

Failure of Institutions and the Ethics of Non-Redemption in Mahasweta Devi's Fiction

Md. Ghulam Sarwar¹, Dr. Binay Shanker Roy²

¹ Research Scholar, University Department of English, B.R.A. Bihar University, Muzaffarpur

² Professor & Head, University Department of English, B.R.A. Bihar University, Muzaffarpur

Abstract

This paper examines the fiction of **Mahasweta Devi** through the critical lens of institutional failure and the ethics of non-redemption. It argues that Mahasweta Devi deliberately constructs narratives in which institutions conventionally associated with protection and moral order—such as the state, law, family, and socio-economic systems—consistently collapse in their responsibility toward marginalized women. Rather than offering narratives of rescue, reform, or justice, her fiction foregrounds unresolved suffering and structural violence, positioning the absence of redemption as a deliberate ethical and political strategy.

Drawing on subaltern studies and feminist criticism, the paper reads key texts including *Draupadi*, *Breast Giver*, *Behind the Bodice*, and *Douloti the Bountiful* to demonstrate how institutional power operates as an instrument of exploitation rather than redress. Law enforcement agencies appear as perpetrators rather than protectors, family structures commodify women's bodies and labour, and economic systems normalize bonded labour and sexual slavery. In these narratives, women encounter institutions not as sources of relief but as mechanisms that legitimize violence and erase accountability.

The study emphasizes that Mahasweta Devi's refusal to provide narrative closure or moral consolation should not be interpreted as pessimism or narrative incompleteness. Instead, non-redemption functions as an ethical mode of realism that exposes the limits of reformist thinking and challenges readers to confront the persistence of injustice. By denying the comfort of resolution, Devi resists sentimental representations of suffering and refuses to convert trauma into symbolic victory or catharsis.

Through close textual analysis supported by existing critical scholarship, the paper positions Mahasweta Devi as a writer who transforms literature into a site of ethical witnessing. Her fiction does not promise healing or transformation; it demands recognition of institutional complicity and historical neglect. The paper concludes that the ethics of non-redemption in Mahasweta Devi's work constitutes a powerful feminist intervention, one that insists on accountability rather than hope, and exposure rather than consolation, thereby redefining the political responsibility of literary narrative.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi; institutional failure; ethics of non-redemption; subaltern studies; feminist realism; state violence; caste and gender oppression; narrative ethics

1. Introduction

Literature has often been expected to perform a redemptive function. Narratives of suffering are conventionally framed around the promise of justice, reform, or moral resolution, allowing readers to exit the text with a sense of closure. Within feminist writing, this expectation frequently manifests as

stories of empowerment, survival, or transformation, where women emerge strengthened from oppression. However, such narrative patterns risk obscuring the persistence of structural violence and the failure of institutions that claim to protect the marginalized. In the fiction of **Mahasweta Devi**, redemption is conspicuously absent. Her narratives resist consolation, deny reformist optimism, and expose a world in which institutions collapse repeatedly and without remorse. This refusal of redemption is not accidental or pessimistic; it constitutes a deliberate ethical stance that demands critical attention.

Mahasweta Devi's literary career is inseparable from her long-standing engagement with tribal, Dalit, and marginalized communities. Critics have repeatedly noted that her writing emerges from direct contact with oppressed groups and from sustained observation of how power operates at the grassroots level (Shweta and Kumar). Rather than imagining oppression as an individual moral failure, Devi presents it as a systemic condition sustained by interlocking institutions such as the state, law enforcement, family, and economic structures. These institutions appear not as neutral frameworks but as active agents of exploitation and erasure. Women, particularly those located at the intersections of caste, class, and gender, experience these failures most acutely.

A significant body of criticism on Mahasweta Devi has focused on subaltern resistance, women's suffering, and feminist consciousness. While such readings are valuable, they often emphasize moments of defiance or symbolic empowerment, sometimes overlooking the larger narrative pattern in which no institutional correction follows these moments. Studies on *Draupadi* highlight the brutality of state violence and the courage of the protagonist, yet the narrative ultimately offers no justice or accountability (Chauhan). Similarly, analyses of *Breast Giver* examine the exploitation of maternal labour, but the story ends not with reform or recognition, but with abandonment and erasure (Ahlawat). These unresolved endings are not narrative oversights. They signal a deeper ethical commitment to exposing reality without mitigation.

