

Tribhuvan University

Voicing the Voiceless: Resistance of *Dalits* in Mahasweta Devi's *Dhouli*

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,

The Central Department of English, Kirtipur,

Kathmandu in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Masters of Arts in English

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2023

Letter of Recommendation

Ms. Asmita Bajgain has completed her thesis titled “Voicing the Voiceless: Resistance of *Dalits* in Mahasweta Devi’s *Dhoulī*” under my supervision. She carried out her research from October 2021 to August 2023. I hereby recommend this thesis to be submitted for viva voce.

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Mani Bhadra Gautam, PhD

August 2, 2023

Letter of Approval

This thesis titled "Voicing the Voiceless: Resistance of Dalits in Mahasweta Devi's Dhouli" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Asmita Bajgain has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Mani Bhadra Gautam, PhD, Asst. Prof. at Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, for his valuable time, close observation and regular support. His directions and motivations throughout the research paper helped me to complete this research paper on time.

I am also indebted to the Head of Department of English, Prof. Jiblal Sapkota, PhD, for his encouraging advices. Similarly, I would be delighted to extend my gratefulness to Taralal Shresth, PhD and all other respected professors and lecturers of CDE for their valuable directions in conducting the research as well as in my academic success.

Furthermore, I must express my very profound gratitude to my parents, Tejraj Bajgain and Parbati Bajgain for their never ending love, support and motivation. In the same way, I would like to share my innermost gratitude to my uncle and aunt, Kumar Bajgain and Srijana Acharya, and to the whole family for their financial and emotional support throughout my years of study.

Lastly, I would like to extend my gratitude to my friends, Pradip B. K. and Devendra Kumar Khadka for their help with the research work. And, my thankfulness goes to those authors and researchers whose works have been consulted during the preparation of this thesis.

August 2023

Asmita Bajgain

Voicing the Voiceless: Resistance of *Dalits* in Mahasweta Devi's *Dhouli*

Abstract

In this research work, the researcher attempts to portray a picture of upper-caste dominance in the then Indian society as well as the Dalit community's resistance to it in Mahasweta Devi's Dhouli. At the beginning of the novel, Dalits seem to be following all the rules and regulations set by upper caste people. Later, they revolt and get their rights back. Devi chooses Taharr, a real location in India, to tell the realistic tale of Dhouli, Jhalo, Shanichari, Murari and Jhulni in order to illustrate how caste ideologies treat Dalits, and how their collective and individual resistance is crucial in challenging the customs, traditions, and cultures that uphold caste-based oppression and discrimination. To carry out this task, the researcher brings theoretical insights related to Dalit study of B. R. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste, Bishwabhakta Dulal 'Aahuti's Varna System and Class Struggle in Nepal, and others too. Overall, this paper attempts to extend the alternatives of maintaining caste equality and freedom in the society in order to make it a better place to live in.

Key words: *Dalits*, Oppression, Exploitation, Sex Toys, Resistance, Victory

This research paper aims to analyze MahaswetaDevi's *Dhoulias* a representation of caste-based oppression. In this novel, MisrilalMisra, Hanuman Misra, KundanMisra, *Panchayat*, and other prominent members of the upper caste rule over *Dalit* characters, including Dhouli, Jhalo, Shanichari, Murari, Jhulni, Dhouli's parents, and others. The main *Dalit* characters endure abuse from their upper caste *maliks*. However, the higher caste dominance does not last for very long. The theoretical insights related to the *Dalit* study advanced by BhimraoRamjiAmbedkar and BishwabhaktaDulal 'Aahuti' are used to explore how *Dalits* resist oppression and go through transition.

This is the fact that *Dalits* appear to be under the control of caste-based ideology in the novel's beginning and middle, but, at the end of the novel, it gets collapse. Dhouli is particularly drawn by Misrilal's beautiful remarks at the novel's beginning and middle. However, towards its end, she publicly protests against any social structures that might kill her rather than adhering to them, and she later begins a prostitution business. She is shunned by the *panchayat*, which solely represents the interests of those from the upper caste. She gladly accepts the choice and moves to a large community where she feels at home. By rejecting the social structures in which they are viewed as less than animals, Dhouli's emergence as a strong *Dalit* woman shows the transition and transformation of *Dalits*. The oppression of *Dalits* by members of the upper caste and *Dalits'* fight for emancipation are issues covered in the study.

Through this novel, the author illustrates the caste system's terrible effects in Taharr, a rural region of then-India where the effects of education, the law, human rights, women's rights, and other factors have not been felt yet. Through the occurrences involving characters like Dhouli, Shanichari, Murari, Jhalo, the mother and father of Dhouli, among others, Mahasweta Devi challenges the practice of untouchability and the acceptability of the rape of *Dalit* women. What are the reasons that sustain the caste system and drive *Dalits* to revolt

against this oppressive system? Why do they fight caste discrimination and how do they do it? The purpose of this paper will be to answer these questions.

Dhouli by Mahasweta Devi is set in Taharr. This novel narrates the story of domination of upper castes over lower caste people. The dominant upper caste characters, like, Misrilal Misra, Hanuman Misra, Kundan Misra, *Panchayat*, clients and others dominate the *Dalits* of their village like, Dhouli, Jhalo, Shanichari, Murari, Jhulni and so on. The plot of *Dhouli* begins with the scene where Dhouli, the central character of this text is waiting for Misrilal who has gone out of the village in order to manage shelter for him and Dhouli when they leave their village, Taharr. Dhouli herself is a *dusad*, an untouchable falls in love with Misrilal, an upper caste Hindu man. She becomes pregnant and bears his son, but does not get any recognition from society and even from Misrilal. After four months, Misrilal comes back to the village, marries his own caste woman, and leaves the village again with the promise of providing money to Dhouli for survival. But, he does not send her money and does not fulfill his promises.

