions the validity of freedom for women won through flag politics and independence-struggles in India.”(Anwar 91)20 Douloti’s silent death left haunting questions for people like Mohan Srivastava, whose “faith in Law, in the police remained unshaken.” But after seeing Douloti’s dead body across the carefully drawn map of India, he could for the first time sense the real pain, that no other words than those of the writer herself could better define-“...looking in front, he closed his eyes. His body jerked again, as if his arms were tied and a machine-gun was being emptied into him.”(94) 21

This is shock, this pain, this breaking down of long held belief in ‘all is well’ is what Devi seeks to achieve as a writer and social worker. She poignantly “uses the image of bonded- sex-worker lying dead body on the map of India to denounce exploitation and to destroy the myth of free India for all” (Collu 55).22 Thus, the writer through this narrative expresses the pain, trauma and tribulations of the suffering humanity and

shocks her readers in order to awake them from the slumber of satisfaction with the status quo. To sum up, the narrative truly justifies the following observation about the writer-“Mahasweta Devi, does not augment the silence or create a further peripheralization or misrepresentation of the Subalterns; instead the attempt has been to perpetuate a ‘presence’ in an eradicable absence of full presence”(Jamuna 138).

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