The failure of institutions is a recurring motif across Mahasweta Devi's fiction. Law enforcement agencies, rather than safeguarding citizens, function as instruments of terror and control. Scholars have noted that the police and military in Devi's stories consistently operate beyond accountability, reinforcing caste and gender hierarchies instead of dismantling them (Soni and Chitra). Legal frameworks exist in name but fail in practice, offering neither protection nor redress to subaltern women. This institutional betrayal dismantles the myth of the benevolent state and exposes the hollowness of democratic ideals when confronted with entrenched social inequalities.

Equally significant is the collapse of the family as a moral institution. In Devi's narratives, the family does not provide refuge or emotional security. Instead, it often becomes a site of economic dependency and exploitation. The commodification of women's bodies and labour within domestic structures reflects broader systemic failures, where survival is prioritized over dignity (Zala and Prasad). Motherhood, traditionally idealized as sacred, is stripped of its moral sanctity and revealed as a form of unpaid or underpaid labour that benefits others while consuming the woman herself. The absence of familial care at moments of extreme vulnerability underscores the extent to which private institutions mirror public ones in their failure.

Economic systems in Mahasweta Devi's fiction further reinforce the ethics of non-redemption. Bonded labour, sexual slavery, and exploitative work arrangements are presented not as aberrations but as normalized practices sustained by social indifference and institutional complicity. Critical studies of *Douloti the Bountiful* emphasize how economic exploitation operates without interruption or consequence, leading to death without recognition or memorialization (Manzar). There is no narrative

intervention that disrupts this cycle. Instead, Devi forces readers to confront the permanence of injustice and the absence of corrective mechanisms.

The concept of non-redemption is central to understanding Mahasweta Devi's ethical vision. Traditional realist narratives often rely on resolution to affirm moral order, even when depicting suffering. Devi rejects this convention. Her stories end abruptly, leave questions unanswered, and deny the reader the comfort of hope. This narrative strategy aligns with what critics have described as her commitment to exposing reality without aesthetic softening (Ahlawat). By refusing to redeem her characters through rescue or reform, Devi resists turning suffering into spectacle or inspiration. She insists that injustice must be acknowledged in its full brutality, without the illusion of narrative salvation.

This refusal also challenges liberal feminist frameworks that equate agency with empowerment or transformation. In Mahasweta Devi's fiction, women may resist, but resistance does not guarantee survival or change. Acts of defiance do not dismantle institutions; they merely expose their cruelty. Scholars examining subaltern representation in her work have noted that agency often appears as momentary assertion rather than sustained empowerment, highlighting the limits imposed by structural power (Shweta and Kumar). Non-redemption thus becomes a feminist critique of narratives that overestimate the efficacy of individual resistance within deeply unequal systems.

Another crucial dimension of non-redemption lies in the reader's position. Mahasweta Devi does not guide readers toward moral reassurance. Instead, she implicates them in the act of witnessing. By denying closure, she prevents emotional detachment and challenges the reader to confront institutional complicity. As critics have observed, her fiction transforms reading into an ethical encounter rather than a passive experience (Chauhan). The discomfort generated by unresolved endings is intentional, forcing sustained engagement with injustice rather than momentary sympathy.

This paper situates Mahasweta Devi's fiction within a framework that foregrounds the failure of institutions and the ethics of non-redemption. Rather than revisiting familiar themes of resistance or empowerment, it focuses on how the absence of justice functions as a narrative and ethical strategy. By examining texts such as *Draupadi*, *Breast Giver*, *Behind the Bodice*, and *Douloti the Bountiful*, the study demonstrates that non-redemption is central to Devi's critique of power. Institutions in her work do not fail accidentally; they fail consistently, revealing a social order that is structurally hostile to marginalized women.

By foregrounding non-redemption, this study seeks to reframe Mahasweta Devi's contribution to feminist and subaltern literature. Her fiction does not offer solutions, nor does it promise healing. Instead, it exposes the depth of institutional decay and demands accountability without offering comfort. In doing so, Mahasweta Devi redefines the ethical responsibility of literature, positioning it not as a vehicle for hope, but as a space for uncompromising truth.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws primarily on subaltern studies, feminist literary criticism, and narrative ethics in order to examine institutional failure and the ethics of non-redemption in the fiction of **Mahasweta Devi**. These frameworks are employed not as abstract theoretical overlays but as interpretive tools that emerge organically from the concerns articulated in Devi's narratives and in the existing body of critical scholarship on her work.

