

2021

## Women of the Dalit Unrest: Rewriting Bodies, Reinforcing Resistance

Suddhadeep Mukherjee  
suddhadeepmukherjee.jucl@gmail.com

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### Recommended Citation

Mukherjee, Suddhadeep (2021) "Women of the Dalit Unrest: Rewriting Bodies, Reinforcing Resistance," *Tête-à-Tête*: Vol. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/tete\\_a\\_tete/vol1/iss1/11](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/tete_a_tete/vol1/iss1/11)

## Women of the Dalit Unrest: Rewriting Bodies, Reinforcing Resistance

by *Suddhadeep Mukherjee*

### Towards a Holistic (Re)-cognition of the Dalit Woman's Body: An Introduction

*“Bodies are not inert; they function interactively  
and productively. They act and react. They  
generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable.”<sup>1</sup>*

—Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*

I choose to begin my paper with the mention of two recent changes that have been made in the academic scene, in India. 1. The works of two Dalit writers, Bama and Sukirthani, have been removed from the English syllabus of a core course titled Women's Writings, at Delhi University. The academic committee also, as an afterthought, decided to eliminate Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi". 2. The Madhya Pradesh government has resolved to revise the engineering curriculum of the state by the incorporation of Tulsidas' devotional text *Ramacharitamanas* and the story of the Ramsetu. The state's effort to extend the Hindutva narrative, with an obvious simultaneous

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<sup>1</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2011. p. xi.

erasure of alternative narratives, is clearly inferable from the above. This paper, which attempts to discursively read Dalit women's agency, therefore turns itself into a response in resistance to the proliferating Hindutva strategies of further disempowering the disempowered minority voices. The primary concern of this paper is to critically understand how the resisting female Dalit bodies can lead to certain epistemological performances, in one's knowledge of caste-class-gender oppressions. However, before moving forward with the paper, I would like to clarify how the female gender and the word "body" become relevant in this study, and why this paper should not be read as just another analysis of Dalit resistance.

Bodies are signs, and to understand the "full-scale materialising and dematerialising force"<sup>2</sup> of their significations, one must carefully resort to chronology. The subject of the 'body', in a more corporeal sense of the term, is radically important in the understanding of the Dalit epistemology, given that the identity of the Dalits have always been reduced to their bodies, and dealt with only *in terms* of their bodies. If we return to our ancient literatures—namely the *Manusmriti*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the three most-discussed and practiced texts of the current times, we find ample examples (and proclamations) of mutilation, sexual violation and passionate discrimination vis-à-vis the Brahmanical orthodoxy's attitude towards the Dalit Other. The *Manusmriti* describes in its foremost chapter that the Shudras, or the lower castes, were created out of the feet of Vishnu (Brahmans from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the

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<sup>2</sup> Tharu, Susie. "The Impossible Subject: Caste and the Gendered Body," in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao, Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, India, 2003.

thighs). In doing so, it immediately located the social position of the Dalits<sup>3</sup> at the “below”<sup>4</sup>—the feet of the society.

The *Manu Samhita* also declares that a Shudra’s body should be mutilated and hot wax be poured into his ears, if he is found acquiring knowledge through the perusal of the Vedas. The benevolent king, Ramachandra, cut off the head of Shambuka, a Dalit boy, on finding him reading the Vedas. Incidentally, it was through the killing of Shambuka, that Rama could save the life of a Brahman boy, reinstating that knowledge is only the monopoly of the upper caste male. In the *Mahabharata*, the master Dronacharya, by asking Evalavya’s thumb as *gurudakshina*, not only took away the craft of the *nishada* boy, but also his agency and basic human rights through the negation of a body part. When Surpanakha, a non-Aryan woman, expressed her sexual desires to Lakshmana, the brother of Rama, he mutilated Surpanakha’s nose, ears and breasts, thereby taking away the sexual and bodily agency of the woman. (Several contemporary retellings, like Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s<sup>5</sup>, look at this event in the *Ramayana* as a gang rape on Surpanakha by the two Aryan brothers. Rangakayamma interprets these non-Aryan rakshasis as Dalit political activists, whose lives are in perennial threat under the Hindutva regime, in her Marxist, feminist retelling—*Ramayana Vishavriksham*<sup>6</sup>.) While the abduction of the chaste wife of the Aryan king and the

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<sup>3</sup> The word “Dalit”, being a more political term, that includes several categories of lower castes within it, is being used in the paper to identify the oppressed subject.

<sup>4</sup> “Below” not only indicates a social position in the paper, but also acts as a methodological tool of comparative studies that attempts to rewrite literary history and historiography. Refer to Amiya Dev’s “Literary History from Below,” in *Comparative Literature: Theory & Practice*, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Dev Sen’s short story “Rajkumari Kamballi,” in *Sita Theke Shuru*, Ananda Publishers, looks at the event in the *Ramayana* as a rape of Surpanakha, and ends her retelling with a spirit of sisterhood between Sita and Surpanakha. Volga’s story “Reunion,” in *The Liberation of Sita*, Harper Perennial, is also thematically similar as Dev Sen’s.

<sup>6</sup> See Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s essay, “Flowering of the Poison Tree,” to be published from Zubaan books.

king's unblemished valour to combat the abduction become the central subjects of the *kavya*—embedded in popular imagination and passed on across generations, the violent cases of mutilation of non-‘Aryan’ women continue to remain in the periphery, with the violence unread and ignored. An unchanged, unchangeable consciousness ‘regulate’ the main narrative of the nation, which is quite understandably casteist and patriarchal: while the incident of an upper caste Patankar woman losing her *mangalsutra* receives public attention, the rape of Dalit women happening at the same time and same geographical location, remain in the dark and never gets to become a ‘news’, let alone *the news*<sup>7</sup>. The paper will eventually return to Ann Stoler's idea of the “hierarchies of credibility” and the politics of narrativization towards the end, while discussing the gangrape in Hathras, which shook the nation.

