Frames of Marginalisation in Mahasweta Devi’s *Outcast: Four Stories*

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Despite being ‘voiced’ in the space of the Western academia by writers like Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, Mahasweta Devi is still not extensively known to academics outside Bengal in her own country. Yet Mahasweta Devi, the most distinguished social activist among the contemporary Bengali literary artists, took up her pen to expose and explode the sham and fraudulence of the democratic set-up in our country and to represent the fates of marginalized women undergoing untold miseries within and without their own communities.

Mahasweta Devi’s *Outcast: Four Stories* is a treatise on the pathetic doom of four marginalized women characters—Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina and Chinta1—who are doubly wronged by being marginalized even by those who are usually regarded as marginalized in society. In these stories, Mahasweta Devi actually envisages a three-tier hierarchical structure in the Indian social order composed of the rungs of the non-marginalized or the mainstream, the marginalized or the subordinated, and finally the outcast or the marginalized by the marginalized. I will argue that it is Mahasweta Devi’s intention in these stories to excavate and exhibit the gendered causes lying underneath the socio-political and economic exploitation of three women belonging to a backward minority. The writer reveals the virtual slave trade that festers under the facade of the democratic society of India, and clearly indicates the plight of these women who usually have no one to turn to, nothing to look forward to, and have only a few to lend them a voice—women who are regarded as sub-human and treated as commodities both without and within their own communities.

1 “dhouli,” “shanichari,” “chinta” are the eponymous titles of Mahasweta Devi’s short stories. The title of the other story is “the fairytale of rajabasha.” “rajabasha” is the name of a place. It is interesting to note that the initial letters of the titles of all these stories are in lower case, perhaps to imply the insignificance, commonplaceness of the stories of those wretched women to the socially privileged. The writer, however, uses the initial letters of their names in higher case in the text—Dhouli, Shanichari, Chinta—perhaps to suggest the centrality of their role in the stories. More interesting it may seem to be that on the cover page and on the title page, both the author’s name and that of the translator have lower case initials. Both are women.
The first of these stories, eponymously titled “dhouli” (note the translator’s ironic intent in using the first letter of the title in the lower case), presents the sad plight of a dusad (untouchable, lower caste) young widow who is seduced and impregnated by Misrilal, the son of a wealthy, upper-caste Brahman named Hanumanji Misra. Misrilal gets rid of the responsibility of the newborn child and its mother by marrying another woman belonging to his own caste and by settling in Ranchi, a distant Indian city. When Dhouli begins to sell her body in order to earn bread for her son and for herself, Misrilal returns and becomes instrumental in forcing her to leave her village and move to the city to become a prostitute.

In Mahasweta Devi’s second story, “shanichari,” an Oraon girl is marginalized like Dhouli in her own society for coming back with a diku’s child in her womb. A middle-aged woman, Gohuman, has sold Shanichari to a brick-kiln owner in Barasat, West Bengal, where she faces economic and sexual exploitation leading to pregnancy. Subsequently, Shanichari is sent back to her native village, but only to face ostracism.

Somewhat differently, however, in the story, “the fairytale of rajabasha,” a self-imposed ostracism, not from her own society, but from the world, is the consequence of the love of Josmina for her husband Sarjom. Both of them are sold to a landowner in the far-away Indian state of Punjab, where Josmina faces the same treatment as Shanichari, even though she eventually manages to come back home with the prospect of beginning life afresh. But this bright vision of hope turns out to be a hallucination, as she develops the symptoms of motherhood, a condition forced upon her by her master in Punjab. In the end, to save her beloved husband from being ostracized from his own community, Josmina commits suicide.