Subaltern studies form the foundational theoretical lens of this paper. Scholars working within this tradition have emphasized how marginalized groups remain excluded from dominant historical, political,

and legal discourses. In the context of Mahasweta Devi's fiction, subalternity is not limited to economic deprivation but is intensified by caste, gender, and ethnic marginalization. Critics have noted that her writing exposes how institutions such as the state, law enforcement, and administrative systems systematically deny protection to tribal and Dalit communities (Shweta and Kumar). Subaltern theory is therefore essential for understanding why Devi's characters are denied justice and why institutional failure is presented as a structural condition rather than an episodic lapse.

Feminist literary criticism further sharpens this analysis by foregrounding the gendered nature of institutional collapse. Feminist scholars have argued that women experience oppression not only through overt violence but also through everyday social structures that normalize exploitation and silence. Studies on Devi's women characters highlight how motherhood, sexuality, and labour are commodified within both public and private institutions, leaving women without moral or emotional support (Ahlawat; Zala and Prasad). Feminist criticism allows this paper to interpret non-redemption not as narrative pessimism but as a critique of patriarchal systems that repeatedly fail women while claiming moral authority.

The concept of narrative ethics provides an additional interpretive dimension. Narrative ethics examines how storytelling choices shape moral responsibility and reader engagement. In Mahasweta Devi's fiction, unresolved endings, abrupt closures, and the absence of rescue figures function as ethical strategies. Critics have observed that her refusal to provide narrative consolation forces readers to confront injustice without emotional release (Chauhan). This framework enables the study to argue that non-redemption is an ethical stance that resists the aestheticization of suffering and challenges readers to recognize institutional complicity.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative, text-centered approach based on close reading. Selected texts including *Draupadi*, *Breast Giver*, *Behind the Bodice*, and *Douloti the Bountiful* are analyzed to identify recurring patterns of institutional failure across legal, familial, and economic structures. The analysis focuses on narrative moments where institutions appear, intervene, or remain absent, and examines how their failure shapes the lives of women characters.

Secondary critical sources drawn from existing scholarship on Mahasweta Devi are integrated to support and contextualize textual interpretations. These sources are used to reinforce arguments about subaltern exclusion, gendered exploitation, and unresolved trauma, rather than to impose external theoretical models. By combining theoretical insight with close textual analysis, this study seeks to demonstrate that institutional failure and non-redemption are central to Mahasweta Devi's ethical vision, redefining the political and moral responsibilities of literary narrative.

The Collapse of Law and State Authority

In the fiction of **Mahasweta Devi**, the state and its legal machinery appear not as safeguards of justice but as instruments that sustain violence against marginalized women. Law, policing, and administrative authority are stripped of their moral legitimacy and revealed as deeply complicit in structures of caste, class, and gender oppression. Rather than correcting injustice, these institutions normalize it, functioning in ways that expose the profound disjunction between constitutional ideals and lived reality. The collapse of law and state authority in Devi's narratives is not episodic or accidental. It is systemic, repetitive, and central to her ethical vision of non-redemption.

One of the most striking features of Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of the state is the consistent inversion of its protective role. Institutions that are theoretically designed to ensure safety and order instead

operate as sites of terror and domination. Critical responses to Devi's work have emphasized that her representation of the state is grounded in historical experience, particularly in regions where tribal and Dalit communities encounter the law primarily through coercion rather than protection (Shweta and Kumar). In this context, law is not an abstract principle but a lived force that disciplines, punishes, and silences. Women located at the margins of society experience this force with particular intensity, as their gendered bodies become easy targets for institutional abuse.

The narrative of *Draupadi* offers one of the most uncompromising depictions of state violence in Mahasweta Devi's fiction. The presence of police and military authority in the story does not signify order or justice. Instead, it marks the extension of state power into the most intimate spaces of the subaltern body. Scholars analyzing this text have pointed out that custodial violence, particularly sexual violence, functions as a deliberate strategy to assert dominance and to suppress dissent (Chauhan). The law does not intervene to restrain this brutality. On the contrary, it provides the framework within which such acts are justified or erased. The absence of legal accountability is total, and the narrative refuses to imagine any corrective mechanism that might restore justice.