So, she manages her family by forced prostitution which is not liked by him. He neither accepts her as his wife, nor allows her to stay in the village because of her profession. He makes an issue of it and calls a *panchayat* meeting in order to expel her from the village. And as a matter of fact, he does not get the blame but more specifically, the *panchayat* charges Dhouli for the consequences brought about by Misrilal. So, ultimately Dhouli, a *Dalit* woman, is forced to leave the village and settle in Ranchi as a prostitute. But, the powerful and turning point is that Dhouli does not ask for any mercy to allow her to stay in the same village, rather, she accepts their decision happily and goes to join the big community where she gets a community which accepts her as an important member. She feels a sense of freedom when she is told to leave Taharr and stay in Ranchi.

Devi was a journalist, author, and social activist from India. She was born in Decca, British India, in 1926. She is most known for her writings on women, and tribal groups in general. The majority of her writings focus on the struggles of marginalized in Bihar, Chhatisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh. She frequently depicts the horrific subjugation of *Dalits*, women, and others by powerful, upper-caste landowners, lenders, and corrupt government officials in her writings. *Rudali*, *Aranyer Adhikari*, *Titu Mir*, and *Dhouli* are some of her best creations. On July 28, 2016, we lost her.

Since it was published, this novel has received a great deal of praise and criticism from numerous forums for critical analysis. Diverse commentators have seen the work from various angles. The following is a list of a few of them, like, Debasish Chattopadhyay observes, “Mahasweta Devi’s [*Dhouli*] is a treatise on the pathetic doom of... Dhouli... I will argue that it is Mahasweta Devi’s intention... to excavate and exhibit the gendered causes lying underneath the socio-political and economic exploitation of... women belonging to a backward minority” (105). Chattopadhyay, in her article, talks about the plight of women even in ‘the democratic society of India’ where equality between men and women is promised. Women like Dhouli who do not have anyone to rely on, have no dream of future and have only few people to speak for them are regarded as sub-humans and commodities not only out of their community but also in their own community. He presents Dhouli as an exploited and mistreated woman only because of her gender. Here, Chattopadhyay wants to tell us the way women are taken in our society which is presented with the help of Dhouli who is taken as less than human because of her gender.

Similarly, another critic, Damodar K. Rao aptly points out; “Mahasweta has the storyteller’s rare genius of transporting her audience into her world of creation in no time, here a world of suffering, unrelenting suffering. Mahasweta proceeds with her narration of capturing the different time-frames in Dhouli’s life...” (4). Here, Rao presents the narrative

styles used in *Dhouli*. He praises Devi because of her ability to take her readers easily to the merciless world which is created in her writing. He further tells us that Devi has captured the different phases of Dhouli's life, and narrated without giving us any space for doubt. She has also used a visual technique to lure her readers, and flashback technique to tell us the past life of Dhouli. Through his article, Rao shows the narrative styles of Devi used in *Douli*.

This is what Mary Cappelli endorses in her article "Tortured Bodies, Rape and Disposability in Mahasewta Devi's "Giribala", "Dhowli" and "Douloti the Bountiful." When she says; "In "Dhowli," (Dhouli)... Devi establishes that the sexual taking of young *Dusad* girls is nothing new in this village as the Misra landowners are accustomed to treating girls as chattel... His response is "Why didn't you kill yourself?" (Devi, 1990, p. 204). This question reflects a patriarchal ideology, which reinforces the victimization of women...." (4-5). Here, Cappelli shows the tendency of the Misras, a Brahman community who take having physical relation with *Dalit* girls as their by-birth right. Once, Misrilal told Dhouli to commit suicide. He said it because she starts prostitution. Without realizing his own fault which forces her to engage in prostitution, he defames her. He does not take his own sexual exploitation of Dhouli seriously, he rather demands her to commit suicide. Cappelli says that Devi has captured the image of Hindu society where women are taken as sacrificers, husband worshippers and the means of sexual satisfaction of men. Overall, Cappelli explains *Dhouli* as a text where women are taken as the sex toys of men.

Appreciating the contribution of Devi working for so many years for the tribal, suppressed and backward communities, AudityNowshin writes in her thesis, *Deconstructing the Marginalized Female: A Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Short Stories*, that, "Mahasweta Devi holds the distinctive power of representing the suppressed class. She picks the turnover point where Dhouli enters a professional world of prostitution. As a docile and dominated character in the story, Dhouli becomes powerful while she becomes a part of a larger

community... In other words, it explains that Devi is actually giving them a voice”(11). Here, Nowshin writes that Devi is a champion in projecting the plight of tribal, suppressed and marginalized communities. Devi takes Dhoulis choice of joining prostitution very positively. Devi challenges society which does not respect prostitutes, and where even prostitution is taken as a sinful act. But, Devi writes this text on Dhoulis who turns herself into a prostitute. Devi gives us ample examples where our so-called ordered society fails to save humanity. She presents Dhoulis as a rebel who rejects the social rules which are about to kill her in the name of saving culture. Dhoulis is presented as a society changer. In short, Nowshin takes *Dhoulis* as a text where Devi has spoken for the marginalized females.

K. Shams Naveeth in his article, “Exploring Marginalization in Mahasweta Devi’s Dhoulis,” writes, “Dhoulis is an early widow, but society does not think of marriage... It is the fault of society and also politics that force the question why Dhoulis can’t remarry any man in her own community? She was only given the choice of being a concubine for her brother-in-law” (1). Here, Naveeth talks about the issue of remarriage which is only allowed to men, not women. He questions society which discriminates men and women even in marriage.

In the text, Dhoulis becomes a widow in her teen age, but society forbids her to remarry. Misrilal gets her in the trap of love-cum-lust, makes her pregnant and abandons her. Even after this, society blames her for the result which is not caused by her. Dhoulis is not permitted to remarry and settle down, rather, she is given a choice of becoming a kept-woman of her brother-in-law or the upper caste males. So, Naveeth digs this text up from the perspective of marriage and remarriage where man is allowed to marry as many times he wants but, woman can only marry once in her life whether her husband dies or abandons her.