Dissimilar as these characters and their stories seem to be, what brackets these three characters together is the label of “Otherness” that sticks to their existence. It is interesting to note that this leitmotif of “Otherness” is re-created in the narratival mode of the three stories at different levels. The very opening paragraph of “dhouli,” for instance, creates an ambience of an “Other world,” the world of the subaltern where no light can ever penetrate:

The bus left Ranchi in the evening and reached Taharr around eight at night. […] The world beyond and the wide, metalled road ended here. Rohtagi Company’s bus was the only link between Taharr and the rest of the world. […] They used poor, rundown buses for poor, rundown places like Taharr, Palani or Burudiha. The service was suspended during the rainy season as buses couldn’t ply on unmetalled roads. Taharr would be completely cut off from the rest of the world during the monsoon months.(1)

An ambience of marginalization, which is intensified later on, is suggested by the use of words like “poor, rundown buses for poor, run down people.”

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2 A diku is a gentleman or a man belonging to the mainstream of the society.
At another level, too, the word “buses,” a clear signifier of modern life style and civilisation, fixes the nature and role of the people of the “Other world” as these buses are explicitly defined as rejected vehicles fit only to ply to a world where the “metalled road ends.”

In total dissonance from the reference to the civilized world in the opening paragraph, the concluding paragraph of “dhouli” signifies another frame of marginalization. Here Mahasweta Devi delineates the natural world and thereby ironically effects a dissolution of the nature-civilization dichotomy:

The sun shone brightly. The sky looked blue and the trees as green as always. She realized that nature was unaffected by the upheaval in her life. This painful thought made her weep. Wasn’t everything supposed to change from today? Everything? The day Dhouli was to finally enter the market place? Or is it that, for girls like Dhouli, nature accepted such a fate as only natural? The nature, which, after all, was not created by the Misras—or had the sky, the trees and the earth [been] sold out to the Misras as well? (33)

Significantly, the effacement of the nature-civilisation binary leads to a kind of identification between the two apparently dichotomous entities and suggests an ominous absorption and annihilation of nature by a soul-killing civilization. Like the world of civilization represented by the “metalled road” in the opening paragraph, nature at the conclusion of this short story remains apathetic to Dhouli’s exclusion from her own subaltern community.

Mahasweta Devi, however, makes it clear through her narrative that the label of “Otherness” is conferred by the politics of power dynamics and the hegemony exercised and enjoyed by a privileged class. In the Panchayat meeting where Dhouli’s fate has been decided by the senior Misra, Dhouli is given two options—of being burnt alive, or having to adopt the path of prostitution in an “Other world.” Hanumanji announced, “Dhouli cannot practise prostitution in this village. She can go to some town, to Ranchi, and do her whoring there. If not, her house will be set on fire and mother, daughter, child will be burned to death” (31). It is significant and pertinent to note that even the tribal untouchables, the dusads and ganjus, do not make any protest against this verdict. The narrative thus overtly points to direct repression, which is the product of a societal power structure interlinked with the hegemony of a dominant class. An exposure of the outcome of the exploitation of power- the acceptance of the verdict of Hanumanji even by the marginalized- is shown to be the consequence of the created culture of the privileged, which results in the desertion by the marginalized of even one belonging to their own community.

In the story “shanichari,” Mahasweta Devi presents the young tribal girl, Shanichari’s status in the social hierarchy. Shanichari, along with her grandmother “enjoyed the train ride to Tohri, sitting on the floor of the [train] compartment, chugging along, having a good time picking the lice from each other’s hair” (34). This oblique reference to Shanichari and her
grandmother’s subaltern state, suggested by the phrase “sitting on the floor of the [train] compartment,” is further reinforced through an apparently innocuous folk-tale fragmentarily narrated by the grandmother:

‘Don’t you know the one [story] about the carpenter who carved a girl out of wood and became her father? The weaver who gave her clothes and became her brother? The goldsmiths who gifted her jewellery and became her uncles? Didn’t the sindoorwala [the seller of vermilion] bring her to life by giving her sindoor?’ (35)

In quintessence, this story is reminiscent of the myth of the birth of Eve. As Eve was brought to life from Adam’s rib, so too was this girl carved from wood by a man and brought to life by the sindoor of another man, the Sindoorwala, who eventually possessed her. The implication of this tale inset in the very opening of the short story is that Shanichari will be treated as a commodity and thrown away as soon as her commodified existence becomes useless to the males in her life.