What makes Devi's treatment of law especially significant is her refusal to frame institutional failure as a moral deviation by individual officers. The problem is not a few corrupt officials but an entire system that legitimizes violence through silence and impunity. Studies of Devi's political fiction emphasize that the state in her narratives is structurally aligned with dominant interests, particularly those of upper-caste and economically powerful groups (Soni and Chitra). This alignment ensures that subaltern women remain unprotected, even when they are victims of the most extreme forms of abuse. The law's neutrality is exposed as a myth, masking a deeply unequal distribution of power.

Administrative authority fares no better in Mahasweta Devi's fictional world. Bureaucratic systems appear indifferent, inaccessible, or actively hostile to the needs of marginalized communities. Documents, procedures, and official records exist, but they do not translate into justice. Instead, they function as tools of delay, denial, and erasure. Critics have observed that Devi's narratives frequently highlight how official records fail to register the suffering of subaltern women, rendering their experiences invisible within institutional memory (Zala and Prasad). This erasure is itself a form of violence, reinforcing the sense that the law recognizes some lives as grievable and others as expendable. The collapse of state authority is further underscored by the absence of legal redress. In conventional narratives of social realism, exposure of injustice is often accompanied by the possibility of reform or intervention. Mahasweta Devi rejects this structure. Her stories do not move toward courtroom drama, policy change, or moral reckoning. Instead, they end in stasis, abandonment, or death. Scholars examining *Douloti the Bountiful* have noted that bonded labour and sexual exploitation continue uninterrupted, with no institutional response capable of halting the cycle of abuse (Manzar). The state's failure here is not merely procedural but ethical. It refuses responsibility, allowing exploitation to persist as a normalized condition.

This ethical collapse is particularly evident in the way the law treats women's bodies. Sexual violence in Devi's fiction is not portrayed as a crime that demands investigation or punishment. It is presented as an extension of state power, used to discipline and humiliate. Feminist critics have emphasized that this representation challenges liberal assumptions about the law as a protector of women's rights (Chauhan). Instead of offering security, the state becomes the source of the most profound vulnerability. The law's silence in the face of such violence underscores its complicity and exposes the gendered nature of institutional neglect.

Mahasweta Devi's critique of state authority also extends to the ideological language that surrounds law and governance. Terms such as order, security, and development appear hollow when contrasted with the lived experiences of her characters. Development projects displace communities without compensation. Security operations target the poor while protecting entrenched power. Scholars have pointed out that Devi's fiction consistently reveals how the rhetoric of governance masks practices of exclusion and control (Shweta and Kumar). By juxtaposing official language with material suffering, Devi dismantles the moral credibility of the state.

Importantly, the collapse of law and state authority in Devi's narratives is inseparable from her ethics of non-redemption. She does not allow the law to redeem itself through reformist gestures or benevolent interventions. There are no sympathetic officials who restore faith in the system. This narrative choice resists the temptation to preserve institutional legitimacy for the sake of closure. As critics have noted, Devi's refusal to introduce corrective figures prevents readers from locating hope within the very structures responsible for violence (Ahlawat). The absence of redemption thus becomes a form of ethical clarity, forcing recognition of systemic failure.

The reader's role in this narrative economy is also shaped by the collapse of law. Without institutional justice to rely on, readers are denied the comfort of moral resolution. They are compelled to witness injustice without recourse to familiar frameworks of accountability. This discomfort is deliberate. By refusing to stage legal or political solutions, Mahasweta Devi implicates the reader in the persistence of injustice. The law's failure becomes not only a thematic concern but a challenge to the reader's assumptions about power, responsibility, and ethical engagement.

In exposing the collapse of law and state authority, Mahasweta Devi offers a radical rethinking of political realism. Her fiction does not merely depict corruption or administrative inefficiency. It reveals a systemic alignment between power and violence that renders justice inaccessible to marginalized women. The state, stripped of its moral authority, stands exposed as an institution that governs through neglect and force rather than care and accountability. This uncompromising portrayal reinforces the central argument of this study: that non-redemption in Mahasweta Devi's fiction is not narrative despair but ethical insistence. By refusing to allow the law to redeem itself, Devi demands that readers confront the depth of institutional failure and the human cost it exacts.

Family, Motherhood, and Economic Institutions

In the fiction of **Mahasweta Devi**, the family and the economy are exposed as institutions that mirror the failures of the state rather than compensating for them. Conventional social narratives often position the family as a moral refuge and motherhood as a source of dignity and protection for women. Mahasweta Devi dismantles these assumptions by revealing how familial bonds and economic systems function as sites of exploitation, abandonment, and commodification. The collapse of these institutions is neither incidental nor private. It is structurally connected to broader regimes of power that normalize inequality and deny women ethical recognition.