Similarly, SahanaPriyadarshini in her article, “Women in Mahasweta Devi’s Breast-Giver, and Dhoulis” writes, “Dhoulis as the female protagonist in *Dhoulis* shows the underlying

situational result of tribal custom while she starts prostitution without having any choice of different livelihood, thus it comes to the knowledge of the so called good society; in those times Misrilal becomes the custom/ value saver” (450). Here, Priyadarshini questions the so-called custom which is taken as the essential part of so-called good society. Misrilal forces her to be a prostitute. When she lives by selling herself for hand-to-mouth, Misrilal comes forward as a custom saver. Where was he when Dhoulis was in the need of him? Where was so-called good society when Dhoulis was asking for food and work to live? Later, the entire society becomes one in casting her away from society to save the custom of their society. Priyadarshini points to the issue of custom which does not feel happy when women like Dhoulis get their way of living; rather it wants them to die.

Primarily, most of the aforementioned reviews are confined to the cruelty inflicted upon women and incidents of women’s suffering. Some of the reviews like Sahara Priyadarshini seems to focus on the cruel system of society where women are targeted and put below men, Mary Cappelli seems to be limited to Devi’s presentation of the then India which takes women as a means of sexual pleasure where the role of women is just to satisfy their men and other men through mutual consent or by force. Similarly, K Shams Naveeth has tried to question the custom of remarriage which is a male privilege. Women are not allowed to remarry in case of untimely death of the husband but the same is not applicable to men, they are free to remarry not only in case of the death of their wives but also by their personal choice to keep another wife.

In the same manner, Debasish Chattopadhyay has talked about the issue of gender-based discrimination which results in making women second-grade human beings, who are mistreated only because of their gender. Even in the present world, women are not given full space to bloom. On the contrary, other reviewers like Damodar K. Rao have focused on Devi’s writing and narrative style where the readers can go back and forth into the characters’

lives, which also give a sense of suspense. However, AudityNowshin, in some part of her review has attempted to bring the issue of caste along with feminist issues in Devi's *Dhouli*, but she has failed to give proper justice to *untouchables*. She could not present caste related issues very minutely, rather, she has connected it with women who are mistreated. But, Nowshin also has claimed that Devi has not stopped only at women's exploitation, but, she has put her women as figures of revolution who never remain silent against suppression. They speak up for their rights and freedom.

These reviews appear to be limited to Devi's narrative style, the culture that treats women as sex objects and less valuable than men, the issue of remarriage, and Devi's voice for women, where she is credited for her desire to change this society for the better. In contrast to the assessments listed above, the researcher in this study tries to examine the novel through the lens of *Dalit* studies, highlighting the importance of the *Dalits'* collective voice in their fight for dignity as well as the *Dalits'* role in societal reformation.

Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* is applied in this study. This theoretical tool has been used to demonstrate how the *Dalit* figure vanishes in the non-*Dalit* world, how upper caste individuals humiliate and silence them, and how traditions, cultures, norms, and values only elevate non-*Dalits* to the top while keeping *Dalits* at the bottom of society. He also emphasizes the need for *Dalit* resistance for equality. The researcher has demonstrated the non-*Dalits'* dominance over *Dalits*, including Dhouli, Jhalo, Shanichari, Murari, Jhulni, Dhouli's mother and father, and others, with the aid of his notions. He has also highlighted the importance of the *Dalits'* never-ending opposition to such practices.

To discuss the position of *Dalits* in this system and in Nepal, how it is connected to all elements of society, and how to stop it, Bishwabhakta Dulal 'Aahuti's ideas from his book *Varna System and Class Struggle in Nepal* have also been utilized. The significance of *Dalits*

bonding together to reclaim their rights has been depicted by the researcher in terms of politics, society, culture, and economy. Similar to this, the researcher has drawn on the ideas of other theorists who represent *Dalit* study in order to make the argument more explicit, significant, and vivid. For instance, Miriam Sharma's concept has been applied to demonstrate how higher caste men coerce *Dalit* women to serve as the objects of their lust. Additionally, PadamSundas' concept has been applied to demonstrate how the *Dalits* are divided and suppressed on a social, economic, psychological, and political level, as well as the urgency of recognizing *Dalits* as equal to non-*Dalits* in society before they rebel and overthrow this entire pretended social order and peace.

Dalits are people who have endured caste-based discrimination and repression for a very long time. Numerous labels, such as lower caste, achhut, lower dogs, untouchables, and so forth, are used to describe them. Although the researcher here utilizes these terms interchangeably, the term *Dalit* will be used most frequently in this work. Jyoti Rao Phule coined the phrase *Dalit* for the first time. Ambedkar later made use of this phrase widely in Nepal and India.

Regarding who is *Dalit* in a Hindu system, Aahuti in his *Varna System and Class Struggle* mentions, "...*Dalits* is not a nation or nationality, and *Dalit* is neither a particular region nor a particular class. Rather, it is a community within the Hindu feudal society" (204). One of the Hindu groups that have experienced discrimination based only on caste is the *Dalit* community. Hindu culture places a high value on caste. Aahuti again opines, "Nowadays untouchability is nowhere to be found in the law books, but it is prevalent in actual life" (119). Despite laws against such practices being passed, it demonstrates the prevalence of caste-based prejudice in Hindu society even in the present society.

Aahuti is very careful about the misconception of the term *Dalit*. On it, Aahuti opines, “*Dalit* is not a name given with contempt by any ruler, rather, it is a common identity, a common name, established by *Dalit* movement... identifying oneself as *Dalit* does not mean being inferior but to show that one has been oppressed” (64-65). The *Dalit* community uses the name *Dalit* on their own; the higher caste did not coin the phrase for them. It was created by the heroic leaders of *Dalit* movements to bring them together under one banner and inspire them to fight for their liberation from Hindu society's oppressive *varna* system.