This implication becomes even more unambiguous with the coming of Hiralal, the itinerant folk-song singer who ekes out a living by singing his songs in train compartments. Hiralal, who is endowed by the author with an obvious choric function in the narrative unravels explicitly the woman, Gohuman’s wiles in trapping young girls like Shanichari. Employing sometimes an intimate conversational tone and sometimes a direct narratival and descriptive mode, Mahasweta exposes the devious ways in which tribal girls like Shanichari “felt the fangs of Gohuman” (44). The tragic fate of tribal girls like Shanichari is explicitly presented by Mahasweta Devi in this short story. The Indian paramilitary forces sought to subjugate the tribal people by burning their huts, by looting their possessions and killing them, and by gang raping their women. In a tone of cutting irony, Mahasweta Devi discriminates between the civilized mainstream reader, reading a short story about the condition of the exploited tribal sitting in his or her comfortable hearth and home, and the condition of the “Ho-Oraon-Mundra girls”:

The BMP [Bihar Military Police] took the young girls into the forest and raped them. Imagine the scene. Familiar to you, no doubt, from innumerable story books—the lush green forest and a group of Ho-Oraon-Mundra [three Indian tribes] girls who look as if they have been exquisitely carved out of black stone. Only the bestial howls of the BMP would have been left out of such a picture-book scene. (46)

Even more relentlessly ironic is Mahasweta’s juxtaposition of a song of the tribal community:
My girl could live on tubers,  
Wear leaves and buds in her ears,  
Alas, trees can’t grow clothes  
“Dear Ma” my girl said, “So  
To the brick kilns I must go  
To the brick kilns I must go.” (47)

with the narrator’s wry observation-cum-question posed for the consideration of her readers: “Don’t some of you buy saris worth thousands of rupees every puja?” (46)

Driven out of her village and compelled to leave the inhospitable forests, Shanichari thus goes to the brick kilns to face a situation worse than her earlier one. There she is provided with clothes by the owner of the brick kiln, but only to be stripped and raped. “Rahamat would dress Shanichari in good clothes and nice jewellery, rub fragrant oil in her hair—and then tear into her ruthlessly” (51). Very soon she is replaced by another tribal girl and she began working as a reja.3 Underpaid, half-fed, treated at best as sub-human and impregnated by the owner of the brick kiln, Shanichari returns at last to her people only to discover that she is an outcast in her own community. This final marginalization of Shanichari—her marginalization by the marginal—is neatly presented through a dialogue between the brother of her murdered lover, Chand Tirkey, and the naiga, the village head-priest: “We should think about this as a community. There could be more Shanicharis in the future. Should we cast out our own women? Will that benefit our society?” The naiga said, “We’ll think about it if it happens again. Not now. This is a new problem” (54).

In “the fairytale of rajabasha,” Mahasweta Devi, along with providing a graphic portrayal of the exploitation at all levels of Sarjom and Josmina, a tribal couple, projects certain instinctive reactions of the tribal people living below the poverty line to the minimum that they get, and finally records the behavioral patterns of the affluent people belonging to the mainstream. The story opens with the description of an arrangement of a tribal feast on the occasion of the marriage ceremony of Sarjom and Josmina, and we hear Sura Jonko saying: “Not just turmeric and salt, let’s cook it [the meat] with onions, pepper and other spices” and the narrator voices their unuttered sentiment: “Great fun, great food” (57). The narrative voice then goes on to express the feeling of peace and happiness experienced by the couple even in the midst of their deprivation and poverty:

Josmina collected roots and tubers from the forest. Living off just these and ghato made of makai, she looked gorgeous. A new mother, the curves of Josmina’s body filled out like the gushing Koyena in the months of rain.

