

# **Women's Body and Capitalist Space : A Reading of Mahasweta's "Douloti the Bountiful"**

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Henri Lefebvre, in his book, *The Production of Space*, has introduced that the meaning to the space is socially assigned. Therefore, Frederic Jameson states: "our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages are dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time" (1984: 53). Keeping Lefebvre's and Jameson's idea of space in mind, if we read Mahasweta Devi's (1931-2016) "Douloti the Bountiful", we find that her narrative is remnant of capitalist conflict over space, and engage women's body as a space not only for production but also for achieving conflicts of ideas and material possessions. Such engaging of women's body in the production of capitalist space in Mahasweta's narrative resists the colonisation of textual meanings. In this context, Michel Foucault states:

The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relation of power and domination. (Rabinow 1991:173)

This engaging of women's body in the capitalist space leads to the state of 'objectification' of women's body. The concept of "sexual objectification"<sup>1</sup> finds its root in the verb "objectify". In this context, Rachel M. Calogero, a British Academic-cum-Psychologist states: "to objectify is to make into and treat something that is not an object as an object, which can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known through its physical properties" (Cash 2012:574). However, Martha Nussbaum, the eminent Philosopher, defines

'objectification' based on seven characteristics- instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership and denial of subjectivity (Cash 2012:575; Nussbaum 1995:249-291). Sexual objectification is a mere cultural perspective or treatment of women as a mere object of sex and a procreation machine. Further, power and agency are denied to women, and so they do not have any control over their body. As such, women in the space of conflict zones are subjected to dual oppression. First, women's body are treated as an 'instrument' for satisfying men's sexual desire. Second, women become an object of fungibility or replaceable object that they can be replaced at any given space and time for the male members, particularly the higher caste men of the society. For instance, in the story, Bajainath Mishra substituted malnourished prostitutes with younger and healthy bodies. Thirdly, men try to have an ownership over women's body. For instance, in the story, we find female prostitutes or bride prostitutes are considered as a property of Paramanand Mishra. Fourth, they are the subject of denial, and so women's feelings are not to be given importance. Thus, in the story, Mahasweta identifies numerous female members who become an instrument of men's capitalist motives.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand how, in Mahasweta Devi's short fiction, "Douloti the Bountiful," the conflicting goals over land rights between agri-capitalists and tribe of Nagesia lead to the objectification of woman's body.

In the story, we find that conflict occurs in Douloti, the daughter of Ganori Nagesia, as she is naturally forced into the bond-slavery. Being an offspring of a bonded labour and a bounded-bride of a Brahmin pimp, she has to bear the burden of the crippled bond-slave father. In this context Mahasweta states thus:

Our Lord Fate comes to write fate on the forehead of the newborn in the dress of a head-shaved Brahman. No one can evade what he writes down.

On the high-caste boy's forehead he writes property, land, cattle, trade, Education, job, contract. On the outcaste's forehead he writes bond-slavery. (22)

Her years of experience as a whore bring out all the anomalies of the agri-capitalist system which exist in rural India. The oppression and exploitation of the outcaste tribe or denotified tribes of India by the feudal system- zamindars and money lenders- was a defective social phenomenon in the pre-independent India. However, in the post-independent India, the same oppression and exploitation have managed to gain inroads into the society through the defective socio-political systems, particularly the federal system of the country. Referring to this, Aswini K. Ray states thus :

Indian federal polity shares the problem of regional disparities inherent in the process of capitalist development; more so, because such regional disparities are a product of colonial capitalism of a relatively developed phase. The problems are further compounded because most of the 'Indian states' are not simply functional divisions but represent more or less distinct linguistic, cultural and, in some cases, even ethnic units, with a continuous civilisation dating farther back than their federated existence (Ray 1979:1471).