In his *Varna System and Class Struggle in Nepal*, Aahuti writes, “Even now, it is common to burn the houses of *Dalit*, to gang rape a *Dalit* woman, and not to charge anyone for such crimes. Still now, many so-called high-caste people consider despising, oppressing, and disgracing *Dalit* as their rights and duties” (68). Through this, Aahuti hopes to highlight the oppressive character of so-called upper castes that see it as their entitlement to rape *Dalit* women and beat *Dalits*. The same type of scenario is also presented in the novel where Misrilal Misra, a Brahmin man, tries to have sexual relationship with Dhoulī. And, the conversation begins:

Please don't play with a poor woman like me, *sarkar*.

Play?

Yes, *deota*. You will play your games and push me off, but what will happen to me?

Look what happened to Jhalo! And Shanichari! No, *sarkar*!

And what if I don't let you go?

What can I do? Nothing. *Deota* like you always get what you want! Go ahead, take me, dishonor me. (10)

This event gives us a glimpse of how powerful upper caste is. Upper caste people are termed as *deota and sarkar* which indicates their big social status. Dhoulis as a *Dalit* woman is being sexually used by Misrilal. She cannot refuse him because upper castes are powerful and her refusal will not work. Whether she refuses or not, he will get what he wants. And whatever wrongs happen to the *Dalit* does not become a part of the law and punishment; rather it becomes the right of upper caste people. This is also mentioned in this novel. When Misrilal informs his mother about Dhoulis pregnancy by him, she says, "So what? The men of our family have planted their seed in so many *dusan* and *ganju* girls. You're a hot-blooded young man. Even Jhalo has three sons by Kundan" (13). The mother of Misrilal is reminding him who he is, *Misra* has a right to sleep with a *Dalit* woman and it is also common to become pregnant by the *Misras*.

Similarly, when the discussion between Hanuman Misra, a member of *panchayat*, and Kundan's family takes place:

Kundan said, We'll kill them both, mother and daughter, and get rid of the bodies.

No.

Hanuman Misra said, First clean up your house. The garbage outside will automatically vanish.

We'll kill them...

Don't bother murdering them, deny them food instead. (13)

Here, it is clear that the decision of Dhoulis and her mother is taken by the *Misras*. Dhoulis is not asked for her wish, but she has been made to follow the decision. Her existence is denied, her power as a human being is denied. The *Misras*, the upper caste are up to killing Dhoulis, a *Dalit* woman by denying her food. Even other *Dalits* become indifferent to the case of Dhoulis

because they are punished so many times in order to make them forget about their collective power. When Shanichari goes to the *dusad* neighborhood to talk about the injustice done upon Dhoulis by the *Misras*, they say:

... What's to become of the girl?

No one's brought shame on Dhoulis. She was in love... We are not interested in what happens to her. Let her do what she can.

What is she to do?

Let's wait and see what her beloved *deota* does for her, how well he looks after her!

(22-23)

Here, the conversation between Shanichari and the *dusads* gives us a hint of the passivity of the *dusads* regarding the ups and downs in Dhoulis's life. But, at some point, we can sense their helping nature when they agree to 'wait and see' the steps of Misrilal. But, this sense of stepping up for Dhoulis gets scattered when the right time comes. The narrator narrates, "The *dusads*, *ganjus* and others didn't challenge the verdict. But where was Ranchi? How would Dhoulis get there" (31)? *Dalits* of Taharr remain silent despite throwing Dhoulis out of their community. No one comes forward to challenge the *Panchayat's* decision to exile Dhoulis. It is because they have internalized the result of raising voice against upper caste people. Even they are made to forget their collective power by using oppressive power upon them.

This novel has depicted the nature of caste discrimination where upper caste has not accepted the existence of the so-called lower caste. Even the member of *panchayat*, Hanuman Misra, whose duty is to give justice to Dhoulis commands her death. And he says, "Don't bother murdering them, deny them food instead" (13). Misra is a *Brahmin* caste according to Hindu caste category. And Hanuman is totally guided by *Brahminism*. He takes *Dalits* as the

target for exercising his power. Even the *Misras* don't sit silently seeing Dhouli's survival despite their so many attempts to drag her to the land of death. She starts selling herself in order to fulfill the bellies of her mother, her son and her own. The *Misras* do not remain silent without exiling her from their village in the name of maintaining purity in their village. At the time of *panchayat* meeting, "Dhouli asked, Why didn't the Brahmans pay for the upkeep of one of their own offsprings? Hanuman Misra took off his shoe and flung it at her, saying, Shut up, *randi*" (32)! Dhouli just asks for the responsibility of Misrilal to raise his son. Misra's son is with Dhouli. She wants them to take care of her son. But, one of the Brahmans, Hanuman scolds her and throws his shoe at her calling *randi*, a derogative term for woman.

Regarding the habit of upper caste people, Ambedkar in his *Annihilation of Caste* mentions, "It is a pity that caste even today has its defenders..." (233). In the modern world, people attempt to defend caste prejudice. They repeatedly do it throughout their lives. Ambedkar again opines, "[A Hindu's] whole life is one anxious effort to preserve his caste. Caste is his precious possession which he must save at any cost" (250). A higher caste Hindu is utterly committed to maintaining his caste at all costs. He dislikes seeing people step outside of their caste. In the novel too, Kundan Misra, Misrilal Misra, their mother, Hanuman Misra and other *Misras* go to the extent of banishing Dhouli just to show the power of their caste. While defending and attempting to save his caste, Hanuman Misra says, "Your brother has brought shame to the entire family. People are laughing at us. First, restore our honour" (13). He worries about his own caste, not the caste of Dhouli. It is because in Hindu society, *Dalits* have no honour, no prestige, which is not true at all. He only thinks about people who may be laughing at the *Misras*. But, he does not think of the people who are waiting to tear Dhouli up. He is only thinking of restoring the *Misras* honor. He has nothing to do with the honor of Dhouli which is gone because of their own kin, Misrilal Misra.