The dominant narrative moulds the historical, social and cultural factors, which in turn, “produce” the body as a body of a determinate type<sup>8</sup>. Although the Bhakti movement and the Veerasaivaite movement tried to liberate the body from the clutches of such determinism, Uma Chakravarti writes that both the movements failed due to their lack of a structure and of a center that could hold it together. She writes that such movements “while critiquing caste in the domain of the religious tradition, did not, or were not able to, mount a serious challenge to the caste system as a ‘structure of social relations.’ The women did not have another ‘order’ to escape into.”<sup>9</sup> She

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<sup>7</sup> This refers to the role of news media during the Sirasgaon incident of 1963. As noted by Anupama Rao in her book *The Caste Question*. Mahasweta Devi's “Choli ke Peeche,” later discussed in the paper, also brings forth the same issue.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler writes in her book “Bodies that Matter”: “Construction is not an activity, but an act, one which happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed. Thus, constructivism is reduced to determinism and implies the evacuation or displacement of human agency.” We have to study the Dalit woman's body from such a standpoint.

<sup>9</sup> Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens*. Sage Publications: Stree, 2018. Pp.95-96

goes on to say that the practice of intra-caste marriage within such traditions resulted in re-instating the idea of ‘caste’ and was therefore antithetical to its own principle, contributing further to the already existing disorderliness. However, it remains unarguable that the Bhakti, by situating itself beyond the normative and with its blatant rejection of structure, was a phenomenal rupture which sought to redefine sexual politics and furthered agency to the gendered body of the disenfranchised woman. Gandhi later used the trope of Bhakti to meet his nationalist demands. By harping on the concept of the unifying Self (atman) and by revitalizing ‘varna’, Gandhi while trying to create a sense of inter-community harmony, widened the separation between the interiority of the Dalit self and the exteriority of the Dalit body. Under this Gandhian rationalization, while the Harijans’ internal selves could have a shared-existence and compatibility with the upper castes’, their ‘bodies’ were to remain in the periphery, cleaning manholes<sup>10</sup>. As the paper progresses, it would try to deconstruct the interiority/exteriority, mind/body binaries by analysing how the effects of interiority can all be explained in terms of the codifications and transformations of the Dalit’s corporeal surface. Far from Gandhi’s patronizing “Harijans”, Anand Teltumbde writes how the word “Dalit” is largely a political term distinct from the demeaning Untouchables. “The term

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<sup>10</sup> Gandhi responds to Ambedkar’s “Annihilation of Caste” in the *Harijan* (18 July 1936) by distinguishing between ‘varna’ and caste: “The law of varna teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling...It also follows that there is no calling too low and none too high. All are good, lawful and absolutely equal in status. The callings of a Brahmin—spiritual leader—and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God.” Please note, that despite alluding to the idea of equality and dignity of labour, Gandhi concretizes the “ancestral calling” of social hierarchy where Brahmins *remain* the ‘spiritual leader’ and the Dalits *remain* ‘scavengers’.

Dalit”, Teltumbde continues, “reflected Ambedkar’s aspiration that all the Untouchable castes would wear this new identity and form a formidable ‘Dalit’ constituency.”<sup>11</sup>

But Teltumbde is aware of the restricted signification of terms and warns that “Dalit women should not be dissolved in the degendered term ‘Dalit’.” It is a known fact that a subaltern woman is doubly subalternized (and therefore doubly silenced) in the subaltern historiography because apart from class-caste oppression, the forces of patriarchy, both from outside communities and from the inside, efface the voices of the women further.<sup>12</sup> Continued suppression and effacement of subjectivities take place in the name of progress. Both feminist movements by middle-class, non-Dalit women, and Dalit movements in general, could not and did not accommodate the issue(s) of the Dalit women, and instead appropriated and homogenized their heterogenous voices and existences. For example, while the Dalit Panthers did make a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970s, Dalit women were kept firmly encapsulated in the roles of the ‘mother’ and the ‘victimized sexual being’, in their writings and programmes. The Dalit women enterprises, like the Dalit Mahila Sanghatana, kept critiquing the persistence of ‘*manuvadi sanskriti*’ in the Dalit male who otherwise traces their lineage to a Phule-Ambedkarite ideology.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Teltumbde, Anand. “Dalits, Dalit women, and the Indian State,” in *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics in India*. Ed. S. Anandhi & Karin Kapadia. Routledge, 2017. Pp. 53-55.

<sup>12</sup> Gayatri Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” writes how the voice of the subaltern woman is doubly effaced in the colonial historiography. I use the similar idiom of double-effacement of the gendered subaltern’s voice within the question of caste.

<sup>13</sup> See Sharmila Rege’s essay “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint,” in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao. Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2003.

To challenge such hypocrisy, Dalit feminists like Sharmila Rege, Anupama Rao, Uma Chakravarti forwarded a call for a revolutionary epistemological shift to a Dalit feminist standpoint, whereby the horizon of Indian feminism could be *re-thought*. In her introduction to the book *Gender and Caste*, Rao states that in order to rethink Indian feminism, one has to “engage meaningfully with Dalit women’s *difference*”<sup>14</sup> and that difference can only be realized through an “authentic” representation of their *presence*. But then, how is this authenticity produced? Gopal Guru’s claim that Dalit women “talk differently”, takes the Dalit women’s subjectivities into cognizance and understands the “talking differently”<sup>15</sup> as genuinely representative, thereby foregrounding an identity of Dalit women through the phenomenon of talking differently. In my reading of certain ‘events’ from texts by women authors, across genres, I would like to pay attention to the ‘difference’ and question if this ‘difference’ processes a *deference* of signification and a deconstruction of concretized structures of caste, class and patriarchy, through ‘authentic representation’ and performances (slash talking) of gendered Dalit bodies.