The family, in Devi's narratives, rarely provides emotional security or moral shelter. Instead, it operates as an extension of economic necessity and patriarchal authority. Women's roles within the family are defined less by care or reciprocity than by utility. Critical studies of Devi's women characters have emphasized that domestic spaces often replicate the hierarchies of caste and class found in the public sphere, making the family complicit in women's oppression rather than a counterforce to it (Shweta and Kumar). This complicity becomes particularly visible when women's bodies and labour are treated as

resources to be consumed for collective survival, without regard for their physical or psychological well-being.

Motherhood occupies a central place in this institutional critique. Far from being idealized, motherhood in Mahasweta Devi's fiction is stripped of sentimental aura and exposed as a form of labour embedded within exploitative economic relations. In *Breast Giver*, the maternal body becomes a commodity circulated among households, valued only for its capacity to produce nourishment for others. Critics have noted that the protagonist's identity is reduced entirely to her biological function, erasing her individuality and humanity (Ahlawat). The family benefits from her labour but offers no protection or care in return. When her body is exhausted and diseased, she is abandoned, revealing the conditional nature of familial bonds.

This representation challenges dominant cultural narratives that equate motherhood with reverence and moral authority. Mahasweta Devi instead presents motherhood as an institutional role imposed by economic necessity and patriarchal expectation. Feminist critics have argued that such portrayals expose how women's reproductive and nurturing capacities are appropriated without acknowledgment or compensation (Zala and Prasad). The maternal figure becomes indispensable yet disposable, valued only while she remains productive. The family, rather than honoring motherhood, participates actively in its exploitation.

Economic institutions further intensify this collapse of care and responsibility. Poverty in Devi's fiction is not an abstract condition but a force that shapes every social relation. Women's dependence on informal economies, bonded labour, and exploitative arrangements leaves them vulnerable to abuse without recourse. Scholars examining Devi's depiction of labour have highlighted how economic survival often requires women to sacrifice bodily autonomy and dignity, with no institutional safeguards in place (Manzar). The economy operates not as a system of opportunity but as a mechanism that extracts value from women while denying them stability or security.

The intersection of family and economy becomes especially evident in the way women are circulated between domestic and public labour. In *Breast Giver*, the protagonist's work is sanctioned by familial need, justified as necessary for survival. Yet this necessity becomes a moral alibi for exploitation. Critics have observed that the family's reliance on her labour absolves its members of responsibility, allowing them to benefit while disavowing complicity (Ahlawat). When the economic arrangement collapses, the family withdraws, revealing that emotional bonds were contingent upon productivity.

Mahasweta Devi extends this critique beyond individual households to expose broader economic structures that sustain exploitation. Informal labour systems, caste-based occupations, and gendered work arrangements appear as normalized practices rather than exceptional injustices. Studies of Devi's fiction emphasize that these systems operate with tacit social approval, reinforced by cultural silence and institutional neglect (Shweta and Kumar). The absence of intervention from legal or welfare mechanisms underscores the interdependence of economic and social institutions in perpetuating women's suffering.

What distinguishes Devi's treatment of family and economy is her refusal to offer narratives of redemption. There is no moral awakening within the family, no reform of labour practices, and no institutional correction that restores dignity to exploited women. Feminist critics have pointed out that this refusal challenges liberal narratives that imagine progress through individual empathy or incremental reform (Ahlawat). By denying such resolutions, Devi insists that exploitation is systemic and cannot be remedied through personal goodwill alone.

The ethics of non-redemption are particularly stark in the way Devi handles endings related to familial and economic collapse. Women who have sustained families through their labour are not rewarded with care or recognition. Instead, they are discarded when they cease to be useful. Scholars analyzing Devi's narrative strategies argue that these endings are meant to unsettle readers rather than console them, forcing confrontation with the moral bankruptcy of institutions that claim legitimacy (Zala and Prasad). The absence of closure becomes a moral indictment rather than a narrative gap.

Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of economic exploitation also resists romanticized depictions of endurance and sacrifice. Women's suffering is not framed as noble or redemptive. It is presented as unnecessary, unjust, and preventable, sustained only by institutional indifference. Critics have noted that Devi's realism exposes how narratives of sacrifice often function to naturalize exploitation, especially in the context of women's labour (Manzar). By refusing to aestheticize hardship, Devi preserves the ethical urgency of her critique.