Similarly, another defender of caste is the mother of Kundan, she defends it by saying, “It’s always the fault of the woman. For not considering a Brahman’s honour, she’s even more to blame” (14). Here, she also tries to blame Dhoulis instead of her son. She tries to save her caste, Misra by making Dhoulis guilty. At the meeting of *panchayat*, Hanuman Misra again defends his caste by calling Dhoulis cultureless, “Such sinful activities cannot continue in the heart of this village. This village still has Brahmans living in it. *Puja* is still done in their homes everyday” (32). Hanuman talks about the sinful activities and *puja* but, he forgets the sinful activities of his own people. The *Misras* are solely responsible for the sufferings of Dhoulis and her people. They sleep with *Dalit* girls, make them pregnant and leave them without taking any kind of responsibility. Who is sinful, Dhoulis or the *Misras*? They force her to die. Who is sinful, Dhoulis or the *Misras*? And they talk about *puja*? What type of *puja* and whose *puja*? Is it right to put off the light and spread darkness in other’s house, and to lighten up own house? Now, the *Misras* are blaming Dhoulis for being involved in prostitution. But, who forces her to be a prostitute? The only answer is the *Misras*.

Ambedkar expresses, “A caste can easily organize itself into a conspiracy to make the life of a reformer hell... Caste in the hands of the orthodox has been a powerful weapon for persecuting the reformers and for killing all reform... Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible” (258-259). People begin planning attacks on social reformers. They even intend to murder them in order to maintain their antiquated viewpoints. As a result, society continues to be divided into upper and lower caste groups, where there is no feeling of public charity, public welfare, or public opinion.

The life of reformers is thrown into hell by the upper caste in this novel too. In this novel, Misra, Dhoulis and Shanichari can be taken as reformers, and they are not allowed to live their lives as they wish. Whenever the question of caste arises in the relationship between

Misrilal and Dhoulis, Misrialal used to say, "I don't care about things like caste and untouchability. Besides, Taharr is not the only place on earth. And the government law too sanctions our marriage" (12). Misrilal presents himself as a social reformer. He wants to change the notion regarding marriage with a *Dalit* widow. But, in the later phase of his life, he changes because of the force of society which is ruled by orthodoxy. They blame him for bringing "shame to the entire family" (13) of the Misras. And when he refuses to leave his village, his brother, Kundan threatens to kill him. Kundan says, "If you don't go, we'll make sure your corpse leaves the village. Men like you are a black mark against our name" (13). In the end, he is forced to leave his village and his beloved, Dhoulis.

Similarly, Dhoulis is also a social reformer. She tries to break the outdated rules of society. She is a *Dalit* widow. Despite these barriers created by society, she falls in love with a Brahman boy though her dreams cannot turn into reality. But, she challenges this society and because she dares to change society, she is forced to die. For her daring, Hanuman Misra orders Kundan, "Don't bother murdering them, deny food instead" (13). She is left with no option. So, she starts selling herself in order to survive. Society is not satisfied until she leaves the village. The reason behind her exile is Misrilal who used to sell the dreams of challenging and changing his society. He calls a meeting of the *panchayat* and which take a decision on his behalf. And, "Misrilal said, Now you know that I'm a man and that I'm also a Brahman's son" (32). The narrator narrates, "Early next morning, Dhoulis and the contractor took a bus" (33) for Ranchi where Dhoulis will engage in prostitution in a big market. This tells us the fate of social reformers. This society, where caste has rooted itself as a permanent fixture, makes it very hard for *Dalits* to live. The privileged castes only enjoy rights and power whereas lower castes become victims all the time.

Caste has also killed the sense of charity. When Dhoulis is in problem, nobody comes to help her besides Shanichari. The narrator says:

Dhouli realized that her community, the Misra family and the contractor's labourers, would watch her keenly now. They could see that her son was growing up on scraps and scrapings. They knew that her mother searched for roots and rubbers in the forest. They were aware that Shanichari visited them sometimes with *makaitied* to her waistcloth. (26)

Dhouli is in the need of help. Her son and mother are in great problem of not being able to manage food for them. Nobody comes forward with helping hands. It shows that caste has such power where people from one caste suffer greatly and people from another caste do not come forward for charity.

Apart from charity, caste has made the public opinion favoring *Dalits* impossible. Because of her caste, Dhouli is not heard publicly when she tries to put her thought on solving the problem between her and Misrial, "Hanuman Misra took off his shoe and flung it at her, saying, Shut up, *randi*" (32)! So, her caste has not allowed her to speak publicly and Hanuman's caste has allowed him to shut her up from being heard in the public though the meeting is related to Dhouli.

Victimization of *Dalits* has been on the rise daily. Somehow, the oppression is also caused by the acceptance of *Dalits*. They accept such injustices as a part of their life and do not rebel against it. Instead, it causes them to remain silent in front of the so-called superior castes. About the continuation of caste based discrimination in present society, Ambedkar writes:

Dalits have been completely disabled for direct action on account of this wretched caste system. They could not bear arms, and without arms they could not rebel... They could receive no education. They could not think out or know the way to their

salvation... not having means of escape, they became reconciled to eternal servitude, which they accepted as their inescapable fate.(274-275)

Dalits lack the means to defend themselves against injustices committed against them. There is no prospect for them to receive an education. As a result, they continue to think of themselves as the servants and maids of upper caste.