Here, one may pause and ask a few questions: How do the ideologies of caste purity and accumulation determine the signification of a Dalit woman’s body? How do bodies raise the inevitable questions of caste and of sexual difference? In what ways does the Dalit woman rewrite the inscribed codifications on her corporeal surface and revitalize the meaning of her body? How do the gendered bodies of Dalits baffle the binaries of interiority and exteriority, and remap agency

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<sup>14</sup> Rao, Anupama. “Introduction: Caste, Gender and Indian Feminism,” in *Gender and Caste*. Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2003. p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Guru, Gopal. “Dalit Women Talk Differently,” in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao. Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2003.

and consciousness in terms of primacy of corporeality? How do Dalit women transgress the regulatory norms, and initiate movements of social, cultural, historical boundaries through their bodily resistance?

To answer these questions, and to raise a few more, let us start with Bama.

### **Body as Barricade: Reading Dalit Women's Resistance in Bama's Writings**

Bama, or Bama Faustina Soosairaj was born in a Roman Catholic family in the Paraiyar community of Tamil Nadu, in the year 1958. Bama is therefore an insider to the Dalit community. Although we find a growing sense of detachment of the educated Dalit individuals from their Dalit communities in Bama's literary works, we should not read the detachment as complete isolation, because complete isolation (of the already isolated) is never logically possible within the Dalit predicament. The spatial detachment, or rather the distance, allows the educated Dalit individual to become more intimate with the community and more so with the Dalit cause, either out of a sense of irredeemable belonging to the community or through continuous ostracization while being 'outside' the community. The caste question lingers on in the Dalit's corporeal surface—the Dalit body is a constant reminder of an individual's Dalit identity. This *relentless reminder* makes release impossible. In order to discuss some instances of resistance by Dalit women from Bama's novel, I have to first clarify what I mean by the idea of a 'relentless reminder' with regards to the question of Dalit existence.

While speaking about the “lived” body as the instrument by which knowledge and experience is received and meanings generated, Merleau-Ponty comments that “our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space” and “when we wish to move about, we do not move the body as we move an object. [Rather] We transport it without instruments...since it is ours and because, through it, we have access to space.”<sup>16</sup> In our reading of the Dalit epistemology, we can both agree and disagree to Merleau-Ponty’s remark. Agree because it speaks of an agency (a harmony, a freedom) by establishing that the body is *ours*, and also because it expresses the body as a continuum—a presence that ‘haunts’, and in doing so, transforms spaces. And, disagree because it does not take into its account the presence of sociocultural factors that can regulate the movement/mobility of the body (turning the body into ‘things’), thereby hindering agency. Fanon’s critique of Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the corporeal schema, emerges right at this gap. According to Fanon, Merleau-Ponty failed to consider the black experience. Going against Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the corporeal schema, Fanon, in his book “Black Skin, White Masks”, writes that a black “man” has no corporeal schema, and that he can never forget his blackness—unlike a “normal” person, he can never forget the colour of his limbs or backside, not even in his sleep. The black man’s sense of his own body, says Fanon, is always refracted by a ‘third-person consciousness’<sup>17</sup>. The Dalit body, which is marked by perceptual visual markers (dark-skinned,

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<sup>16</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz’s “Lived Bodies,” in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, 2011. Pp. 90-94. The binaries of interiority and exteriority are being questioned here by considering the body as an active medium of perception, it being fundamentally linked to the representations of spatiality and temporality. “We do not grasp space directly or through our senses but through our bodily *situation*.”

<sup>17</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. Grove Press, 1967, 1952. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty’s essay “The Dalit Body: A Reading for the Anthropocene,” in *The Empire of Disgust: Prejudice, Discrimination and Policy in India and US*. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2019. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780199487837.001.0001

sometimes a spitting pot or broom attached to the body), has an almost similar construction like the black man's body, as Dipesh Chakrabarty so rightly points out. The detachable visual markers eventually turn into a non-detachable "racial theory" of caste.<sup>18</sup> The broom, for example, becomes an extension of the Dalit body, signifying pollution and impurity, and simultaneously an element of 'disgust' in the upper caste social sphere. The "third-person consciousness" interpenetrates both the Dalit and the non-Dalit consciousnesses, ideologically convinces them of the notions of impurity and untouchability, and institutionalizes caste, making even a psychological release (from the socio-historic embeddedness of caste *difference*) impossible for both the Dalits and the upper castes. Both are constantly haunted by this consciousness, which in turn regulate their social behaviour and mutual reception of the respective Others. It is hereby significant to turn to an 'event' in Bama's *Sangati* (also translated as "events") to understand how Dalit bodies haunt spaces and how the necessary rethinking of spaces as Dalit spaces is furthered by resisting Dalit women, through the performance of their raging bodies.

