

## When the Subaltern Speaks: Subverting Power Structures in Mahasweta Devi's 'Dhouli'

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reads Mahasweta Devi's short story "Dhouli" as a text that brings a silenced, subaltern subject into the field of representation and thereby challenges the power structures that sustain her marginalization. Using Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theoretical idea of the "subaltern", the paper argues that Devi not only uses narrative perspective, characterization, and social detail to make Dhouli's suffering visible, she also complicates the idea that the subaltern can be simply "given a voice" by elite discourses. The analysis shows how Dhouli documents everyday injustices (rape, abandonment, starvation, social ostracism) and stages small acts of resistance that unsettle the logic of caste, patriarchy, and class. The story performs a kind of ethical witnessing as it refuses to reduce Dhouli to a passive object of pity and compels readers to recognise the structural causes of her suffering and the agency she exercises in survival and refusal.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Power Structures, Patriarchy, Oppression, Subversion

### INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) wrote fiction that aimed to make visible the lives of India's most marginalized people: tribal communities, lower castes, exploited labourers, and, frequently, women who suffer double oppression on account of caste and gender. One of her short story "Dhouli" from *Outcast: Four Stories* (translated by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta), narrates the story of a young tribal woman, Dhouli, whose life is destroyed after a sexual relationship with an upper-caste man and the social consequences that follow. Dhouli grows up in a small village with her widowed mother, and their lives are shaped by constant scarcity. They belong to a lower caste, and because of this, their options are limited from the beginning. They work in the fields of upper-caste landlords, depending on daily wages to survive. Poverty is not just about lack of money for them; it is about living under the authority of those who control land, food, and social respect.

Misrilal, the younger son of a Brahmin landlord, begins to notice Dhouli. He is drawn to her, but he is also fully aware of the rigid caste boundaries that govern village life. He knows very well that he can never openly marry a girl from her caste without facing social backlash. Still,

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he starts meeting her in secret. He speaks softly to her, offers promises of care and protection, and creates the illusion of a shared future. For Dhoulī, who has known only hardship and insecurity, his attention feels like hope. She trusts him. She believes that love can cross the lines that society has drawn so strictly. Gradually, she gives herself to him—not just physically, but with her whole heart.

When she becomes pregnant, the harsh truth surfaces. The difference between their social positions becomes painfully clear. Misrilal steps back. His family quickly arranges his marriage to a woman from their own caste, protecting their social standing and reputation. The Brahmin household closes ranks, determined to avoid scandal. Their honour matters more than the life they have disrupted.

Dhoulī, however, cannot hide her condition. She faces the consequences alone. The same village that remained silent about Misrilal's actions turns against her. No one questions him. No one demands accountability from his family. Instead, Dhoulī and her mother are blamed. They are pushed out of work, refused food, and cut off from the little support they once had. The entire upper-caste community stands united, showing how caste society functions as a powerful system that protects its own while punishing the powerless.

As hunger grows and doors continue to close, Dhoulī finds herself with no choices left. With a child to feed and no means to survive, she is forced into prostitution. The ending is bitter and deeply ironic. The same society that used her body in secrecy now openly reduces it to a commodity. Her body becomes the only resource left to her in a world that first exploited her innocence and then abandoned her.

The narrative is short but densely political. It shows how everyday social institutions like family, village, caste norms, the household of a landlord etc., work together to convert private violence into ongoing public exclusion. However, the story is not only about victimization. It is about how a marginalized woman negotiates survival within a system designed to destroy her. Dhoulī's transformation from an innocent village girl to a woman who publicly embraces the role forced upon her becomes a powerful critique of social hypocrisy. The story is important because it centres on a subaltern woman and asks readers to consider how systems of caste, class, and patriarchy collide to make her an "outcast." As Menon also writes, "Women is neither a stable nor a homogeneous category". (Menon, 2012)

### **"subaltern" and the problem of voice**

In the well-known essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses the term subaltern to describe people who live on the margins of society, the people who are pushed outside systems of power and decision-making. These are individuals and communities whose lives are shaped by structures they cannot control and whose perspectives rarely find space in official conversations, institutions or historical records. When Spivak says the subaltern "cannot speak," she does not mean that they are literally silent or incapable of expressing themselves. Rather she suggests that even when they do speak, their words are often ignored, misunderstood or filtered through dominant voices. In other words, the problem is not the absence of speech but the absence of recognition. Their experiences fail to be heard as valid or authoritative because social and political systems are

not designed to listen to them. Spivak shows that the subaltern is a subject who has been historically and epistemically marginalized. Their forms of knowledge and experience are filtered, displaced, or erased by dominant discourses. She warns that the attempts by intellectuals or activists to “give voice” to the subaltern can repeat the same violence if those attempts overwrite the subaltern’s own forms of expression. Spivak’s point is not that the subaltern is mute, rather than she insists on the complexity of representation and the ethical responsibility of anyone who speaks for subaltern. This theoretical caution is useful when reading Dhoulī. Devi tries to register the subaltern’s suffering without flattening it into mere testimony read only through elite categories. The story negotiates a space where Dhoulī appears without being simply appropriated. A crucial aspect of Spivak’s argument concerns representation, who speaks for the subaltern and how their experiences are mediated. By rendering Dhoulī’s life in granular detail, Devi forces readers (who may belong to more privileged groups) to acknowledge the systemic wrongs. This act of witnessing is not the same as giving Dhoulī an institutional platform, but it creates moral accountability in the reader.