The same scene is presented in the novel too where *Dalit* characters do not challenge their exploiters. They take such inhuman acts as the part of their fate and life. While grazing the goats of Misrilal's family, Misrilal tries to have physical relations with her. She says, "Deota! Please don't say such things. Deota! I'm your slave. Oh no! please don't! Trembling in fear, Dhoulis turned her face away" (6). Dhoulis does not talk about laws and rights. She accepts herself as a slave. Here, slave has two meanings, one is based on her job of grazing and looking after Misra's goats, and another is on the basis of her caste, *Dalit* because the people of her caste always serve the *Misras*. She is supposed to submit her body to the upper caste whenever they want it. She is not educated, not given any chance to learn how to escape from such situations. So, she internalizes this event as her fate and accepts it despite knowing that this will lead her to the world of sufferings created by the same people, the *Misras*.

When Dhoulis is left to die, she learns how to survive in this selfish and cruel society. So, she starts sleeping with so many in exchange for food, money and clothes. Is it wrong to do such thing if someone is left with nothing, only death? But the upper caste people feel ashamed of her survival, and they come up with the concept of purity and impurity. In the name of *puja*, they throw her away from her own society. At the one-sided meeting of *panchayat*, Hanuman Misra says, "Such sinful activities cannot continue in the heart of this village. This village still has Brahmans living in it. *Puja* is still done in their homes everyday" (32). Here, the upper caste, *Misras* put themselves in the category of pure, and Dhoulis, a

representative of *Dalit* community is put in the category of impure. Thus, she does get into prostitution of her own freewill; rather, she is forced to become a prostitute. And the *Misras* are solely responsible for whatever happens to her.

Regarding the source of power to rule and control *Dalits*, Ambedkar opines, “Religious, social status, and property are all sources of power and authority with which one man controls the liberty of another... If the source of power and dominion is, at any given time or in any given society, social and religious, then social reform and religious reform must be accepted as necessary sort of reform” (230). He discusses how religion, social rank, and property are exploited by upper caste individuals as methods of dominance. When discussing challenge and change, he asserts that the solution to the problem must be acknowledged as a component of societal reform. There should not be voice against such changes which ensure equality to everyone.

The same scenario is also mentioned in the novel. Dhoulis and her mother don't own land. When Dhoulis's father was alive, he used to work in Misra's field. Now, in Dhoulis's family, there is no male. So, Misrilal's family refuses to give them any land to work and grow crops. The narrator says:

And what was Dhoulis? A *dusad's* daughter. A widow. An unfortunate woman. She had no father or brother, which was why Kundan had not let her mother till the land. Dhoulis's mother had pleaded, *Sarkar*, I'll pay the rent; the other *dusads* will help me till the land. I'll pay whatever rent you ask but give me the land. Otherwise we'll starve to death.

No...

The mother told her son, As long as her husband was alive he tilled the land and worked as a bonded labour.... (6)

These lines give us a glimpse of the bitter reality of our society where landholders rule landless people. In India and Nepal, most of the *Dalits* don't own land, they are poor. They have to be dependent on upper caste people for land to cultivate crops for their family. Mother of Dhoulis goes to Kundan and asks for land to use. But, he denies. She is ready to pay rent for land. But, Kundan refuses. He holds power because he owns land. Even her husband died as a bonded labor of Kundan's family.

Similarly, another event also gives us the same picture. The social status also indicates the power of a family. When Misrilal threatens to kill Dhoulis, he says, "A Brahman's son to be brought up by *achhuts!* Untouchables! I'll kill you" (32)! Here, Misrilal's intention of killing Dhoulis is purely the product of his caste. His caste gives him the status to destroy, deceive and kill the people of lower caste and lower status. Dhoulis has a son from Misrilal when she starts selling her body. He comes and threatens to kill her if she does not stop sex work. But, the irony is that he is not still ready to help her survive. She is scolded and her caste, *achhut* is mentioned. He once told her that he was not interested in her caste, but, now he is insulting her by calling her caste. After deciding against the wish of Dhoulis, Misrilal again says, "Now you know that I'm a man and that I'm also a Brahman's son" (32). This also indicates the power of a Brahman male which is directly linked with the social status. To dominate and discriminate *Dalits* is taken as the by-birth right of so-called upper castes.

Dalits' poor economic standing makes them the sexual victim of upper caste landlords. Miriam Sharma, in her "Caste, Class, and Gender: Production and Reproduction in North India" mentions, "Economic vulnerability of lower-caste people in general makes their

women vulnerable to sexual exploitation by upper-caste landlords” (79). Higher caste males sexually assault *Dalit* women due to poor economic condition of them. *Dalits* cannot take any action against them because of a lack of money for survival. In this novel too, such events are included very strongly. The narrator shows the poor condition of Dhoulī and her way of survival and says, “Would clients then start knocking at her door and after saying ‘no’ a few times, would she ultimately succumb to hunger and let them in? For the sake of a sari from someone, a few coins from someone else, some *maro* from a third” (22)? This indicates Dhoulī’s compulsion to engage in the flesh trade. She has to do it because of her poor economic condition otherwise she would die. She is forced to accept an act of selling her body for the sake of her survival and her son and mother’s as well. Initially, she rejects lustful offers, but, later on she no longer deny their entry in her bed due to her severe financial condition.

Aahuti mentions, “Even on this day, inter-caste couples are being intentionally murdered through so-called high-caste people. Even today, many “high-caste” people do not eat with *Dalit*, do not drink the water touched by *Dalit*, and do not allow *Dalit* inside their houses. Still, milk produced by *Dalit* will not sell” (68). Aahuti describes how in today's society, people from higher castes proudly kill ‘inter-caste couples’ in order to uphold the alleged sanctity of their caste. The homes of the higher caste do not welcome *Dalits*. In the same way, J. B. Bishwakarma in his “Nepal ma Sambridhiko Bahasra *Dalit* (Discussion on Prosperity and *Dalit* in Nepal)” opines, “Another big problem faced by *Dalit* community is discrimination in socio-cultural event... The incidents like beaten-to-death, exiled from village, and killing are happening due to inter-caste marriage” (10). *Dalits* are chosen as a target group to convey the desires of the upper castes. They suffer abuse, exile, and occasionally even death simply for getting married to upper caste women.