The family's failure, when viewed alongside economic exploitation, reveals a broader pattern of institutional collapse. Private and public spheres are not opposed but interconnected, reinforcing one another's failures. The family legitimizes economic exploitation by framing it as necessity, while economic systems exploit familial loyalty to extract labour. Women are caught at the intersection of these forces, denied protection by either institution. This convergence underscores Devi's larger argument that oppression cannot be addressed in isolation. It is sustained through networks of institutional complicity.

In exposing the failures of family, motherhood, and economic institutions, Mahasweta Devi expands the scope of feminist critique beyond individual acts of violence. She reveals how everyday structures normalize exploitation and render suffering invisible. The absence of redemption in these narratives is not a denial of hope but an ethical demand for recognition. By refusing to allow family or economy to redeem themselves through narrative resolution, Devi confronts readers with the enduring consequences of institutional failure. Her fiction insists that until these structures are fundamentally transformed, women's labour, bodies, and lives will continue to be consumed without accountability.

Bonded Labour, Sexual Slavery, and the Absence of Justice

In the fiction of **Mahasweta Devi**, bonded labour and sexual slavery are not represented as marginal aberrations but as normalized outcomes of economic, caste-based, and institutional arrangements. These practices persist not because of the absence of law, but because of its selective application and moral indifference. Devi's narratives repeatedly expose how systems designed to regulate labour and protect human dignity instead enable exploitation to continue uninterrupted. The absence of justice in these contexts is neither accidental nor temporary. It is systemic, sustained by silence, complicity, and the routine erasure of subaltern women from legal and social accountability.

Bonded labour in Devi's fiction operates as a structure that collapses the distinction between economic necessity and coercion. Women are bound not only by debt but by inherited vulnerability shaped by caste and gender. Critical studies of Devi's work emphasize that bonded labour is portrayed as a lived condition rather than a legal category, one that traps women in cycles of exploitation that extend across generations (Shweta and Kumar). The economic logic that sustains this system is brutally efficient. Labour is extracted without wages, bodies are consumed without consequence, and death itself fails to interrupt the cycle. Justice remains perpetually deferred, rendered irrelevant by institutional indifference.

Sexual slavery in Devi's narratives is inseparable from bonded labour. Women's bodies become sites where economic exploitation and patriarchal control converge. Scholars examining *Douloti the Bountiful* have noted that sexual violence is institutionalized rather than incidental, functioning as an accepted method of maintaining dominance over marginalized women (Manzar). Sexual exploitation is not framed as a crime that demands investigation or punishment. Instead, it is presented as an unremarkable aspect of the social order. The law's silence in the face of such violence reinforces its complicity, transforming sexual slavery into a normalized economic practice.

What makes Devi's portrayal particularly unsettling is her refusal to isolate perpetrators as individual villains. Exploitation is not confined to a single landlord, trafficker, or authority figure. It is sustained by an entire network of social and economic relations that profit from women's subjugation. Critics have observed that Devi's fiction consistently reveals how communities, markets, and institutions collaborate in sustaining bonded labour while disavowing responsibility (Zala and Prasad). This diffusion of guilt ensures that justice has no clear target. Accountability dissolves into collective indifference.

The absence of justice is further underscored by the invisibility of legal intervention. Courts, police, and welfare mechanisms are conspicuously absent from the narrative landscape. When law appears, it does so as an abstract promise rather than a functional reality. Studies of Devi's political realism emphasize that this absence is deliberate, designed to expose the gulf between constitutional ideals and lived experience (Shweta and Kumar). Women subjected to bonded labour and sexual slavery do not encounter the law as a source of protection. They encounter it, if at all, as an unreachable abstraction that offers no relief.

Mahasweta Devi's narrative strategy intensifies this critique by refusing redemption at the level of plot. There is no rescue, no rehabilitation, and no moral reckoning that restores dignity to exploited women. In *Douloti the Bountiful*, death itself fails to generate justice or remembrance. Critics have pointed out that even in death, the subaltern woman remains unacknowledged, her body reduced to evidence of exploitation rather than a subject of mourning (Manzar). This denial of closure transforms death from an endpoint into a continuation of injustice, reinforcing the permanence of institutional failure.