The public well is a recurrent motif in Dalit studies. In this regard, one cannot forget about the Mahad Satyagraha or the Chavdar Tale Satyagraha, led by Ambedkar in 1927. The everyday caste discrimination in the very access to basic life-giving resources such as water, initiated the movement. Incidentally, it was during this very Satyagraha where Ambedkar made the debatable call to the Dalit women to drape saris like upper caste women. Public spaces have for most been barred from use by the Dalits. In June, 2018, three minor Dalit boys were stripped, beaten and

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<sup>18</sup> See Aniket Jaaware's *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*. Fordham University Press, 2019.

paraded naked in a village in Maharashtra's Jalgaon district for allegedly swimming in the village well to beat off summer heat. Even some of the several 'refracted' narratives of the Sirasgaon violence of 1963, say that it originated in a quarrel over access to common water. In the infamous Sirasgaon incident, four Dalit women were pulled out of their home, stripped and paraded naked in the village, while constantly being beaten with a stick by upper caste men. This ritualized performance of sexual humiliation, where Dalit bodies are manifestly material-ized through stripping and naked parading, can be reconstructed as "a form of political violence, as *caste violence*"<sup>19</sup>, writes Anupama Rao. I would like to make a reading of some instances from Bama's text at such a juncture, where resistance through self-disrobing by Dalit women, can be realized as a political act of the Dalit unrest. *Sangati* (1997), which can also be translated in English as "events", narrates events in a Dalit's every day, which can however not be read as isolated events. These events compress upon one another and form a pattern—a pattern which defines Dalit survival. In the novel, a Dalit woman named Sammuga Kizavi, through her bodily performances, attempts to alter the signification of a well, constructed solely for the use of upper caste people. The stubborn old woman spat a mouthful of water in the well of an upper caste man who forbade her from drawing water from it. Later she chose to stand half-naked in the well so that she could not be physically abused. The living microbes of upper caste disgust was thus transferred to the water of the well from the Dalit woman's body and the water was rendered undrinkable, even untouchable, for the upper castes.

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<sup>19</sup> Rao, Anupama. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. University of California Press, 2009. (See Chapter "The Sexual Politics of Caste," p. 221)

Another time, the same Sammuga Kizavi, on seeing a little boy from her community being thrashed for simply touching the water pot of an upper caste man, silently urinated in the same pot, as an act of protest. Her act of urinating in the upper caste's pot can be understood as being revolutionary when read in conjunction to the methodical and persistent infliction of violence on the Dalit woman and her body. Teltumbde accounts how certain kinds of violence are "*customarily reserved* by upper castes solely for Dalit women"<sup>20</sup>. For instance: addressing Dalit women by sexual epithets, the naked parading of Dalit women, the dismemberment of the corpses of murdered Dalit women (the dismembering of the raped and mutilated bodies of the women of the Bhotmange family in the Khairlanji incident, the burning of the nineteen-year-old Dalit woman in Hathras, repeating cases like that of Kakarpura and Palakkad where Dalit women are denied funerals in public crematoriums, are to be remembered here), forcing Dalit women to drink urine and eat faeces, branding Dalit women, pulling out their teeth, the tongues and nails of Dalit women to 'punish' them (the reiteration of the punishment inflicted on the promiscuous non-Aryan Surpanakha), the murdering of defenseless Dalit women after proclaiming them as 'witches', etc. It is to be noticed how the Dalits use the same 'tools' that are meant to systemically oppress them, in resisting the oppression. I look at Sammuga Kizavi's act in terms of Spivak's idea of "affirmative sabotage"<sup>21</sup> whereby the signification of something is turned around from the 'inside' in such a way that the tool of (here) oppression is sabotaged, but affirmatively, that is, for the

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<sup>20</sup> See Teltumbde, Anand. "Dalits, Dalit women, and the Indian State," in *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics in India*. Ed. S. Anandhi & Karin Kapadia. Routledge, 2017. p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> See Gayatri Spivak's *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, 2012. Also see <https://youtu.be/YBzCwzvudv0> , <https://youtu.be/M7GIWRDx94s> .

benefit of the oppressed people. The Dalit identity is always perceived in terms of pollution and defecation. The Dalits, as is evident from *Sangati*, sabotage those very same markers by literally *using* them in/for their everyday survival, and thus rewrite the Dalit historiography from the vantage of resistance.

Meillasoux argued that to keep the Other in a state of subordination, the notion of the ‘impure’ must be maintained.<sup>22</sup> This operates not only within the paradigm of caste, but also in the structuring of gender. A Dalit woman’s body is therefore doubly impure. Impurities inhere in her body and are concentrated mostly around her vagina—the most dangerous site of a Dalit woman’s body, threatening the casteist world with a continued proliferation of Dalit existence. But beyond the question of birth, one should interrogate why the Dalit woman’s vagina can arouse a sense of discomfort in people. Let me digress here a bit and speak about a technique endorsed by some *hijras* in their practice of begging. Some *hijras* lift up their sari and expose their genitalia when people deny to give them money. They keep the sari lifted up until they are given the money. The genitalia of the *hijra*, being a site of people’s curiosity and disgust, forces people to give the money to the *hijra*, so that they are released from the shame associated with the sight of it, at the earliest. The genitalia, which has been the cause of the *hijra* individual’s poverty, also seems to empower the *hijra* economically. Once again, affirmative sabotage. The Dalit woman’s vagina is also an otherized genitalia as it is not comparable to the upper caste woman’s vagina. The former’s vagina

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<sup>22</sup> See Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens*. Sage Publications: Stree, 2018. p. 21.

is polluted (but penetrable), impure (and at times ‘endangered’<sup>23</sup>) and therefore, racialized. The sight of it can cause shame and disgust in people—even in Dalit people.

The Dalits, despite creating the hugely significant Ambedkarite movement against casteism and despite mass conversion to Buddhism, failed to come out of the clutches of the hegemony of the Hindu culture. As a result of which, “the status of their women has remained unchanged within their castes, afflicted by the patriarchal mores of Hindus.”<sup>24</sup> The Dalit man fulfils his desire of climbing up the social ladder by exercising his gender power on the Dalit woman’s body through physical and sexual abuse. In this context, let us look at another ‘event’ from *Sangati*, where a Dalit man while physically abusing his wife, Rakkamma, pulled her by her hair to the public domain, amidst a spectating Dalit crowd. When Rakkamma could neither stop her husband nor could ‘move’ the community people through her physical and verbal defense, she chose to lift up her sari and expose her vagina to the unmoved people. The sight of the vagina shocked the husband as well as the crowd, and they all dispersed.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in the heightened moment of violence and apathy, where the boundaries of public and private were dissolved, Rakkamma’s vagina changed its signification into a ‘barricade’ — a term that we often use in our protest movements. Rakkamma’s action reinstates the supposition of the paper that the sexed body of the Dalit woman is neither inert nor passive. Although one cannot disagree with Foucault’s argument that several systems of power enforce docility on women’s body, Dalit women like Rakkamma

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<sup>23</sup> An idea that will be discussed in the next section, while discussing Mahasweta Devi’s “Choli ke Peeche”.