Mahasweta Devi’s narrative technique attempts to create literary space where the subaltern woman’s suffering and consciousness become visible without reducing her to passive victimhood. Instead of portraying Dhoulī merely as an object of pity, Devi highlights her emotional conflicts, her awareness of social injustice, and her gradual assertion of self-determination.

Through this literary representation, Devi participates in what can be described as an ethical form of narrative mediation: she does not claim to replace the subaltern voice but foregrounds the structural conditions that silence it. Thus, the story itself becomes a critique of dominant discourse, compelling readers to confront the systemic inequalities that sustain caste patriarchy.

### **Intersectionality of Caste, Gender, and Class in Devi’s Narrative**

From the beginning, Dhoulī’s identity as a member of the Dusad caste determines how others treat her. Even when she serves diligently as a housemaid to earn her livelihood in a respectable manner, caste hierarchy makes her vulnerable to exploitation. The upper-caste man’s sexual access to her is both an assertion of sexual privilege and a social signal: the boundaries that protect upper-caste men permit them to use lower-caste bodies while refusing social responsibility for the harm they cause. Devi draws attention to this structural cruelty rather than presenting the events as accidental misfortune. The male characters in the story, Misrilal and the men who sanction him, act with relative freedom. They can deny paternity, marry within caste and enjoy their family life without any suffering. Women like Dhoulī bear the social penalties and emotional harassment. Not only men but upper-caste women also participate in sustaining patriarchal and caste oppression. Dhoulī’s suffering is not produced by men alone, it is enabled and normalized by women of the dominant caste. Misrilal’s mother functions as a part of the discursive system that ensures the subaltern woman cannot speak. When she comes to know about Dhoulī’s pregnancy through Misrilal, she comments: “so what? The men of our family have planted their seed in so many dusad and ganju girls. You ‘re a hot blooded young man. Even Jhalo has three sons by kundān. What will she do?”

“(Devi,13) This reveals her deeply ingrained acceptance of gendered and caste based double standards. Her remark exposes the deep hypocrisy of the system -acknowledging the exploitation of subaltern women but treating it as a naturalized acceptable practice.

Devi’s narrative exposes the gendered logic that allows men to exercise sexual power without social checks, and the way patriarchal family structures reproduce injustice. Feminist critics locate Devi’s critique in the fact that the story is about how patriarchal honour is protected while lower-caste women’s bodies and reputations are treated as expendable.

### **Dhouli’s Confrontation, Resistance, and Subversion**

Mahasweta Devi’s *Dhouli* presents the life of a subaltern woman whose struggle against caste and patriarchy unfolds through everyday experiences rather than open rebellion. *Dhouli* belongs to the Dusad caste and lives at the margins of society where poverty, caste hierarchy, and gender discrimination shape every aspect of her life. From the beginning, she is denied dignity, security, and voice. Yet, as the story progresses, *Dhouli* begins to confront the forces that oppress her, resist their control, and finally subvert the moral and social structures that seek to erase her. Her journey is not heroic in the traditional sense, but it is deeply human and politically meaningful.

*Dhouli*’s confrontation with power begins through her relationship with *Misrilal*, an upper-caste man who desires her but never treats her as an equal. When *Dhouli* becomes pregnant, *Misrilal* very conveniently goes to the city and gets married, leaving *Dhouli* in lurch. This abandonment marks *Dhouli*’s first direct encounter with injustice. Upon his return to the village, he confronts *Dhouli* with audacity, asking why she has not committed suicide. *Misrilal*’s response is typical of the patriarchal mindset that expects women to end their life when faced with such humiliation. *Dhouli*, however has emerged more courageous and determined. She replies with defiance: "I tried to kill myself. But then I thought, why should I? You can get married, run a shop, see movies with your wife, and I have to kill myself. Why? Why? Why?".(Devi,32) She demands to know why she should die, while he continues to live comfortably, questioning the hypocrisy of the social order. Society does not question *Misrilal*’s responsibility; instead, it places the entire burden of shame and punishment on *Dhouli*. At this moment, *Dhouli* confronts the harsh truth that morality in her society exists to protect powerful men, not to ensure justice. Her confrontation is quiet but firm—she does not chase *Misrilal* or beg him to save her honour. By refusing to plead or justify herself, she challenges the idea that she must accept guilt for a man’s wrongdoing.

This confrontation soon turns into resistance when *Dhouli* refuses to abort her child. Her mother suggests abortion out of fear of social punishment, showing how deeply patriarchal fear controls even oppressed women. *Dhouli* knows that keeping the child will make her life harder, yet she chooses to do so. This decision is a strong act of resistance against patriarchal control over women’s bodies. In a society where women are expected to sacrifice their bodies for social respectability, *Dhouli*’s refusal becomes a powerful assertion of selfhood. She does not argue or explain herself; her resistance lies in her determination to make her own choice.