3 A tribal girl who works in brick kiln.
There was much happiness and peace in this first chapter of the fairytale of Rajabasha (59).

Later, after the cataclysmic upheaval in the lives of the couple caused by their moving to Punjab as slaves and when they come back to their village, Mahasweta Devi’s description points to the minimum that a subaltern requires:

Within no time everything became as it was before. It was so refreshing to bathe in the waters of the Koyena. So peaceful to boil some makai at the end of the day and cook ghato in the evening. To sprinkle salt on it and eat off leaf plates. So pleasant to sit by the banks of the river, washing pots and pans while chatting to girls you’ve known all your life (78).

In contrast to the happiness of the couple even in the midst of poverty, Mahasweta Devi’s projection of Nandlal Sahu’s unhappiness in the midst of affluence is revealing: “He had two fine houses in the districts of Monoharpur and Raikera. And two wives [in contrast to Sarjom’s one hut and one wife] in those two houses. Now his first wife, who lived in Rajabasha, was pestering him for a pucca brick house”(59). So to fulfill the desire of his first wife, Nandlal sold Josmina and Sarjom to an “adarsh kisan [an ideal agriculturalist] of Punjab.”

Mahasweta Devi shows here that at the very core of the mainstream-marginal issue lies the typical power dynamics of a feudal master-slave relationship in which the former treats the latter sometimes as a commodity and at other times as an instrument of labour, a beast of burden. This is why, while buying the couple, the Punjabi agriculturalist, Niranjan Singh, “pinched Sarjom’s arm and shoulder muscles,” and a little later when Josmina, “gaping open-mouthed at everything around her, put a nipple to the child’s mouth,” Niranjan mused: “Feed her for a week and these goods will be just right.”(66) Throughout the story, Mahasweta suggests that these subaltern people are nothing but “maal,” “goods,” commodities, “junglee jaan-wars,” forest animals, to those at the top of the social hierarchy: “To Niranjan, she [Josmina] was just fresh meat; dark, junglee [savage] flesh which he had paid for. They bought it all up, everything. Everything that belonged to the Josminas” (72). Consequently, the master treated them as he pleased—subjected them to “16 to 18 hours’ labour,” stripped and abused the wife in front of her child, and put them under lock and key at night: “It was his [the master’s accomplice, Harchand’s,] job to keep the buffaloes, cows and bonded labour under lock and key” (68).

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4 Ghato is a watery gruel made by boiling makai, the main food of the underprivileged. Makai is a kind of seed generally used by the privileged class as fodder.

5 A pucca house is a brick-built house.
But “the fairytale of rajabasha” is not merely about the exploitation of the tribal “Other.” After winning a reprieve from their slavery, Josmina and Sarjom come back to their tribal village. But their hopes of happiness are shattered when Josmina realizes that she is carrying the child of the Punjabi man who has raped her. Knowing that her own tribal community would never condone this, and that both she and her husband would be socially ostracized, Josmina drowns herself in the Koyena river on the banks of which she and Sarjom spent so many idyllic moments before.

One way to look at these short stories of Mahasweta Devi is to read them as the voiced articulations of the tribal “Others” in contemporary Indian society. Gayatri Spivak’s answer to the question as to whether the subaltern can speak has been resoundingly in the negative. Yet, it is important to note that Mahasweta Devi speaks not only about the marginalized, but, far more importantly, about the marginalized within the communities of the marginalized. Her voice does not simply ventriloquise the plight of those at the edges of civilization, but goes deeper to analyse and reflect upon how the power structures that engender marginalisation are replicated in the texture of the society of the marginal. The point is that the author’s sympathy unearths the reality of an exploitation concealed within the truth of another and more obvious exploitation. Thus, Mahasweta’s true concern is with a subalternity subsumed within a larger parameter of subalternity. In a sense, this is a deeply humanistic perception, one that is as incisive as an insight into human reality, as a deep and penetrating social understanding.

Works Cited