<sup>24</sup> Teltumbde, Anand. “Dalits, Dalit women, and the Indian State,” in *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics in India*. Ed. S. Anandhi & Karin Kapadia. Routledge, 2017. p. 54.

<sup>25</sup> The body produces ‘affect’, as well as, *effects*.

prove how Dalit survival compels its women to turn its docility upside-down and look into the eyes of power with a required wildness. Dalit women indeed re-write the history of their prison, with all the “political investments of the [viable] body that it gathers together in its closed architecture.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Intersections and Interpenetration: Dalit Corporeal Agency in Mahasweta Devi’s Short Stories**

The “third-person consciousness”, which is born as a result of the perennial surveillance by the upper-caste panopticon and further fortified with the intervention of the gender polemic, transforms the Dalit woman’s body into a prison having a “closed architecture”. The rigidity of the structure, however, does not make her body inaccessible to the heterosexual desires of upper caste men. It is a “public secret”<sup>27</sup> that the latter have the right to ‘enjoy’ the Dalit woman’s body sexually, if (and) not romantically. Under such a secret, it is a given that the lower caste women can never become partners to the upper caste men, because of the existing caste difference. Within the paradigm of the “public secret”, I would like to make a reading of Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Dhouli” whereby I will discuss how the “problematic permeability of violence and desire, of rape and marriage, intimates sexual violence [on Dalit women] as caste violence because it

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<sup>26</sup> Foucault, Michel. “The Body of the Condemned,” in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Pantheon Books, 1977. Also see Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* in this context. Butler shows how the materializing effects of the ‘regulatory power’ (in the Foucauldian sense), materializes the body as a prison.

<sup>27</sup> Public Secret: “normalized as a privilege by the upper castes and experienced as a shameful secret by its victims.” See Anupama Rao’s chapter on “The Sexual Politics of Caste”, in *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. University of California Press, 2009.

operates as the prerogative of upper caste men.”<sup>28</sup> I would also raise the issue of sexual labour, in terms of both exploitation and emancipation, through my reading of Dhoulī’s character vis-à-vis her Dalit identity.

Dhoulī, a Dusadh girl, impregnated and later discarded by an upper caste ‘deota’ (or devta/god), chose to be a “beyosa randi” over a “byekti randi”<sup>29</sup>. By being a “beyosa randi”, Dhoulī’s body could break open the signification of docility and accomplish an agency (sexual and economic) through an institutionalization of her body, beyond the limit of her village. Dhoulī’s knowledge of the “limit”<sup>30</sup> enables her transgression. Dhoulī understood the power of a community and the powerlessness of a disenfranchised gendered individual. Sexual labour seemed to be the only way through which Dhoulī could feed her son—the carrier of the *deota*’s blood. Instead of being sexually exploited by the upper caste *deotas* on an everyday basis, Dhoulī found prostitution to be a better alternative. The radical nature of Dhoulī’s choice of being a “beyosa randi” can only be realized once we peruse the intricacies of the eye-opening narrative of Mahasweta.

The upper caste woman—a generic identity—says without any conflict, let alone remorse, that Dhoulī was not to be sympathized as she was not the first woman in the village to be “wasted” by a Brahman man, and in the eyes of the village it was Dhoulī who was always to remain the

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<sup>28</sup> Rao, Anupama. “The Sexual Politics of Caste,” in *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. University of California Press, 2009. p. 235.

<sup>29</sup> Randi is a term that is derogatorily used to refer to a woman of promiscuous sexual behaviour—more specifically, a prostitute. ‘Beyosa’ means *byabsha* or business. ‘Byekti’ means self, or personal.

<sup>30</sup> Foucault while stating that the limit and transgression are interdependent, writes that “transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows.” p. 34, in “A Preface to Transgression,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Cornell University Press, 1977. In our study of caste and gender, the transgression is prominent because the limits are composed of anything but “illusion and shadows.”

sinner—it was Dhouli who was to die of hunger for seducing a man from the Brahman household.<sup>31</sup> The upper caste man, however, keeping aside his promises of love (and later of food grains) to Dhouli, had the grandest wedding with an upper caste girl, that the village had ever witnessed. (It is to be noted here that the residents of the village were not only aware but were also convinced of the upper caste man’s commitment to and oppression over Dhouli. It is also to be noted that my repetitive use of the epithet “upper caste man” instead of their individualized names, is a conscious attempt of identifying the oppressor, whereas the use of Dhouli’s name attempts to establish my political awareness of the heterogenous identity of the category of “Dalit women” as well as to recognize Dhouli’s idiosyncratic method of resistance.) This is how the “public secret” operates. A Satnami (Chamar), for instance says that “the upper castes would not touch us. They would never eat with us. But they were always ready to fornicate. For ‘doing it’ our women were not untouchable...Even after licking the private parts of Satnami women, they would not lose their purity.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, to the upper caste ideology, the Dalit woman’s body is socially untouchable, but is sexually penetrable.

