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LAND AND LABOUR: DALIT WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES IN OUTCAST AND KARUKKU

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ABSTRACT

The tribals and Adivasis are the historically termed as the first inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. Therefore it is mandatory to allow the adivasis and dalits to be a part of this land. But after the invasion of Aryans, Adivasis or Dravidians were forced to quit from their own land and they were given the title as bonded labourers. Aryans used their hegemonic power to marginalize the original inhabitants of our country. In the name of development the forest dwellers are rooted out from their own habitat. This displacement of Adivasis affects the total environment of their lives and they are scattered everywhere unable to uphold their group culture. Mahaswetha Devi and Bama tried to excavate the hidden knowledge lied deep under the memories of historians. They focused their writings on these groups of people who are highly marginalized in the society. Mahaswetha Devi, though she negated the argument that she was a feminist, also wrote about females and their relationship with land much. It is because the Dalit or tribal women are always at the bottom level of social hierarchy. Bama, the advocate of Dalit feminism also wrote much about the atrocities faced by the Dalit women in the society.

Mahaswetha Devi in her book, *Outcast: Four Stories*, brings the lives of diverse female characters, but with some commonalities. These four women share a common factor- they are the victims of the most severe kinds of exploitation in Indian society. They have been evicted from their native land and they are forced flee from there in search of a labour. In these stories, Mahaswetha 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. 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

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communities.

The first of these stories, titled *dhouli*, presents the heartbreaking 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. She inaugurated one of the printed saris that Misrilal had given her. She borrowed some oil from Shanichari and rubbed it into her scalp and took a bath and groomed her hair. The man brought *makai*, dal and a rupee and Dhouli gave him 'his money's worth'. The act of selling one's body for money was explained with a tint of pain.

There were many ready to pay. They kept coming. Dhouli and her mother wore proper clothes again. Ate two square meals a day. Dhouli felt very sleepy these days, after her clients left. How simple to sell one's body in a loveless exchange for salt, corn, *maroa*. (Devi: 28)

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 she moves to the city to become a prostitute. Finally, Misrilal proved that he is a man and also a Brahman's son by sending Dhouli to Ranchi. Dhouli seized a pitying smile. She thinks that she would have been a *Randi* in her private life. But now she was about to become a professional *randi*(prostitute). She imagines that the collective strength of that society was far more powerful than an individual's strength. The story ends on a sad note that nature was unaffected by the upheaval in her life.

Shanichari, the second character in the text *Outcast*, is shown as an innocent girl of twelve, living in the enchantment of her grandmother's fairy tales. Just like her community, since she could not resist 'the pangs of empty stomachs', she also fell in the hands of Gohuman who sells girls for twenty rupees and supplies thousand girls and make twenty thousand to work in the kilns of Kolkata. She was about to be married to Chand Tirkey that year but unfortunately the clash between the Adivasis and the military force, in the midst of the *Adi Jati Raksha Morcha* movement, took away the life of eleven tribals along with Chand Tirkey.

Shanichari and others reached Rahmat's brick kiln and the wall surrounding the kiln was high as a jail wall. The lack of facilities in the kiln made Sanichari's throat dry. They were treated as 'bunch of animals'. The work assigned to them was this:

... At the end of the day, when you're too tired to keep your eyes open, the head *mastaan* will call out your name in the daily auction. Today you go to him, tomorrow the driver, the day after the *munshi*. (Devi: 50-51)

Shanichari also became one of the women who shared their body with the list mentioned above. She would dress in good clothes and nice jewellery, rub fragrant oil in her hair. Unexpectedly Rahmath told Sanichari that the next day on wards Josin would stay with him and Shanichari would work as a *reja*. Realizing the fact that she is pregnant she decided to escape from the place. As she returned she is left with the pain and suffering that she had experienced. She sighs comprehending that till the motherland provides basic food and clothing to girls like her, she will not take her pointed finger back from the accused around her.