Sexual slavery in Devi's fiction also exposes the gendered dimensions of economic exploitation. Women's labour is inseparable from their bodies, and their bodies are treated as renewable resources within exploitative systems. Feminist critics have emphasized that this conflation denies women any separation between work and violation, rendering exploitation total and inescapable (Ahlawat). The absence of justice here is not merely legal but ethical. Society fails to recognize sexual slavery as a moral crisis, allowing it to persist under the guise of economic necessity.

The role of silence is crucial in sustaining this absence of justice. Devi's narratives reveal how silence operates not only at the level of victims, who are denied platforms to speak, but also at the level of institutions that refuse to acknowledge abuse. Scholars have noted that silence functions as an enabling condition for exploitation, allowing bonded labour and sexual slavery to continue without challenge (Chauhan). By representing silence as an active force rather than a passive void, Devi exposes its role in maintaining systemic injustice.

Importantly, Mahasweta Devi resists framing bonded labour and sexual slavery as problems that can be resolved through reformist intervention alone. Her fiction does not gesture toward policy solutions or moral awakenings. Instead, it confronts readers with the endurance of exploitation and the futility of expecting justice from institutions structurally aligned against the marginalized. Critics have argued that this refusal to imagine reform distinguishes Devi's work from liberal narratives that place faith in

gradual improvement (Shweta and Kumar). Non-redemption becomes an ethical refusal to sanitize reality.

The reader is positioned as a witness to this sustained injustice. Without narrative resolution or legal redress, readers are denied the comfort of moral distance. They are compelled to confront the ethical implications of a system that allows bonded labour and sexual slavery to persist unchallenged. This discomfort is integral to Devi's narrative ethics. By refusing justice within the story, she demands accountability beyond it. Critics have observed that this strategy transforms literature into a space of ethical confrontation rather than emotional catharsis (Chauhan).

In representing bonded labour and sexual slavery without justice, Mahasweta Devi exposes the hollowness of institutional promises. Law, economy, and society converge to sustain exploitation while disavowing responsibility. Women trapped within these systems are denied not only freedom but recognition as subjects worthy of justice. The absence of redemption in these narratives is not an expression of despair. It is an uncompromising ethical stance that refuses to grant legitimacy to institutions that perpetuate violence. By laying bare the permanence of injustice, Devi challenges readers to recognize the depth of systemic failure and the moral cost of collective silence.

Open Endings and the Ethics of Non-Redemption

A defining feature of the fiction of **Mahasweta Devi** is her consistent refusal to provide narrative closure. Stories end without justice, rescue, reform, or reconciliation. This absence of resolution is not a structural weakness or an expression of despair. It is a deliberate ethical strategy that reinforces her critique of institutions and challenges the reader's expectations of moral completion. Through open endings, Mahasweta Devi articulates what may be described as an ethics of non-redemption, a narrative stance that resists consolation and refuses to convert suffering into symbolic meaning or moral reward.

In conventional realist and reformist narratives, endings often serve to reaffirm faith in social order. Even when injustice is exposed, closure typically arrives in the form of punishment, awareness, or the promise of change. Mahasweta Devi systematically denies such outcomes. Her stories conclude at moments when institutional failure is most evident and when the possibility of justice appears irretrievably foreclosed. Critics have observed that this refusal disrupts the reader's desire for emotional release and forces sustained engagement with the reality of oppression (Ahlawat). The open ending becomes an ethical demand rather than a narrative gap.

This strategy is particularly significant in texts where extreme violence and exploitation are central. In *Draupadi*, the narrative does not progress toward legal accountability or political transformation. The story ends at a moment of confrontation, not resolution. The absence of institutional response underscores the hollowness of state authority and exposes the limits of resistance within an unyielding system. Scholars have noted that such endings resist the temptation to frame defiance as victory, thereby preserving the integrity of lived subaltern experience (Chauhan). Resistance exists, but redemption does not follow.

Similarly, in narratives dealing with economic exploitation and sexual slavery, endings often coincide with abandonment or death. In *Douloti the Bountiful*, death does not bring recognition, justice, or memorialization. Instead, it reinforces erasure. Critics argue that this narrative choice exposes how even the ultimate human endpoint fails to interrupt systemic violence (Manzar). By denying closure, Mahasweta Devi refuses to grant institutions retrospective legitimacy through symbolic mourning or reformist implication.

Open endings also function as a critique of readerly consumption of suffering. Feminist critics have pointed out that narratives offering redemption risk aestheticizing pain and transforming trauma into moral spectacle. Mahasweta Devi resists this process by denying the reader the comfort of meaning-making (Shweta and Kumar). The unresolved conclusion prevents suffering from being absorbed into familiar narrative arcs of progress or hope. Instead, it remains ethically unresolved, mirroring the social reality it represents.