Rao writes in this context that “the specific relationship of stigmatized existence with sexed subjectivity accentuates the consistent illegibility of sexual violence as caste violence, even as it

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<sup>31</sup> The Bhojpur Rebellion of 1960s is very significant in this context. It was a peasant revolt on the upper caste landlords who exploited the landless Dalits and had unrestricted access to the Dalit women. Kalyan Mukherjee writes in “Peasant Revolt in Bhojpur”: “It is at the level of sexual tyranny that the theme of upper caste dominance becomes most pronounced. At the other end, the submission to an order of sexual devaluation is canonised.” <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4367921>

<sup>32</sup> Rao, Anupama. “The Sexual Politics of Caste,” in *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. University of California Press, 2009. p. 234.

renders sexual violation a definitive aspect of gendered Dalit personhood.”<sup>33</sup> Devi’s “Dhouli” portrays that in spite of the intimacy between the upper caste man and the lower caste woman being consensual, the intimacy gets signified as sexual violence, in other words, as caste violence, as it is always followed by an upper caste *indifference*. The caste consciousness of the upper caste man allows him to be indifferent of the Dalit body that he had once been intimate with. With this *indifference*, the upper caste man effaces the Dalit woman’s corporeal presence and simultaneously restores his own caste identity.

*The next day Misrilal left for Dhanbad with his newly married wife. While boarding the bus, his brother-in-law asked, Who’s that girl?*

—*Where?*

—*There, standing with a child. Staring at you.*

—*Some Dusadhin.*

—*So attractive?*

—*Perhaps. I’ve never cared to look.*

*The bus left.*<sup>34</sup>

The “untouchable” Dusadh girl, was forced to sell her “attractive” body due to the upper caste’s indifference; and on being contaminated through sex work, she was forbidden a place in the village where Brahman gods were still worshipped. When Dhouli’s mother asked why she did not just live with her *bhasur* (brother-in-law), as *his* mistress, Dhouli replied that that would have

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid 30.

<sup>34</sup> Personal translation, from Mahasweta Devi’ “Dhouli”.

turned her into a whore lacking in agency; instead, she chose to be a professional whore, which would make her a part of the society (*samajer sadashya*). By establishing her rights on her body and through sexual agency, Dhoulī transformed her female labouring body into a source of production and affirmed her Dalit identity within the idea of “*samaj*.” Dhoulī’s transgression liberated her body as well as her Dalit personhood from the regulatory power of the upper castes of her village. Gail Omvedt, in her understanding of the relationship between class and caste in the Indian society, writes that “Caste is a ‘material reality’ with a ‘material base’; it is not only a form but a concrete material content, and it has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications even today.”<sup>35</sup> Following Butler, I would like to study the ‘material reality’ of caste by returning to the notion of ‘matter’ that is always materialized over time to ‘produce’ the effect of boundary and fixity, through the operation of certain regulatory norms. Although Dhoulī succeeds in inaugurating an autonomy over her body through sexual labour (and through it, initiates a movement of boundaries)<sup>36</sup>, it is impossible for her to subvert her class position because of the intersectional intimacy of the question of class with the caste criterion. The inability to comprehend the intersectionality of caste, class, gender and sexuality vis-à-vis sexual labour, motivates the ignorant upper class, urban man of “Choli ke Peeche”—another of Devi’s stories, to ask the migrant proletarian Gangor, with an element of surprise: “You

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<sup>35</sup> Omvedt, Gail. “Class, Caste and Land in India: An Introductory Essay,” in *Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States*, ed. Gail Omvedt, Author’s Guild Publications, Delhi, 1982. Also quoted in Uma Chakravarti’s *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens*, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Please note that sexual labour for a Dalit woman is not necessarily sex-‘work’. It is mostly a part and parcel of her daily existence—be it unpaid sexual labour at workplace, violence on the Dalit woman’s body, sexual labour within the domestic sphere, etc.

are doing whore work, Gangor?” Gangor’s retort, which is born straight out of her subjective gendered Dalit experience and out of a repugnance towards the exploitative urban man, is also a classic one— “What’s it to you, son of a whore?”<sup>37</sup>

The urban archivist’s orientalist gaze transforms the Dalit woman’s breasts into an “artefact” and a site of male violence. The male archivist, through his desire of preservation<sup>38</sup>, exoticizes the Dalit woman’s body to an extent that the body gets converted into a thingness. Note the comparisons that Upin, the male archivist in the story, makes with Gangor’s breasts: “God, those breasts are *statuesque!*”, “Konarak chest, resplendent”, “cave paintings of Ajanta”—and that the breasts of Gangor were therefore “endangered”. To save the *endangered mammal projections*, Upin photographs and publishes them, as an after-effect of which the breasts get destroyed. It is the upper-class man’s ignorance of the Dalit circumstance that transforms the Dalit woman’s breasts into straw—chaff, rags. Mahasweta posits the “normality of ‘sexuality’ as male violence”, in her story “Choli ke Peeche”, and portrays how the embedded presence of power and control, in the idea of ‘preservation’ in the upper-class male *benefactor*’s intellectual consciousness, ultimately damages the subaltern woman’s body (and through the body, also the ‘personhood’—the exteriority/interiority debate once again), to the point of absolute obliteration. But the writer

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<sup>37</sup> In quoted extracts, I shall be using Gayatri Spivak’s translation of Devi’s “Choli ke Peeche,” henceforth. See Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast Stories*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Seagull Calcutta, 1997.