The Fairytale of Rajabasha also portrays the naked fact that the discrimination by the upper-class people does not rest on the female alone; among the victims, there are men too, in plenty. Sarjom

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Purti marries Josmina by giving three cows as bride price, though it is purely a love marriage. Nandlal Shahu lent him money to buy these and put his thumb impression on a blank sheet of paper. It was the time of blessedness, both of them collected firewood and sold it and Nandlal never asked for his money. Added to their keen pleasure they were once again blessed with a male child. Sajom worked in Nandlal's field all day and he believed in the true customs of Ho-tribe and he never wanted to be buried with an unsettled debt.

Josmina also faces the same treatment as Shanichari, even though she eventually manages to come back home with the prospect of beginning life afresh. This vision of hope turns out to be a hallucination as she develops the system of motherhood, a condition forced upon her by her master in Punjab. Finally, to save her beloved husband from being ostracized from his own community, Josmina commits suicide.

The story of *Chinta* is extremely different as the settings and characters are different. Unlike the characters in the previous stories *Chinta*, the prominent character in the story is hailing from an upper caste Brahman family, but the death of her husband brought shame and disgust on her. Her child Gopal was not mature enough to take over the four *bighas* of land. Therefore she fell in the hands of Ustab who promised her to marry but plundered her wealth and left the place. She became the mother of two girl children. She had to sell her two daughters for ten and eight rupees in order to pay the penalty for her adultery.

Bama, the *Karukku* fame, gets her stories from the oven of her own memories which are ready to serve hot. Her memories are always like embers waiting to be burned again if there is a small blow of wind. She opens *Karukku* with the description of her village. Her village is beautiful, surrounded by many hills and most of the people are agricultural labourers. In the village itself, she could establish the distinction between the villagers and the better-off castes. She takes her village as a sample to show the incongruities between the haves and have-nots. If there is no work in the fields the labourers used to go to the woods on the mountains and make a living by gathering firewood and selling it. Her village is occupied by many castes like Nadars, Chakkliyar, Koravar, Kusavar, Palla, Paraya, Thevar, Chettiar, Aasaari, Naickers and so on.

Bama feels terrible and concerned about the past generation for their services to the upper caste as slaves and the way they are oppressed in the name of untouchability, casteism, suppression, domination and so on. Life as a Parayah is very hard, to live from the very childhood. Lack of education and over dedication to their works never allowed them to question the unearthed exploitation that they are facing. Everyone has to work in order to earn their living by labouring either for the Naickers or in the fields. Apart from this, they work as construction labourers by digging wells, carrying loads of earth, gravel, and stone and even if this work is not available they go to the hilltop to gather firewood. They work at the kilns making bricks because more than three-quarters of the land belongs to the Naickers. Each Paraya family is attached to a Naicker family as bonded labourers. She remembers that her grandmother is a real and proper servant. She used to hire labourers for Naickers. She used to bring workers to work regularly. She supervises them and makes sure they receive their wages. Grandmother has to rise before the cockcrow, gets water and does all household chores. To do all these things Bama and other women used to wake up well before cockcrow. The daily lives of paraiyar women are shown in detail in *Karukku*. After throwing away her identity as a nun, she goes back to her original self as a Dalit woman and what she wants to do is to enlighten her community with the introduction of education

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among her people. Education is the only security that the society can guarantee to Dalit women. These authors framed the world of the downtrodden in the milieu of barrenness. They are forced to say goodbye to their land and culture in order to earn a living. Their presence itself is a curse and therefore they are ready to vanish from their land. Lands of Dalits and Adivasis are to be distributed among themselves. The major share of land is still in the hands of the upper caste and upper-class people. So the demography of Dalits and tribals are diminishing these days. The term 'progress' has been treated as archaic in the present globalized dictionary and the word 'development' has filled the gap. The word development is always related to money and it gives less importance to the true upliftment of the downtrodden society. It is a euphemistic word that badly affects the land and demography of Dalits and Adivasis.

Mahaswetha Devi and Bama tried to excavate the hidden knowledge lied deep under the memories of historians. As Foucault suggested their attempt was to unearth the subjugated histories. Foucault says that 'subjugated knowledges' are the historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systematization or it is a whole set of knowledge, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of scientificity. So, the talents that these authors exhibited through their writings are no doubt beneficial to the society in general and the downtrodden in particular.

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