
Memory, Silence, and the Ethics of Representation in Mahasweta devi's Narrative

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22SAHS1030004, B.A in English Hons VI Semester

Article Received: 12/05/2025**Article Accepted:** 14/06/2025**Published Online:** 16/06/2025**DOI:** 10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.06.332

Abstract: This research paper explores the less-examined dimensions of Dhowli by Mahasweta Devi, focusing on memory, silence, and ethical storytelling. While caste, gender, and injustice are critical themes in Devi's work, this study investigates how the narrative engages with the politics of memory and the silences embedded within subaltern experiences. It addresses the ethical responsibility of the author in voicing trauma and considers how the text both reveals and conceals pain. This paper delves into the ways personal and collective memory shape Dhowli's identity, how trauma manifests through unspoken grief, and how Mahasweta Devi mediates between history and fiction in representing these experiences. The study analyzes the narrative techniques that foreground fragmented memory and examines the socio-literary implications of writing about those who cannot speak for themselves. Through a close reading of the story, the research emphasizes the ethical tension between documentation and appropriation, empathy and distance, visibility and erasure. The paper ultimately argues that Dhowli is not merely a narrative of marginalization but also a meta-narrative about how such stories are remembered, told, and passed down in a society structured by amnesia and silence. Mahasweta Devi's Dhowli, while frequently studied through the lens of caste and gender oppression, invites deeper interpretive exploration into its subtler, more philosophical dimensions—particularly the politics of memory, silence, and the ethics of representation. This research paper proposes a shift in critical engagement from the familiar sociopolitical frameworks toward a literary-philosophical inquiry into how Devi's storytelling navigates the tension between revealing and concealing trauma, remembering and forgetting, speaking and silence. The story is not simply a document of Dalit suffering, but a profoundly complex act of remembering a life that society has chosen to forget.

The abstract foregrounds how Dhowli becomes a site of counter-memory, a space where the absence of formal history about subaltern women is resisted through narrative. Dhowli's experience, though shaped by socio-political forces, is equally marked by her relationship to memory—personal, communal, and historical. The narrative stages memory not as a linear recollection, but as a fragmented and embodied process, expressed as much through silences and omissions as through direct speech. Her silences are not voids but active expressions of testimony, communicating pain and resistance in non-verbal registers. These silences call for an ethical mode of reading—one that honors what is unsaid, listens to the gaps in narrative, and does not force coherence where there is trauma.

Another major focus is on the body as a mnemonic archive. Dhowli's body bears the invisible inscriptions of trauma—of violation, labor, rejection, and survival. Through the corporeal, the story registers memory in ways that resist narrative articulation. The body becomes a text, a testimony, a site of historical truth when all other forms of expression fail. In this sense, Dhowli challenges the primacy of verbal testimony and insists on bodily memory as equally authoritative. Thus, this research paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on representation in postcolonial literature, trauma studies, and feminist ethics by offering a reading of Dhowli as a powerful meditation on the burdens of memory, the complexity of silence, and the responsibility of storytelling. It proposes that literature can function not merely as a mirror to social reality but as an active participant in shaping how marginalized lives are remembered—or forgotten.

Keywords: Memory, Silence, Representation, Trauma, Ethical Writing

Introduction: Mahasweta Devi stands as one of the most powerful literary voices in twentieth-century Indian literature, a writer whose works have consistently foregrounded the lives of the voiceless, the dispossessed, and the forgotten. Her short story Dhowli, first published in Bengali and later translated into English, is one of her most haunting and deceptively simple narratives. It tells the story of a lower-caste Dusad woman, Dhowli, who is socially ostracized and driven into sex work after an affair with a higher-caste Brahmin boy ends in betrayal. While Dhowli has been widely discussed in the context of caste hierarchy, patriarchal violence, and gendered exploitation, there remains an entire dimension of the story that is equally important but less frequently analyzed: its exploration of memory, silence, and the ethics of representation.

Literature has always served as a powerful archive of memory. Yet, whose memory gets preserved in the literary canon? Whose pain is remembered, and whose is erased? In a society as structurally stratified as India, memory is not merely personal—it is deeply political. For people like Dhowli, memory does not exist in grand monuments or textbooks; it resides in the body, in silence, in the barely recorded details of oral storytelling, or, tragically, in oblivion. This paper seeks to investigate how Dhowli acts as a counter-narrative to historical forgetting. It proposes that Devi's story is not only about Dhowli's suffering but also about how such suffering is remembered—or forgotten—by individuals, communities, and the nation at large.