<sup>38</sup> One must be aware of the politics of preservation here. Spivak, in her introduction to the *Breast Stories*, writes: “To preserve the breast as aesthetic *object* by photography or implant is to overlook its value-coding within patriarchal social relationship: it is ‘natural’ that men should be men. It is therefore ‘natural’ that women should be modest, and not provoke, by making the living breast dance.”

ensures that Gangor's breasts, and by her breasts, her body and gendered Dalit identity, are not obliterated—the breast in Mahasweta's story is not a symbol, as Gayatri Spivak reminds us. Treating it as a symbol in our reading may further objectify it and threaten the very purpose of the study. Gangor opens her blouse and asks Upin to “look, look, look”—and therefore asks the reader to look at a ‘non-issue’—violence on the subaltern woman's body—that never finds a space in newspapers, or other public platforms. There it is only represented as an ‘artefact’—a ‘thing’ of archival interest. The body of Gangor becomes a social discursive ‘object’, bound up in the order of desire, signification, and power—exposing caste violence and a rape of the people that occurs perpetually behind the bodice. The bodice, or the choli, is basically a construction, that is concretized over time to maintain class-caste-gender division and operate class-caste and gender violence.

*“Gangor takes off her choli and throws it at Upin. Look, look, look, straw—chaff, rags—look what's there.*

*No breasts. Two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava at Upin—'gang rape'...biting and tearing 'gang rape'...police...a court 'case'...again a 'gang rape' in the lockup...now from Jharoa to Seopura...Seopura to Jharoa...the Contractor catches clients...terrorizes a 'public'...plays the song, the song...*

*Upin stands up weaving unsteady.”<sup>39</sup>*

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<sup>39</sup> Devi, Mahasweta. *Breast Stories*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Seagull Kolkata, 1997. p. 157.

The disfiguration of the Dalit woman's body reflects a disfiguration in the sociological anatomy as well. Gangor's transformed breasts assume a form—a form which engenders an identity. Gangor's mutilated breasts—a *body without organs*—produces 'affect' in the upper-class 'subject', by means of which he loses his present postural position— "Upin stands up weaving *unsteady*", and finds his destiny on the rail tracks. The violent 'sight' of the non-breast, not a *non-issue*, by exposing the violence perpetrated on the Dalit woman by the ignorant 'preserver', leads to the formation of rhizomes<sup>40</sup>—a new epistemological construct which confuses organization and arrangement, and creates a rupture in all existing hierarchies. It is in the consequent distorted presence of caste arrangement, class structures, corporeal organizations, that the affect is reinvigorated (the upper-class man, the non-subaltern, is rendered speechless) with a simultaneous loss of subject-object configurations, as the rhizome (which has been produced by Gangor's body) disrupts the potency of such hierarchized (id)entities.

"In the current global conjuncture, then," Spivak writes, "behind the bodice is the rape of the people: choli ke peeche *ganadharshan*."<sup>41</sup> Not only Mahasweta's story, but in every story concerning a Dalit woman, the state and its police is an important participant in the functioning of the rape of democracy, or *ganatantrer ganadharshan*. Along with the penetrative

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<sup>40</sup> It is my personal interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizomes w.r.t. Body without Organs, from a feminist lens.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid 37. Introduction p. xv.

drive of the upper caste, upper class man, it is the state violence that penetrates<sup>42</sup> the subaltern woman's body. But the intent of this paper is to put forth the idea of 'interpenetration', to show that the body of the lower caste woman is effective, as well as affective. In the presence of the rhizome, when the constructs of 'subject' and 'object' get subverted and reversed, the Dalit woman by exposing the state's violence on her body, in turn penetrates the conscience of the upper-class man, and through him perhaps also the conscience of the hypnotized and de-humanized<sup>43</sup> nation.<sup>44</sup>

### **Hathras, and the Absent-Presence of Dalit Women's Bodies: A Conclusion**

On September 14, 2020, a mother heard the screams of her nineteen-year-old daughter while they were working in the fields of the Thakurs at Boolgarhi village in Hathras district. On rushing towards the sound of the screaming, she found her daughter lying on the ground, covered in blood, with her spine broken, and her tongue cut off. She immediately covered

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<sup>42</sup> Please note the weight of the word 'penetration' here. It refers to the composite drive of oppression, perpetuated by the state on the Dalit woman's body, most of which is inflicted sexually.

<sup>43</sup> Paulo Freire's idea of how the oppressor gets further dehumanized while trying to dehumanize the oppressed through his oppression, is important here. I look at the Hindutva state as the oppressor in my paper, which gets dehumanized through its oppression on the marginalized people.

<sup>44</sup> One may look at Italo Spinelli's film adaptation of "Choli ke Peeche," titled *Gangor*. Spinelli ends his film with raging Dalit women exposing their breasts, in protest of rape, in front of the judiciary. Perhaps this is what I mean by interpenetration. Such acts of resistance promise to penetrate the conscience of the nation. Interestingly, protests like the above, changes the signification of the breasts, and is indeed affirmative sabotage, once again.

her daughter's body, called her son, and carried her to the local police station. The police delayed in registering the FIR and asked the complainants to take the victim away. Some reports say that the police did not even assist in arranging an ambulance. The doctor at the district hospital referred her to the Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College (JNMC) at Aligarh, stating that the local clinic did not have the facilities to treat her. In the next fourteen days, the victim's condition worsened during her stay at JNMC, Aligarh. Her statement was recorded in which she mentioned molestation and named the two attackers, including the main accused Sandeep. In her "dying declaration", she named the other three accused—Luvkush, Ravi and Ramu—accusing them of sexual assault. The medico-legal examination done on the same day of September 22, at JNMC mentions "use of force" and any opinion regarding penetrative intercourse was reserved pending the availability of the Forensic Science Laboratory report. The victim's condition got critical and she was referred to AIIMS. However, she was taken instead to Safdargunj Hospital in Delhi, where she succumbed to her injuries the very next morning. After a day-long protest outside the hospital, by activists, and by the members of Congress Party and the Bhim Army headed by Chandrashekhar Azad, the victim's body was taken back to the Boolgarhi village, along with the victim's brother and father in a separate black SUV. The victim's brother reports that their car was stopped on its way and they were told by senior police and administrative officials that they were directly being taken to the cremation ground. The family's refusal to the nightly cremation went unheard. Some of our walls on Facebook were flooded with the video of the victim's mother, with other women, weeping and beating the bonnet of the approaching white ambulance which carried the body of their daughter, demanding to see their daughter for one last time, to take her back home and perform

some final rituals. At around 2:30 AM, the victim's body was burned by the state police in one of the village grounds, while the family was locked up in their house. All this time, the police formed a human chain to keep the media and the villagers from getting close.

