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**'DOULOTI IS ALL OVER INDIA.' STUDYING HUMAN SITUATION IN
MAHASWETA DEVI'S DOULOTI THE BOUNTIFUL**

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi, one of the great names in the literary history of India, has many remarkable works to her credit. *Douloti the Bountiful* is one of Mahasweta Devi's most pathetic stories which presents the sufferings and the problems of bonded slavery in the tribal communities at Palamu in Bihar in the last few decades of the 20th century. Compounding rate of interest on the borrowed money from the moneylenders forced the helpless and hungry tribals work as bonded labourers through generations. Even, the female members of the family were also forcefully used by the Jotedars to work as bonded labourers and bonded prostitutes under the unavoidable pressures of loan. Under the scorching heat of the sun in summer, Gonori Nigesia was used for pulling the bullock cart overloaded with paddy which led to make him Crook Nigesia. Gonori's fresh-faced daughter Douloti was deceived in the name of marriage and used as a bonded prostitute to earn raw cash by Paramananda who had repaid Gonori's loan of three hundred rupees only and by doing it he bought Douloti from Gonori. Douloti's painful death on the Independence Day because of tuberculosis and venereal diseases ridiculed and whipped the civilized society in our country.

Keywords: bonded prostitute, moneylender, tribal, loan, Douloti

Mahasweta Devi is widely known as *Sabor Janani*, Sabor being one of the poorest and most exploited tribal communities in West Bengal. Mahasweta has many great works to her credit like *Aranyer Adhikar*, *Chottimunda and His Arrow*, *Operation? Bashai Tudu*, *Mother of 1084*, *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* and many other novels, stories and plays. The present story *Douloti the Bountiful* from the book *Imaginary Maps* is the outcome of one of the most realistic experiences of her life at Palamu. Mahasweta is distinguished from her contemporary writers in many respects, the most important of them is her feeling of oneness with the dejected

tribals. She criticizes that her contemporary writers of Bengali Literature did not write about the burning issues of the society and did not focus on them in their writings.

A critic, Anjani Sharma, writes in her book, *Works of Mahasweta Devi: A Critical Exploration*:

As a writer Mahasweta is conscious of the role of an artist. Literature, according to her, has to be a medium of social criticism. She views art and literature as a potent vehicle for social criticism and reforms. The consistency and deep concern with which she engages

with the life of the downtrodden stands in sharp contrast to the unsteady stance of her literary colleagues on the issues of dominance and oppression. She boldly documented the cruel realities of the society in an uncompromising manner. (169)

In the present story, *Douloti the Bountiful* Mahasweta shows us how the curses of bonded slavery crushed the life of the most deprived and poorest tribals at Palamu. The Jotedars and Moneylenders used to exploit the tribals by lending loan when the tribals desperately required it during wedding, funeral, feast and on other occasions. In order to repay the loan, they were forced to work as bonded labourers in the agricultural fields and in the houses of their masters. Their life ended, but the repayment of loan continued through generations. Gonori Nigesia had to borrow three hundred rupees from Munabar Singh for several reasons and he gave his thumbprint on a white paper at the time of borrowing. He spent the money during the marriage ceremonies of his eldest son and daughter and had to throw a feast among his people after returning from jail. He was accused of stealing water-buffaloes from the market and was put in jail. After borrowing money from the Landlord Munabar, Gonori became a Kamiya. He thought :

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. The sun and the moon move in the sky by Fate's rule. The poor boys of Seora village become kamiyas of the Munabars, Fate's rule. (Devi 22)

Gonori had to do all kinds of work for Munabar from morning to night. Munabar had lent money to all tribal communities in Seora village and kept 'Dusad, Ghasi, Nigesia, Munda, Lohar, Oraon, Bhuyian, Chamar, Parhaia as kamiya. There is no end to the people he has lent money to, and made into kamiyas (Devi 20). No kamiya could escape from the all

devouring Jotedars and Moneylenders. In *Douloti the Bountiful* Mahasweta writes :