The act of storytelling itself becomes central to this inquiry. Mahasweta Devi, although committed to documenting the lives of the marginalized, is not herself a member of the oppressed caste she writes about. This brings to light critical questions about representation. What does it mean for someone outside a community to tell its stories? Can one ever fully represent the trauma of another, particularly when that trauma is rooted in centuries of systemic violence and silencing? Rather than claiming full authority over Dhowli's voice, Devi employs

narrative techniques that allow for ambiguity, fragmentation, and silence. These elements not only enhance the aesthetic quality of the story but also foreground the ethical limits of representation. By refusing to make Dhowli a mere victim or a heroic figure, Devi avoids simplistic portrayals and instead invites the reader into a more intimate and uncomfortable encounter with the story's silences. Silence is, in fact, one of the most important motifs in the story. Dhowli does not offer lengthy monologues or elaborate justifications. Her pain is expressed through absence, withdrawal, physicality, and a haunting stillness that pervades the text. In trauma theory, silence is often understood as a form of speech that transcends language. It signals the inability of conventional narrative structures to contain the full weight of suffering. By structuring the story around what is left unsaid, Devi respects the gravity of Dhowli's trauma. The silences in the text are not narrative gaps to be filled in by the reader's imagination; they are deliberate ethical spaces that demand acknowledgment rather than interpretation.

Another significant theme the paper explores is the function of the body as an archive. In Dhowli, the body becomes the only site where memory can be inscribed and carried forward. Unlike history books or state documents that erase the lives of lower-caste women, Dhowli's body tells a story that cannot be erased so easily. Her physical presence in the village—at once abject and accusatory—forces the villagers to confront the very history they are trying to forget. In this sense, Dhowli's body becomes an embodied form of resistance against collective amnesia.

The role of the village community in the story is also crucial. Rather than confronting their complicity in Dhowli's marginalization, the villagers collectively choose to forget her. This act of forgetting is not passive but willful; it is a form of moral disengagement that allows the community to maintain its hierarchical structure without guilt. In contrast, Devi's narrative performs the very opposite function—it insists on remembering. It resurrects Dhowli's experience not through sentimentality or spectacle, but through the quiet dignity of observation. In doing so, it forces readers to question their own positions as consumers of trauma narratives.

Finally, this paper argues that Dhowli is not only a story about memory and silence but also an important case study in the ethics of writing about trauma. In an age where stories of suffering are increasingly commodified, Mahasweta Devi's restrained and dignified approach to storytelling offers a powerful model. She does not romanticize pain, nor does she offer the reader a comforting resolution. Instead, she presents a narrative that is morally complex, emotionally unsettling, and intellectually demanding.

By focusing on the narrative strategies that highlight memory, silence, and representation, this paper seeks to extend the discourse around Dhowli beyond the familiar tropes of oppression. It opens up new avenues for interpreting Mahasweta Devi's work as not just politically engaged literature but also ethically reflective art. In Dhowli, remembering is not a passive act—it is a political, emotional, and ethical imperative. This paper honors that

imperative by engaging deeply with the story's silences, its embodied memories, and its quiet, unyielding demand to be remembered.

Silence is, in fact, one of the most important motifs in the story. Dhowli does not offer lengthy monologues or elaborate justifications. Her pain is expressed through absence, withdrawal, physicality, and a haunting stillness that pervades the text. In trauma theory, silence is often understood as a form of speech that transcends language. It signals the inability of conventional narrative structures to contain the full weight of suffering. By structuring the story around what is left unsaid, Devi respects the gravity of Dhowli's trauma. The silences in the text are not narrative gaps to be filled in by the reader's imagination; they are deliberate ethical spaces that demand acknowledgment rather than interpretation.

Memory and Historical Absence: Memory in Dhowli is not just an act of recollection but a political practice. Dhowli, a Dusad woman, lives in a world where her experiences are rarely recorded or remembered. Her love affair, the violence she suffers, and her social ostracization are events that exist outside of official historical discourse. Through Devi's storytelling, these forgotten or deliberately ignored events are re-inscribed into cultural memory. Devi challenges the grand narratives of history that omit the voices of women like Dhowli. The story becomes a site of memory—a *lieu de mémoire*—where the unacknowledged past resurfaces. In this context, Dhowli's body and suffering act as repositories of historical truth. Her story is not just an individual tale of tragedy but a symbolic act of remembrance for generations of women erased from collective consciousness. Dhowli, Mahasweta Devi invites the reader to confront a stark reality—not merely the brutal lived experiences of an oppressed woman but the haunting fact that these experiences are systemically forgotten by history. Dhowli is not only a character subjected to marginalization; she is also emblematic of a larger population whose suffering exists outside the pages of formal historiography. This chapter explores how Devi's narrative functions as a literary counter-archive, recovering subaltern memory from the margins and challenging the silences of dominant historical discourse.