The ethics of non-redemption also challenge liberal feminist frameworks that equate empowerment with transformation. In Mahasweta Devi's fiction, agency does not culminate in change. Acts of resistance expose injustice but do not dismantle the structures that sustain it. Open endings preserve this tension, refusing to exaggerate the power of individual defiance within deeply entrenched systems. Critics have noted that this realism strengthens, rather than diminishes, the political force of her work (Zala and Prasad).

Ultimately, open endings in Mahasweta Devi's fiction serve as an ethical refusal to lie. They deny the illusion that institutions will correct themselves or that suffering can be redeemed through narrative resolution. By leaving injustice unresolved, Devi places responsibility outside the text, confronting readers with the persistence of systemic failure. The ethics of non-redemption thus emerges as a powerful narrative stance, one that insists on accountability without offering comfort, and recognition without closure.

Conclusion

The fiction of **Mahasweta Devi** demands to be read not as a literature of hope or reform but as a literature of ethical realism. Throughout this study, the collapse of institutions such as law, state authority, family, and economic systems has been examined as a deliberate narrative and political strategy. These institutions do not merely fail in isolated instances; they are shown to be structurally incapable of justice for marginalized women. The persistent absence of redemption across Mahasweta Devi's fiction is therefore not an expression of narrative pessimism but a principled ethical stance that refuses to misrepresent reality for the sake of comfort or closure.

Ethical realism, as articulated in Mahasweta Devi's work, rejects the consolatory function often assigned to literature. Her narratives do not soften suffering through symbolic compensation, nor do they convert trauma into moral instruction. Instead, they insist on exposing injustice in its enduring, unresolved form. Critics have repeatedly emphasized that her writing resists sentimental portrayals of oppression and avoids reformist optimism that would falsely imply institutional accountability (Ahlawat; Shweta and Kumar). By denying readers the reassurance of narrative justice, Mahasweta Devi confronts them with the moral consequences of systemic failure.

The ethics of non-redemption are central to this realism. Across her fiction, moments of resistance do not lead to transformation, rescue, or reconciliation. Acts of defiance expose the violence of power but do not dismantle it. This refusal to exaggerate the efficacy of individual resistance challenges liberal narratives that equate agency with success. Scholars have noted that Mahasweta Devi's women assert dignity in conditions that foreclose change, revealing the limits of empowerment within deeply entrenched systems (Chauhan). Non-redemption thus becomes a feminist critique of narratives that promise progress without structural transformation.

Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of institutional collapse also redefines the political responsibility of literature. Rather than offering solutions, her fiction demands recognition. Law enforcement, family, and

economic institutions are exposed as complicit in violence, not because they malfunction, but because they operate according to logics that privilege power over justice. Critics examining her depiction of bonded labour and sexual exploitation have emphasized that these practices persist precisely because institutions normalize them (Manzar; Zala and Prasad). By refusing to imagine reform from within these structures, Devi denies them retrospective moral legitimacy.

This narrative stance profoundly shapes the reader's ethical position. Without closure or redemption, readers cannot disengage through emotional satisfaction. They are compelled to witness injustice without the comfort of resolution. Scholars have argued that this mode of ethical witnessing transforms reading into an act of moral confrontation rather than passive consumption (Chauhan). The discomfort generated by unresolved endings is intentional, forcing readers to acknowledge their own position within social systems that sustain inequality.

Ethical realism in Mahasweta Devi's fiction also resists the aestheticization of suffering. By denying redemption, she prevents trauma from being absorbed into familiar narrative arcs of sacrifice, endurance, or moral triumph. Feminist critics have observed that such aestheticization risks neutralizing the political force of suffering by turning it into spectacle (Shweta and Kumar). Devi's refusal preserves the urgency of injustice and maintains the ethical integrity of representation.

Ultimately, Mahasweta Devi's literary responsibility lies in her unwavering commitment to truth without consolation. Her fiction insists that literature must bear witness to institutional failure without offering false hope. This stance does not negate the value of resistance or dignity; it situates them within a reality that demands accountability beyond the text. By exposing the persistence of injustice and refusing redemption, Mahasweta Devi redefines the role of literature as an ethical practice. Her work challenges readers not to admire suffering or celebrate resilience, but to confront the structures that make such suffering inevitable.

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