In Andhra the people of Matangi, Jaggali, Malajangam, Mahar and other castes become Gothi. In Bihar Chamar, Nigesia Parhaiya, Dusad become Kamiya or Seokiya. In Gujarat the Chalwaris, Naliyas, Thoris and others become Halpati. In Karnataka the low of birth become Jeetho, in Madhya Pradesh Haroyaha. In Orissa Gothi and in Rajasthan Sagri. The Chetty rayats of Tamil Nadu keep Bhumidasas. In Uttar Pradesh the Bhumidas is called Maat or Khandit-Mundit or Sanjayat. The Bhumidasas of the Laccadive Islands are Nadapu. (Devi 61)

In 'The Author in Conversation' of the book *Imaginary Maps*, Mahasweta tells Spivak:

The Palamu I have depicted in my stories – only a few have been translated- is a mirror of tribal India. I have covered all of the district on foot. I walked miles, stayed somewhere overnight, went from place to place. Thus, the bonded labour system, in its naked savagery and its bloody exploitation of woman, became clear to me. I started writing about Palamu. (Devi iv-v)

Gonori had become Crook Nigesia because of borrowing money from Munabar. He had not only to work from morning to night, he also had to pull the loaded bullock cart with the ox yoke on his shoulders like an ox. As an inevitable outcome he broke his body and earned the name Crook. The author shares her bitter experiences in 'The Author in Conversation' in *Imaginary Maps*:

I saw Crook Nigesia with my own eyes in the month of June, just before the rainy season. Palamu has very little rainfall. Under the burning sun the landlord loads the bullock cart with paddy and tells the man to pull the cart to the local market. He could not do it. He fell under it. He was crushed. He became twisted and crooked for the rest of his life. I asked the landlord why he did it. In order to approach the landlords of Palamu you have to say you are a superior government officer

taking notes, and that's what I was. The landlord offered me a glass of milk with sugar-cane crystals. He was trying to please me. 'You are an upper-caste person,' he said. 'These bullocks are costly. If I send a bullock, it will suffer in the heat and it might collapse. But these bonded labourers don't count for much. A man can be wasted, a bullock cannot.' (Devi xiii)

Initially the tribals were completely dependent on the Natural resources and the land they possessed and occupied were theirs. Mother Nature blessed them with her bounties – food, hunting, shelters, timber, leaves etc. There was an intimate bond between Nature and Tribals. Mother Nature loves them. They lived a life in the lap of Nature that was calm and quiet. There was acute poverty in their life, but that was a better life than that of bonded slavery. Urbanization of the tribal land started in the colonial period and the displacement of the tribals also began at the same time. In 'The Author in Conversation' she comments:

The British had isolated the small tribes. They were afraid to touch the majority tribes for fear of wide spread havoc. They branded the small tribes as criminal tribes because they lived in the forest and did not take to cultivation. These tribes had no concept of money. They would come out of the forest, go to the village market, place honey, leaves, roots, flowers, and silently take away whatever they needed: rice, oil, spices. So they were thieves! With the felling of the forests, these tribes were exposed to the current savagery. (Devi v-vi)

After independence the same trend continued and the influx of the rich people like forest contractors, road contractors, bridge contractors, and their appointed labourers destroyed the pristine life of the tribals. The tribal lands were illegally grabbed by the land sharks and as an inevitable outcome the tribals were displaced and dispossessed. To satisfy the eternal enemy like hunger the tribals were compelled to borrow money from the landowners and moneylenders and were forced by them to work as bonded labourers in their

fields from morning to night. The tribal women also worked in the fields of landowners and some of them were also sexually exploited by the landowners, moneylenders, contractors, and their labourers.

Gonori had to spend several days in hospital to get treated after being crushed by pulling the overloaded cart. He received all kinds of medical facilities available for him in the hospital at Tohri, and for the first time in his life he slept on nice mattress and pillow and in the night, there was burning a mosquito net. One of the worst effects of bonded slavery is bonded prostitution. The loan of three hundred rupees borrowed by Gonori made his daughter Douloti a kamiya prostitute. One day Paramananda Mishir, a worst moneylender, met Gonori and asked him about his stay at the hospital. But his real intention was not to show sympathy to Gonori, he cleverly started asking about Gonori's health and economic conditions and then hit upon the main point, Douloti. The conversation went on:

'How old is she?