These foreign systems which structure the Indian nation-state do not gel well with the Indian experiences. Moreover, the social evils of the pre-independent India were not weeded by the will of the natives, but by the rational views of the Europeans. As a result, the social improvement in Indian society was more or less cosmetic. It also led to a widespread disparity between the rich and the poor. As such, corruption becomes a mainstay in such a society and polity. Thus, in the post-independent India, the dominant high-caste has either grabbed the land belonging to the tribals/ low-caste communities or used physical forces to grab the produce of the land, leaving them in a situation where they are forced to borrow money from the money lenders, resulting in accumulation of the interest and bond-slavery. This has become the 'vicious circle of poverty'<sup>2</sup> and oppression. In the story, Mahasweta relentlessly emphasises it thus :

My man took two hundred rupees from him, to get land. How, in a year it became four thousand rupees. Then the god said to my man, you won't be able to repay, you are a kamiya. Send your wife. Your debt will be repaid in five years, your wife will return home with money in hand. (63)

In the post-independent India, the elite class with their monetary power and political connection has been influencing state machineries. The creation of agri-capitalist class as called by Mahasweta herself has been because of the democratic system which failed to end the colonial imperialistic traits of the British rule. Referring to this, Mahasweta states thus:

These savants want government support  
The government wants the Kulk's support  
Land-lender, this is new agri-capitalist caste  
This caste is created by the independent  
Government of India (49-50)

In the domain of power, Zamindars and money-lenders are at the centre, and outcaste tribals are at the margin. This power structure which is the outcome of federal system can be illustrated with the help of Table 1.

Table 1: Typology of Power in Mahasweta's fiction

Power Structure	Socialist framework in Post-in dependent India	Mahasweta's Capitalist framework
Centre Sub-centre	Government and Executive Zamindars and Money Lenders	Money Lenders and Brahmins Government Officials, Law Enforcement Agencies and Judiciary
Margin	Schedule Caste, Outcaste Tribes, and Denotified Tribes	Schedule Caste, Outcaste Tribes, and Denotified Tribes

The conflict over power holdings is subverted in Mahasweta's narratives. There is always central power in contrast to the margin. Mahasweta's fiction depicts Central government as a titular or sub-centred power in the society. This situation of power struggle has risen out of the conflict between Central government and the State government, as the latter finds biasness in the crippling financial power of the former. In this context, noted Indian judge and academician, Durga Das Basu states thus :

The strong Central bias, however, has been boon to keep India together when we find the separatist forces of communalism, linguism and scramble for power, playing havoc notwithstanding all the devices of Central control, even after five decades of the working of the constitution." (Basu 2009:63).

Thus, Federalism has become a foundational ground for neo-liberalism to grow, and in such a development paradigm the freedom of the margin is always bounded. Referring to this, Walter Mignolo states: "there is no modernity without coloniality...you see only modernity and, in the shadow, the 'bad things' like slavery, exploitation, appropriation of land, all of which supposedly be 'corrected' with the 'advance of modernity' and democracy" (Mignolo 2007: 466). So, the appropriation of such a development paradigm leads to oppression and exploitation of the marginalised. In "Douloti the Bountiful", the will to dominate the marginalised with a motive to earn profit is invoked by Mahasweta in the song of the womenfolk :

He has thousands of sheets of paper like this  
 He is the king by the strength of loans  
 He is the government by the strength of loans  
 He is the patwarie, he is the jungle officer  
 He is the police station, he is the policeman,  
 He the judge the verdict of the court...  
 He has become the government by lending money  
 And we have become kamiyas (20)

The passage reveals the capitalist plan of the money lenders. It shows how they design the power structure in the federal system. While referring to this, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states: "this poem comes from the position of the author analyzing the analyst, who wishes to make science out of structures that may be random" (Spivak 1989-90: 115). Thus, Mahasweta's "Douloti the Bountiful" reflects the knowledge of the conflict between the capitalist class and the marginalised. The state machinery calls it a menacing rebellion. On the contrary, the leftist intellectuals have been supportive of the movement against capitalist imperialism which exist in the postcolonial era.