Similar events are also available in this novel as well. Dhouli falls in love with Misrilal. But, the *Misras* don't accept her as their family member; rather both of them are forced to leave the village. When Misrilal realizes that their society cannot accept them as a couple, he says:

A strange emptiness filled Misrilal.

Dhouli, my beloved, why were you born a *dusadin*?

Don't say that, *deota*. Please don't. I can't take it anymore.

Listen. Crying won't help you now.

I have a whole lifetime to cry.

This time I have to leave. I've had to accept all their conditions. (15)

The sense of insecurity is felt by both of them. This is when Misrilal is forced to leave the village in order to end his love relation with a *Dalit* girl. He asks her about her birth in a *Dalit* family. Both of them know that their caste is a barrier to their love. He is compelled to agree with the conditions of his family otherwise he has to be killed by his own brother. When he refuses to leave the village, his brother, Kundan says, "If you don't go, we'll make sure your corpse leave the village. Men like you are a black mark against our name" (13). His own brother is ready to be his murderer just to stop inter-caste marriage. By this also we can propose that how the concept of caste has dominated all of us directly and indirectly.

Similarly, Dhouli is left to die without any means of survival: "If Kundan Misra didn't kill her physically, he would finish her off by denying her food. That was her punishment for loving his brother" (27). But, she manages to live by selling her body. After seeing her survival, the *Misras* plan to exile her from their village. For that, they call a *panchayat*

meeting, decide according to their own wish, and declare her expulsion from the village, “People were not asked their opinion at the meeting. Hanumanji announced Dhouli 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 fire and mother, daughter, child will be burnt to death” (32). At last, she accepts their decision and leaves her village. Similarly, when Dhouli tries to put forth her opinion at the meeting, Hanuman Misra scolds her and “took off his shoe and flung it at her, saying, Shut up, *randi*” (32). Women in general, and *Dalit*women in particular, do not get chance to say, to see and to know anything. Everything is decided by upper castes males.

When *Dalits* receive something after serving to the upper castes, the untouchability practice is seen very clearly. Mary M. Cameron makes the same point. She expresses, “Days after the work was finished, the low-caste workers would return and ask for things, staying longer than I thought necessary to simply ask a question or receive an answer or item desired. I wondered why what was given to the “visitors”... had to seemingly drop through the air, as grain or salt was poured into their extended cloth” (5). They are there to accept the wages they have earned. However, they are told to avoid the touch of upper caste. Cameron further writes, “When a lower-caste woman receives grain payments from her upper-caste *riti* (master, patron), she holds out a cloth into which the grain is poured, a method of giving that prevents any direct contact between the two” (48). While providing anything, physical distance is cared. Their touch is not accepted.

The same thing is also mentioned in this novel as well. When Dhouli’s mother goes to Misrilal’s mother to take *maroa*, this type of behavior is seen, “Without a word, the mistress of the house doled out a kilogram of *maroa*, careful to avoid touching her” (16-17). Misrial’s mother believes that if she touches Dhouli’s mother, her god and goddess will be angry.

The higher caste's hegemony does not last forever. Despite the abuse reformers endure, it is contested. Although *Dalits* are made to be the "ruled," this cannot last without being challenged. Cameron also makes the same argument. She opines, "Low-caste women are not passive and submissive to male authority..." (2). Whether it is a man from their own caste or from a higher caste, they question male authority. They voice their opinions against torture they have gone through. They struggle for their civil and social rights. They are not passive, rather they are active for their emancipation.

The similar event happens in this novel as well, "Shanichari was the village gossip and medicine woman, so the *Misras* left her alone. She was somehow moved by Dhouli's plight and, in her typical manner, decided to raise public opinion in the girl's favour" (19). When Shanichari does this, the *Misras* become restless because of plan of Shanichari, a *Dalit* woman. Similarly, the voice of Dhouli is felt when *Misrilal* comes back to the village after knowing that Dhouli has become a prostitute. When he meets her, he says, "Why didn't you die instead" (32)! But, Dhouli without any fear responds, "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" (32)? She is no longer the old Dhouli. She has learnt a lot from life. She is brave enough to face each and every one of the society who wants to misuse and kill her.

She is now prepared to question the rule of the upper caste in her own unique style, to put it briefly. Even though they do not alter their verdict, she disputes the *panchayat's* decision. She doesn't beg for forgiveness from the upper caste; instead, she accepts their decision without protest and prepares to demonstrate that their attempt to have her killed cannot succeed. Instead of living her life as a kept lady for upper caste men, she is prepared to join the large population of prostitutes in the town. She wants to live her life how she

wants to, not how upper castes want her to be. The plot of this novel starts off with the suffering of *Dalits* but ends with the triumph of caste-based underdogs, especially the triumph of the protagonist, Dhouli. It cannot be wrong to claim that *Dalits* are heard despite the tremendous dominance of upper castes. Their hardships have given them the strength to assist others in making the correct choices when called upon. This is not just Dhouli's win; it is the victory of all *Dalits*.

Despite Dhouli's triumph in this novel, Cameron does not accept that there is equality in the present real society. So, she concludes by expressing, "Social change is not on the horizon but sleeps on the far side of a distant mountain. The people of Bhalara (and Nepal) have so embedded caste hierarchy in their self, identity, and religious views that I do not predict change in this area for several generations, and then not without strong resistance (if the case of India is any example)" (284). She argues that the Nepalese have a traditional attitude. However, she calls for a forceful movement to bring a change in a short period of time. In the name of caste, she seeks equality. She desires a society free from prejudice based on caste. This is the dream of every *Dalit* in the world, as well as every human beings who love mankind. Ambedkar also shows us how to get there by pointing the path. He mentions, "The assertion by the individual of his own opinion and beliefs, his own independence and interest... is the beginning of all reform. But whether the reform will continue depends upon what scope the group affords for such individual assertion" (249-250). In our culture, we need a reformer who is committed to bring drastic change. However, the group's effort is also required for his or her effort to be successful. Ambedkar is an advocate of group initiatives to overthrow this inhumane system.