The above has been summarized from the reports by *The Wire* and *BBC News*, in their articles “Hathras Gang-Rape and Murder Case: A Timeline”<sup>45</sup> and “Hathras Case: A fatal assault, a cremation and no goodbye”<sup>46</sup>, respectively. When a part of the nation was in shock of the Hathras incident, the Prime Minister of the country, in his “Mann ki Baat”<sup>47</sup>, lectured about the importance of passing on “sanskar” to the younger generations through the dissemination of stories about the freedom movement and of our travails under colonialism. The problematic question of “sanskar” encourages one to interrogate the notion of the very ‘story’ itself. In a country where casteist policies are fuelled by dominant Hindutva politics, which ‘story’ is after all actually passed on? This takes us back to the beginning of the paper and to the recent modifications in the University syllabi in Delhi and Madhya Pradesh, and to Becker’s concept of the “hierarchy of credibility”, later reworked by Ann L. Stoler as “hierarchies of credibility”<sup>48</sup> with the question of the subaltern in mind. Stoler points out that the ‘story’ is constructed on the basis of the competing “hierarchies of credibility” *through* which the violence is *read*. For example, although the death of the girl in Hathras itself indicates the veracity of the violence, the upper caste family

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<sup>45</sup> [thewire.in/women/hathras-gang-rape-and-murder-case-a-timeline](https://www.thewire.in/women/hathras-gang-rape-and-murder-case-a-timeline)

<sup>46</sup> [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54444933](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54444933)

<sup>47</sup> Broadcasted Live on 27 September, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Stoler, Ann Laura. “In Cold Blood: Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narrative”, in *Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories*, Winter 1992.

of the accused along with the right wing, continue to justify (and nullify) the ‘violence’ of the rape and murder with a ‘story’ of a possible consensual relationship between the lower caste victim and the upper caste accused. Anupama Rao teaches us to read such sexual violence “as political violence, as *caste violence*”: “When a political context enables a violence to become a site for staging and challenging identities, such political violence can also transform context, creating and destroying frames of intelligibility. The semantic excess of political violence reveals and transforms symbolic formation of body, community, and history.”<sup>49</sup>

What I have tried to accomplish through this paper is to *read* the ‘stories’ of violence and of resistance, that are in all possibility beyond the hegemonic idea of the Brahmanical ‘sanskar’<sup>50</sup> but are always an inevitable part of it—stories about ‘bodies’—stories *that are in themselves* ‘bodies’— ‘bodies’ that interpenetrate, and in doing so reclaim the “symbolic formation of body, community, and history”. So, while the state keeps penetrating the conscience of the nation with a Brahmanical *manuvadi* narrative, Dalit women like Kantabai Ahire and Sheela Pawar climb up the statue of Manu outside the Jaipur judiciary and blacken it.<sup>51</sup> Such actions by marginalized women prevent the further growth and ossification of the authoritative Brahmanical ‘body’. It is hereby inferable that the purpose of this paper in essence has been to critique the more

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<sup>49</sup> Rao, Anupama. “The Sexual Politics of Caste,” in *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. University of California Press, 2009. p. 230.

<sup>50</sup> Put simply, ‘sanskar’ may be translated as the hegemonic practice of tradition.

<sup>51</sup> See the article by Wire written during #BlackLivesMatter: As Symbols of Discrimination Fall Worldwide, Meet the Women who Blackened Manu’s Statue. <https://thewire.in/rights/kantabai-ahire-sheela-pawar-manu-statue-blackened-protest>

calcified, institutionalized, non-intelligible bodies of oppression through a reading of the intelligible, sexed bodies of the resisting Dalit women.

To conclude, I concentrate on the insistent effort of the state and its apparatus in invisibilizing the Dalit women's bodies, and the (un)expected returns of those bodies to challenge the Hindutva narrative. The hasty funeral of the raped and murdered teenage girl at Hathras provides evidence of the state's conspiratorial mechanism of wiping out the Dalit bodies along with the history of upper caste violence on such bodies. But the 'caste body' being deathless, promises to rewrite Dalit historiography even through its absence. What I mean here is basically a perpetual state of absent-presence of the gendered Dalit bodies, in death and otherwise. The disenfranchised living bodies of the Dalit women are in constant threat of social exclusions and of state violence, and the raped and murdered bodies of Dalit women are 'present' in the silenced histories of indelible trauma and resistance within the Dalit community and beyond. One may still question my allegiance to the word "body" over words like identity or self towards the end of the paper. I would answer again that I do not look at the Dalit body as a reducible exterior surface, but read gendered subjectivities in terms of the body by treating it as a signifying medium where the binaries of interiority and exteriority amalgamate. The Dalit experience proves how "all the effects of depth and interiority can be explained in terms of the inscriptions and transformations of the subject's corporeal surface."<sup>52</sup> The narratives of Bama and Mahasweta Devi indicate how the very

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<sup>52</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2011. p. vii.

rudimentary question of *survival* itself transforms Dalit female bodies into feminist bodies, and how an incessant act of rewriting the bodies (while emptying them of Brahmanical codifications) by Dalit women themselves, consciously and otherwise, reinforces resistance that threatens and redefines existing boundaries. At such a juncture, reading itself becomes transgressive and political, as I believe the paper could suggest.

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