However, 'Conflict' can be read from a multifarious approach: conflict in ideology, family related conflicts, conflict arises out of armed rebellion, power struggle, or of interest of individuals or the groups. In this context, Ottomar J. Barthos and Paul Wehr states thus: Conflict can originate either in goal incompatibility or in hostility (or in both), and that it involves a unique type of behaviour, conflict behaviour. Thus conflict is defined here as a situation in which actors use conflict behaviour against each other to attain incompatible goals and/or to express their hostility. (2002: 13 emphasis ours)

In "Douloti the Bountiful", the masters- money lenders and Brahmans- at the centre and denotified tribals at the margin use conflict behaviour against each other. Moreover, the goal of the capitalist masters is incompatible with the goal of the denotified tribes. In order to keep their agri-capitalist motives, they resort to hostility by physically oppressing the borrowers. Further, the goal between Munabar and Nagesias are incompatible as the former wants a free and cheap labour for his agricultural land, and the latter wants some returns against their labour to feed their families. Additionally, Brahman Paramananda wants to keep the tribal women in bondage for life to capitalise the needs of men's desire, while the sex-slaves seek freedom from the bondage. This can be represented in matrix payoff<sup>3</sup> table as shown below

**Table 2. Incompatible goal between Agri-capitalist and the bonded slave tribes**

Types of labour	Agri-capitalist	Bonded labourer/slave tribes
Free labour	Well off	Suffer
Paid labour	Neutral effect	Well off

In the story, the agri-capitalist like Munabar gains from the free labour of the marginalised. The small outcaste tribes like Nagesias suffer more because they have to find another source of income to feed their family after a long day's hard labour without being

paid. Secondly, if their labour is paid, although cheap, the Nagesia bond-labourers would become well off as they do not have to look for another source of income. Further, the capitalist motives of Munabar would not suffer if he decides to pay the labourer because it will have a neutral impact on his income. However, this conflict between the interest of the masters and the bonded labourers gives rise to a situation wherein women become the victims of exploitation in various forms like sexual abuse, domestic violence, social enigmas and executions. Thus, from our reading of the story, it can be argued that a tribal woman becomes a domain of collateral agreement between the master and the man-labourers. For instance, if anyone is found a defaulter in paying back the loan, it has to be paid by his wife and latter after her death by his son and his daughter. Woman's body becomes the bearer of the agreement. In this context, Spivak identifies that "woman's body is thus the last instances in a system whose general regulator is still the loan; usurer's capital, imbricated, level by level, in national and transnational global capital" (Spivak 1989-90:113). Thus, in the story, Mahasweta narrates :

Fieldwork, digging soil, cutting wells is work  
 This one doesn't do it, that one doesn't do it, the  
Other one doesn't do it-  
 The boss has turned them into land  
 The boss ploughs and ploughs their land and raises  
the crop (60)

Therefore, in the story, the women become the victims not only of the conflicting goals between masters and the male members of the tribal society, but also of the capitalist ambition of Paramanand Mishra and then his son, Bajjnath Mishra. However, Jaidev, in the essay, "Douloti as a National Allegory" identifies in the Bajjnath a "better economist and sees that it is more profitable to reduce their rates and take more customers than to have fewer customers paying more money" (Sen and Yadav 2008:87). As such, women become the end user of the patriarchy, both of the mainstream and tribal communities.

## Notes

1. Sexual objectification theory was first propounded by Narbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts.
2. Ragnar Nurkse's concept of vicious circle of poverty expresses the circular motion of productivity where low savings and incomes generate low level of investment. As such low investment leads to low productivity and the income generated remains the same throughout the process.

3. Payoff matrix is a mathematical framework used in game theory to analyse the decision pattern to the two parties in conflict. The concept of prisoner's dilemma frame by Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher is the best example of payoff matrix concept. For instance, two prisoners are interrogated for the same crime where their statements can have impact on their verdict.

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