The same point is also mentioned by Chaitanya Mishra in "Introduction" to *Varna System and Class Struggle in Nepal* of Aahuti:

The “*Dalit*” problem is not merely cultural.... It encompasses, broadly and strongly, the political and economic areas... It is a relationship between those who are addressed as *tam* (derogatory “you”) and *hajur* (honorary “you”), between *Dalit* and non-*Dalit*. It is a relationship of prohibition of touch between these two. Then, how can this relationship be considered nonpolitical, or separate from political power?

Absolutely not! (18-19)

Mishra makes an effort to explain the caste system's political ties. He is determined to find a political answer. Although this senseless practice is considered to be a cultural issue, Mishra demonstrates its political connection. In a same line, he also writes, “Because *Dalitness* is not a process constructed and reconstructed by *Dalit* themselves. This structure and process was constructed by all members of the society, by all citizens. We were all involved in its construction, so it is our responsibility to demolish it” (19). In it, he calls on all Nepali to bond together and oppose this scourge, which sees one community perpetually subordinate to another.

Aahuti does not underestimate the strength of group effort either. He discusses the value of their unity while analyzing *Dalits* and their sufferings in today’s world. He believes that *Dalits* are split among ideological lines, making it nearly impossible to persuade them to leave current parties and found new ones. So, he proposes, “In such a situation, only one solution remains: a common national *Dalit* forum, based on minimum common program and based on the concept of extensive joint effort. Without it, there does not seem to be an alternative to save the *Dalit* liberation movement that is gradually disintegrating” (121). In order to achieve equality in the society, he urges to all *Dalits* and supporters of the *Dalit* movement to set aside their own interests. Currently, everyone is split up into several parties, but for the good of their community, they must speak with one voice or risk losing the successes that the *Dalit* struggle has attained over the years.

Indicating the urgency to solve the caste problem, Padam Sundas suggests, “Who wish to see peace, good governance and social harmony in Nepal must not delay to solve the problem of caste discrimination in a new way- must resolve it before blast” (7). Yes, *Dalits* and those who support their emancipation are gearing up for a never-ending campaign to march against this cruel system. It might sweep everything away if it marches against it. Therefore, those in positions of authority must act quickly to find answers to the issues the caste system has created. Similarly, and most significantly, Ambedkar calls on each of us to destroy the caste system. He further mentions, “You must make your efforts to uproot caste, if not in my way, then in your way” (316). He urges all of us to speak against caste discrimination in our own way. And, it is our duty as well to create a place where everyone is equal.

The researcher comes to the conclusion that every civilization has a dominant social, cultural, or political thought that either directly or indirectly affects the lives of others. When discussing this novel, it's also important to note the existence of a dominant system that oppresses members of the *Dalit* group through caste-based discrimination. In contrast, lower caste individuals are portrayed as submissive, nurturing, followers, helpless, shy, weak, mute, and the like. It solely gives attention to upper caste individuals and portrays them as rulers, speakers, deciders, power exercisers, and the like.

The post-independence India depicted in this story, there is no evidence of the effects of independence. Although external colonizers have left the country, there are still internal colonizers. Devi describes the society in which there is still the worry of being kidnapped, raped and kept as a kept-woman, boycotted, tortured, killed, or silenced by the upper castes. The novel's positive aspect, however, is that it inspires a sense of resistance aimed at changing such tyranny, tradition, and a condition of subordination by outlining some methods

for overcoming dominance. This includes deconstructing the oppression of *Dalits* as well as the absurdity and overvaluation of the caste system that supports it.

Devi has questioned the widespread exaltation of caste-based ideas that grossly undervalue *Dalit* existence. This novel's title, *Dhouli*, is likewise wisely picked. The title character, Dhouli, has a common name. Devi has described the life of a typical girl from the *Dalit* community, who is mistakenly thought of as an upper caste's servant, kept-woman and sex toy. She is imprisoned by MisrilalMisra's endearing words. When she realizes she is being duped, she seeks Misrilal's family for assistance but is turned down. Then, she discovers a means of surviving by testing and shattering society's purported purity.

In conclusion, as a researcher, I belong to an upper caste Brahmin family in Hindu *Varna* system. I have seen and practiced unintentionally the practice of caste-based discrimination not only in my society but also all over Nepal. I could have remained quiet but I have not. It is because people like us who are educated and aware of the social injustice in terms of caste must speak for its annihilation. It must be done in order to create a society where there is no discrimination in the name of caste and to create a feeling of equality. As I have worked in *Dalit* issue, I wish others as well to write more and more in the same issue and spread the message of equality. I hope that this thesis may guide other *Dalits* and non-*Dalits* to take the issue of caste-based discrimination very seriously and work on the same social evil which has divided us in different categories. It is a right time to challenge this practice and change it. We all must work together for its end.

In the novel as well, Devi's *Dhouli* effectively conveys the need for reform in a caste-based social system in which *Dalits* are used as tools to satisfy the aspirations of upper caste people and constantly have their human rights violated. In this writing, the idea of a society in which everyone is treated equally and caste-based prejudice is unheard of is envisioned. It

cries out for world where people from so-called lower castes feel secure and have access to rights, freedom, equality, and socially acceptable norms. Finally, it is a piece of art that expresses Devi's belief in a just society that can be upheld by argumentation, yelling, and revolution in order to eliminate caste-based discrimination and the ideas that support it, which are to blame for the suffering of *Dalits*. By elevating the voices of the oppressed, tortured, raped, murdered, and excluded *Dalits*, as well as by highlighting their struggles and empowering them to stand up for themselves and oppose injustice done to them, this novel establishes its place as a spokesperson for *Dalits*. It imagines a world where people treat one another equally, with self-respect and dignity, and without caste-based discrimination.

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