*Dhouli*’s resistance continues as she attempts to earn a living with dignity. She goes from place to place seeking work, but people refuse to employ her because of her caste and

pregnancy. These repeated rejections force Dhoulis to confront the economic side of power. Once pregnant and ostracized, she lacks economic options, only prostitution becomes a survival strategy. Dhoulis's reflection- "If she had known it was that easy, she would have done it much earlier. Her son too would have been well fed, healthy." (Devi,29) reveals a bitter irony. It is resigned survival, shaped by structural violence. Devi shows how economic structures reinforce caste and gender hierarchies in turning private violence into chronic poverty and social death.

She realizes that hard work and honesty mean nothing in a society where caste decides who deserves survival. Yet, she does not give up easily. Her persistence itself becomes resistance. By continuing to seek work, she refuses to accept the belief that she deserves hunger and humiliation.

The village elders and panchayat represent the most visible form of authority in the story. Instead of punishing the man responsible for Dhoulis's condition, they focus on controlling her body and movement by declaring that- "Dhoulis cannot practice 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" (Devi,32). When they forbid her from practicing prostitution within the village, they reveal the hypocrisy of social morality. The village does not care about exploitation as long as it remains hidden. What truly disturbs them is Dhoulis's visibility. Her response marks a turning point from resistance to subversion. Instead of submitting to village rules, she leaves the village. By crossing the village boundary, Dhoulis symbolically steps outside the caste system's moral control. This movement becomes a powerful act of subversion, as she refuses to recognize the authority of a system that has denied her justice.

Society views Dhoulis's decision to become a sex worker as moral failure, but Mahasweta Devi presents it as a conscious response to structural exclusion. All other means of survival have been closed to her. Rather than starving or begging, Dhoulis chooses a path that allows her to survive on her own terms. When she openly states that anyone who pays can come to her, she removes the false ideas of purity and respectability attached to female sexuality. This statement directly exposes the hypocrisy of caste patriarchy. The same men who condemn her are willing to use her body. By speaking openly, Dhoulis subverts social morality and forces society to confront its double standards.

Dhoulis's subversion is not a heroic triumph or a revolution, but a quiet, sustained, and realistic defiance. She takes ownership of her body and her life, forcing the upper-caste, patriarchal society to accept her presence and, consequently, their own hypocrisy. Her resistance becomes even more practical and visible when she turns to prostitution. While the village sees this as a moral failure, for Dhoulis, it is a strategic way to take control of her own body and support her family. By staying in her village and practicing this trade, she forces the community to look at its own hypocrisy, as the same upper-caste men who publicly condemn her are often the ones who seek her out in private. She refuses to feel ashamed and leaves for the city to find a larger community. Devi presents this state as a turning point in "Dhoulis" with bitter irony- "when you are a kept woman, you're all alone. But now she would be part of the community. The collective strength of that society is far more powerful than an

individual's strength. And those who had forced her to be a whore are the ones who controlled society. They were the most powerful!" (Devi,33). The writer here underscores the collective oppressive power of the society which in the name of tradition keeps women like Dhoulī under regular oppression. But Dhoulī's decision transforms her from an exploited woman into a symbol of resistance showcasing the resilience of marginalized groups against oppression. She subverts the system by proving that she is not just a "thing" to be used and thrown away, but a human being with the strength to define her own future.

## CONCLUSION

Through Dhoulī's story, Mahasweta Devi refuses to let the subaltern woman remain only a figure of suffering. Dhoulī is certainly oppressed by caste hierarchy, by male desire and by poverty but she is not erased by these forces. She confronts caste by exposing its hypocrisy by owning her body and choices. By doing this she challenges patriarchal authority that seeks to define her as impure, disposable or morally fallen. When she is abandoned and pushed toward social death, she does not quietly accept the shame given to her. Instead, she chooses to survive. In that choice lies her resistance.

Dhoulī's strength is not dramatic or revolutionary in the conventional sense. She does not lead a movement or overthrow a system. Her defiance is quieter but no less powerful. When society pushes her to the margins, she does not disappear. She carves out a way to live, even if that life does not fit respectable norms. In doing so, she unsettles the very structures that attempt to silence her.

Mahasweta Devi's storytelling in "Dhoulī" is simple on the surface, yet deeply unsettling. She exposes how caste, patriarchy and economic exploitation work together to deny dignity to marginalized women. The narrative shows how easily a woman can be cast out and how quickly her suffering becomes invisible. Devi does not present Dhoulī as a victim of these forces. She allows her to act, to decide and to endure. Survival itself becomes political.

What makes the story so powerful is that it does not offer comfort or neat solutions. Instead, it forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about structural injustice and social complicity. Dhoulī's story may be limited by circumstances, but it is real. Her refusal to vanish, her determination to live on her own terms has become a form of protest. Through her story Devi gives voice to women whose history often overlooks. The story ultimately suggests that resistance does not always look like rebellion, however, sometimes it is the simple, stubborn act of continuing to exist with dignity in a world that denies your space.

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