When there was independence for you and the bosses, the boss fed everyone puffed bread and stuffed bread, had a big show, went to town. Douloti was born the year after that' (Devi 44).

Paramananda introduced himself as a brahman belonging to the upper caste society. He pretended to win Gonori's heart saying that he did not support bonded slavery at all. It should be ended strictly. When Paramananda expressed his plan to repay Gonori's loan, he felt being an object of fun. Under the pressure of Paramananda, Gonori took him to his master Munabar. On their way to Munabar's house the brahman told Gonori : '...I have got down to this work as the god Narayana, I must have a goddess Lakshmi with me. I will marry your daughter Douloti. Hearing this, Crook said, O Rama, I'm caught by a madman-and started to run with his crooked body' (Devi 46). But Paramananda could not let him go. He was just screaming in fear. Paramananda met Munabar, enjoyed Munabar's hospitality at his luxurious house and repaid the loan of three hundred rupees. Munabar freed Gonori and warned him to act according to the wills of the brahman.

Although Gonori, his relatives and neighbours did not want Douloti go with the brahman as it was unthinkable in a caste-ridden society that a brahman would marry a lower-caste girl. But they were helpless remembering Munabar's warning. So 'Douloti put on her whole cloth. Paramananda said, you don't have to take your torn rags and remnants. I will buy you everything. Leave that stuff behind. Leaving everything behind Douloti left Seora village behind Paramananda. What on earth happened? Fairy tale' (Devi 51).

This poor Douloti was transformed into a kamiya whore as a result of her father's borrowing of money and she was placed in the whorehouse of Paramananda at an urbanized town like Madhupura, and Rampiyari, an old prostitute, was in charge of it. Douloti was ordered to wear fine dresses and use some cosmetics to make her look sexually attractive. She was left alone on a bed and Rampiyari closed the doors. The writer holds the moment: 'She lay down. What a big bed, what a soft mattress. Then the wedding will be here. The god must have gone to dress up as a bridegroom. Who knows how a man of such looks looks when he is dressed up a bridegroom? Who will do the marrying? Will this Rampiyari sing the wedding songs? Does she really know the songs (Devi 58)?' As Douloti was a tribal, she was extremely innocent about the dirty sides of life. Her imagination shattered when Latia, a contractor, '...pulled off her sari, he has torn off her blouse'(Devi 58). What she experienced throughout the night was beyond her wild imagination: 'Douloti is bloodied many times all through the night' (Devi 58) by Latia who used to take *aswagandha* every day at night to keep his sexual hunger limitless. After enjoying Douloti throughout the night, 'Latia threw a handful of banknotes at Paramananda. He said, Tell Rampiyari, this girl is now mine. When I let her go she can take clients' (59). In Mahasweta's story, 'The Fairytale of Rajabasha' from the book *Outcast*, we find that the *malik* Niranjana Singh raped the bonded labourer Josmina in front of her child Masidas. In Mahasweta's notable story 'Draupadi,' we find that Draupadi, an unarmed tribal woman, was being raped by the members of the Special Forces of the Indian Army. They were not Jotedars or Moneylenders, they were meant to protect all

Indians, but Draupadi was raped by them as she was a rebel and had revolted against the blood-sucking Jotedars. When the Senanayak ordered his subordinate officers, 'Make her. Do the needful'(188), and left, the process of making her was started and continued throughout the night. The situations of Rampiyari, Reoti, Gohumani, Somni, Jhalo, Douloti and others were same as they were bonded prostitutes. They could not escape from the whore house in any way as they were kamiya prostitutes. When Douloti requested Paramananda laying down near his feet, 'God! your three hundred rupees have come through five times. Set me free then? Paramananda had laughed'(76). He told her, '...yes yes, you've seen the principal. But interest? I bought you clothes, those fifty-two rupees? My body is compassionate, your money has now increased by interest to two and a half thousand. And all my accounts are written down. When it's repaid in principal and interest, you will be freed' (76). This was the situation. Mahasweta's description of Douloti's death is highly significant and penetrating:

Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spreadeagled, kamiya -whore Douloti Nigesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs.

Today, on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India. (94)

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