

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Mirroring the Struggles of Subaltern Women in Mahasweta Devi's Outcast:  
An Analytical Study**

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**Abstract:**

Mahasweta Devi is known to be one of the renowned short story writer and political activist of Post-colonial India. She has worked tirelessly for the betterment of the subaltern class specially for the women. Her work mirrors the harsh realities faced by the women belonging to the marginalized communities. Through her short stories she has given voice to these voiceless women, as well shown us the bitter truth about treatment of subaltern women in the Indian society. Her works gives us a great insight about the exploitation faced by the women and their struggle for survival. This paper presents an analytical study of Mahasweta Devi's translated anthology *Outcast Four Stories* (2002), comprising the stories of "Dhouli," "Shanichari," "Josmina," and "Chinta". Contrary to the traditional belief about subalternity, Devi's narrative does not merely document systematic violence or validate the tragic hypothesis that "the subaltern cannot speak". Instead, it highlights how subaltern women weaponize their historical, bodily, and socioeconomic exclusions as highly specialized, disruptive tools of resistance. By examining how these protagonists transform their absolute outcast status into a state of autonomy and challenge the societal hierarchies. This study reframes subalternity not as a passive state of victimhood, but as an active, volatile critique of postcolonial capitalism, state apparatuses and intra-community patriarchies.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Gender Oppression, Commodification, Forced Prostitution, Forced Labour

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Introduction:**

Mahasweta Devi is a renowned Indian Bengali short fiction writer who has written several novels, plays, short stories and essays. She is one of the prominent social and political activists of our country and has been working tirelessly for the empowerment of the women belonging to tribal and marginalized communities. Her works mirrors the reality of our society and show us that, despite their oppression based on gender and caste how these women emerged as survivor and empowered. She has the ability to draw out the raw emotions in us most of her fictions take the matter from the real society. As a socio-political activist and writer, she has relentlessly worked and fought for the rights of underprivileged, people who were denied of their basic human rights.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” presents her opinion that the subaltern is not able to speak for themselves, but contrary to this essay Mahasweta Devi through her short stories has shown that despite being suppressed from both fronts i.e., on the basis of caste and gender, the subaltern does have their voice, they try to make us learn about their plight through literature. Through her works Devi has shown the subaltern woman’s grit to survive and empower themselves, though it is challenging but not impossible. The stories written by Mahasweta Devi may seem bleak but it has the power to make the reader think about the subaltern woman in a different light. Many of her female protagonist suffers at the hands of patriarchy; upper caste males in general, but despite being humiliated and forced into prostitution they still retain their dignity as a woman, they are not just victims but survivors. “The title itself points to an intentional removal from society—a forced exile from the protections of citizenship, community, and law” (Dutta Gupta 89).

Mahasweta Devi’s *Outcast: Four Stories* was written from the point of subaltern women who had suffered various kinds of exploitation in our society, all the women protagonists of these stories are the victims as well as the survivor. Through these stories Mahasweta Devi has tried to give voice to these voiceless women who were considered as an outcast even in their own communities. She does not simply state the story of these women as victims but tries to sensitize the Indian society to understand the plight of these marginalized women who suffers at the hand of the patriarchal society. In Mahasweta Devi’s *Outcast* we will learn about stories of the four Protagonists Dhoul, Chinta, Josmina and Chinta who tried their best to live in the harsh realities they were born into and their struggle for survival.

**Discussion:**

Subaltern Feminism first coined by Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci and later expanded by various postcolonial scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others. It defines the social, political, and economic hierarchies of the Subaltern. Subaltern men suffer from the class and caste discrimination whereas, subaltern women experience a compounded, multi-layered erasure. Subaltern women do not experience oppression as a single, isolated factor, their day-to-day reality is dictated by “Triple Subjugation” that is based on their Gender, Class and Caste.

In Mahasweta Devi’s *Outcast*, subalternity is not a singular entity of suffering but it’s an

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intricate web where class, caste and gender trap the protagonists in a hellish loop of never-ending suffering. Unlike many writers before her, Mahasweta Devi rejects the elite's view of subaltern experience, she discards the romanticized views of rural India and its villages, instead she represents it as a place of structural violence. "Mahasweta Devi's activism and fiction bypass this academic deadlock. She does not treat the subaltern as a theoretical abstraction, but as a living, breathing subject caught in historical, material struggles" (Sen 42).

In *Outcast*, Devi demonstrates that while subaltern women may be denied access to formal institutional speech, they are highly proficient in an asymmetrical micropolitics of survival. They do not require elite validation or a seat at the bureaucratic table to assert their presence. Instead, they use non-verbal defiance, economic subversion, and a conscious deployment of their bodily autonomy to challenge the very foundations of caste and patriarchal hierarchies.

**The Subaltern Struggle for Survival:****"Dhouli": The Commoditized Body as a Disruptive Counter-Economy**

In the short story *Dhouli*, we see the protagonist Dhouli a young Dusad (untouchable) woman became a widow in a very young age and after that her only option for survival was to be a kept woman of her brother in law or choose someone from her own community but she didn't want to live her life in shame and she chose to contradict the expectation of her community. Dhouli's life takes a worst turn when she falls for Misrilal and becomes pregnant with his child, who represents the upper-class Brahmin community. This earns her ire of her own community as well as the upper-class community. Her relationship with Misrilal ends up with her being pregnant and being outcast from own community. At this point of total exclusion Dhouli's alternative agency emerges. Refusing to play the role of passive tragic victim, she enters the local flesh trade out of sheer desperation.

Traditionally literary readings often interpret this turn as Dhouli's ultimate defeat- a complete surrender to patriarchal commodification. However, a closer reading reveals that Dhouli completely disrupts the social order by politicizing her survival. She does not hide her trade in the shadow of the village; instead, she brings it out in the open, directly confronting the upper-caste hypocrites who visits her by night and condemning her by day.

When she was at her absolute worst of the socio-economic hierarchy, Dhouli felt an unexpected form of liberation. She has lost her caste status, her family and her social standing, now she can no longer be threatened with further ostracization. "If I'm setting up shop, I might as well charge" (Devi 28). Her own body gave her a sense of autonomy in her life which she never had before.

When Misrilal returns, expecting Dhouli to be destitute and broken, he encounters an autonomous woman who demands compensation for her labour and time. Dhouli's survival via sex work becomes a direct challenge to the village's caste economy. She transforms her body from the cite of passive exploitation into an active, disruptive financial force, turning the hypocritical desires of the ruling elite into the very means of her economic independence.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****“Shanichari”: Tribal Exploitation of Labour, Displacement and Corrupt Policies**

The second story, “*Shanichari*,” explores intersection of tribal identity, seasonal migrant labour, and the corruption of local government policies. The protagonist Shanichari, is a tribal woman whose life is shaped by debt-bondage, deforestation, and the violent encroachment of state-backed contractors. This story reflects the contemporary form of capitalist exploitation of the tribals.

In this narrative, Devi highlights the profound failure of India’s post-independence land reforms and tribal protection policies. Shanichari and her community are systematically driven out from their ancestral forests by predatory alliance of timber merchants, local politicians and landlords. After the collapse of their communities entire ecological, cultural and economic infrastructure many women like Shanichari are forced into precarious migrant labour pipelines. They are trafficked into urban areas to work on construction sites, brick kilns and as domestic help. Within this hellish network, the subaltern woman is subjected to a distinct form of violence: she has to work at sub-human wage rates, while her body was treated as a commodity readily available for consumption by the managers and contractors.

In this story the protagonist Shanichari does not show up as a dramatic, armed rebellion like that of *Draupadi*. Instead, it is an enduring, adaptive resilience. By learning to navigate and exploit the corrupt mechanisms of local government, Shanichari shifts from a displaced tribal outsider to a strategic negotiator, demonstrating that even under the weight of state-backed capitalism, the subaltern can find ways to protect their community and secure their survival.

**“Josmina”: The Intersectionality of Marginality**

In *The Fairytale of Rajabasha*, Josmina’s story unfolds within a rural community where patriarchal family structures work hand-in-hand with feudal economic extractions. Her struggle reveals a critical aspect of intra-subaltern life: the lower-caste patriarch, though oppressed by upper-caste landlords, frequently compensates for that disempowerment by exerting violence over women of their own household. Her agricultural labour is exploited by the landlord for minimal pay and her earnings are routinely confiscated by the male heads of her family. Even her personal safety and bodily autonomy are traded away by her family to secure loans or placate local power brokers.

“When Josmina returns home, she encounters a second barrier: her own community’s strict ideas about purity and pollution. The tribal council, struggling to survive under outside economic pressure, cannot accept a woman who has been “defiled” by an outsider” (Bardhan 33). Josmina finds herself trapped between two hostile environments: a city that uses her up, and a home that shuts her out. Realizing she has no place left to go, she drowns herself in the Koyena River. Devi treats her suicide not as an act of individual despair, but as a direct result of institutional violence. The river, once a source of life for her people, becomes her final resting place, showing how environmental destruction and economic greed combine to erase subaltern women.

Devi’s portrayal of Josmina challenges the romanticized view of the subaltern community as a unified, harmonious collective standing against external oppressors. Instead, she shows that for a subaltern woman, the domestic space can be as dangerous and exploitative as the landlord’s estate.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****“Chinta”: The Clutches of Urban Capitalism and The Resilience of the Marginalized**

The final narrative, *Chinta*, offers a different angle on subalternity by focusing on a Brahmin widow. Traditional subaltern studies often assume that high-caste status protects individuals from extreme marginalization. Through *Chinta*, Devi challenges this view, introducing a new perspective: caste privilege for women is an illusion that vanishes the moment male economic protection is lost.

In the story *Chinta*, we have seen that after the death of her husband, the setting shifts to an urban metropolis, documenting the psychological and physical toll of forced migration. Chinta a domestic worker who has been uprooted from her village was forced into alienating landscape of modern city. There she encounters a profound sense of isolation; in the city she discovers that her exploitation has become mechanized and impersonal. She is subjected to various indignities- accused of theft, confined to cramped spaces and paid wages that barely kept her afloat. Later she uses her **domestic invisibility** to her advantage gathering vital information, excess food and discarded materials, which she redistributes to her migrant community living in the slums. “Yet, Devi refuses to leave these women entirely powerless. They do not speak through formal political channels, but they express their agency through spectral subalternity—the stubborn material choice to endure outside the boundaries set by society” (Beniwal and Vandana 91).

Furthermore, she refuses to adopt the submissive, grateful attitude expected of domestic workers. Her refusal to apologize for her poverty, later forces her employers to acknowledge her presence. She learns to adapt within the heart of the urban capitalism, demonstrating that even when displaced and isolated, the subaltern woman can turn her marginality into a tool of resilience.

**Conclusion: Outcast an Epitome of Subaltern Resistance**

Mahasweta Devi’s *Outcast: Four Stories* remains a landmark work in the post-colonial literature, offering an unnerving analysis of postcolonial India’s failure to deliver justice to its most vulnerable citizens. By focusing on the lives of Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina and Chinta, Devi strips away the comforting myths of national development and political progress. It forces the readers to confront the ongoing realities of caste violence, economic exploitation, and patriarchal oppression.

The perspective offered in this analysis reveals that these women do not survive by adapting to the system, but by letting the system exhaust itself upon their bodies. By transforming their physical suffering, their forced labour, and even their outcast status into a blunt instrument of survival, they strip the upper-caste patriarchy of its moral authority. This study challenges the long-term opinion of the critics that views the gendered subaltern as an inherently silent, helpless victim. Through analysing the unique survival tactics developed by each protagonist, we can see that Devi’s characters do far more than just suffer; they actively rewrite the rules of their oppressors imposed upon them. These protagonists demonstrate that subalternity is not a static state of powerlessness. Even the small acts of defiance by these protagonists can expose and disrupt the control of the elite on the lower-class.

Furthermore, Devi’s work challenges both mainstream Indian society and Western academic establishment to rethink their framework of subaltern representation. Her fiction serves as a powerful

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reminder that literature can do more than merely function as documentation of oppression of the subaltern. Through her work *Outcast: Four Stories*, Devi's has undertaken the task of recording the struggles of subaltern women and their resilience for survival, it also inspires people to struggle for justice across the globe. The defiance shown by these protagonists is a symbol of resistance of the subaltern women towards their oppressors.

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