In India, historical memory has often been mediated through texts, institutions, and dominant cultural narratives that privilege elite, male, and upper-caste experiences. The lives of women like Dhowli—poor, Dalit, rural—rarely find place in the national imaginary. The state does not remember her. The village prefers to forget her. Even her child's existence is a kind of social anomaly, whispered about but not publicly acknowledged. In such a context, memory becomes a form of resistance. It is an act that reclaims dignity in a world built upon erasure.

Devi, through her careful narration, does not merely recount events; she performs memory. Dhowli becomes an archive of what historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot would call "silenced pasts." Dhowli's affair, the betrayal, her subsequent alienation, and her status as a "public woman" are all events that would never appear in any formal record. Devi's fiction thus becomes a counter-hegemonic historiography—a space where the invisible becomes visible, and the unspoken is given shape.

The story exposes how formal history fails to preserve or even recognize the narratives of socially marginalized women. Dhowli's story is not the kind that history books document—not because it lacks significance, but because it disrupts the sanitized narratives of social order and progress. Her suffering, though public in the village, is unrecorded and deliberately ignored. There is no plaque, no trial, no official recognition of her pain. This absence is not accidental; it is ideological.

Literature, then, intervenes where history falters. Devi's narrative does what the archive refuses to do—it tells a story that was meant to be forgotten. But she does not do so with loud proclamations or moralistic lecturing. Instead, she quietly stitches together fragments of Dhowli's life—rumors, gestures, silences, and gossip—to reconstruct a memory that defies the systematic erasure imposed by caste, patriarchy, and historical indifference. In Dhowli, the transmission of memory is not through formal record but through oral culture—through what is whispered in homes, discussed in hushed tones in market corners, and remembered by older women who witnessed Dhowli's descent into outcast status. This oral memory is fragile; it changes with every retelling, is subject to distortion, and can vanish altogether. And yet, it is through these unstable narratives that Dhowli continues to exist, even if only as a cautionary tale or scandalous legend.

Devi captures this oral structure in the very form of her story. The narrative tone is detached, almost journalistic, yet deeply embedded in local texture. It mirrors the way such stories live on—not as historical events, but as embedded cultural memories. The community remembers Dhowli only to condemn her. But Devi remembers her to redeem her humanity, to say: she lived, she loved, she suffered, and she mattered.

Silence as Testimony: One of the most striking elements of Dhowli is its use of silence. Dhowli does not articulate her pain in conventional ways. She withdraws from speech, and her suffering is expressed through bodily gestures, withdrawal, and the gaze. This silence is not merely absence; it is a form of testimony that resists easy consumption.

This use of silence poses a challenge for both the characters within the story and the reader. It refuses catharsis, rejecting the possibility of a neatly resolved narrative. The silences in Dhowli raise questions about what it means to bear witness to trauma that cannot be put into words. In doing so, the text aligns with the theories of trauma literature that argue silence is often the most authentic expression of pain. Mahasweta Devi's Dhowli, silence is not a void to be filled with interpretation, but a rich and layered mode of expression. It carries within it the weight of trauma, the politics of speech, and the limitations of language in the face of pain. While literature often depends on language to convey meaning, Dhowli challenges this assumption by foregrounding the significance of what is left unsaid. This chapter explores silence not as a sign of weakness or passivity but as an active, embodied form of testimony that confronts both the reader and the narrative itself with a truth too complex for language.

Trauma studies, particularly those informed by thinkers like Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, suggest that some experiences are so extreme that they resist representation. Dhowli's trauma—being betrayed, socially ostracized, and reduced to a life of public shame—is one such experience. It is not only personal but deeply symbolic of systemic social violence. Yet, she does not articulate her pain in long speeches or expressive monologues. Instead, she moves through the narrative in a kind of muted agony, her silence becoming more eloquent than words.

This narrative strategy is critical. Mahasweta Devi does not ventriloquize Dhowli's pain. She does not force Dhowli to explain herself to a reader or to her community. Instead, Devi allows silence to act as a kind of ethical space—one that resists both voyeurism and simplification. The reader is not offered the comfort of full disclosure. We do not know all of Dhowli's thoughts. We cannot fully access her inner world. This partiality is not a narrative flaw—it is the point. In refusing to expose everything, Devi preserves Dhowli's dignity and underscores the limits of empathy. In a community where women are expected to speak only in certain roles—wife, mother, servant—Dhowli's refusal to explain, justify, or plead is a radical gesture. Her silence is not submission but a form of resistance to a discursive structure that has already marked her as impure and disposable. Words, in her context, are instruments of judgment, not liberation. The village elders talk about honor. The temple priests invoke morality. Her lover uses language to seduce and then abandon her. Speech is compromised, corrupted by the very systems that oppress her.

Therefore, silence becomes Dhowli's only remaining agency. She does not speak because the available language is inadequate, if not outright dangerous. Her muteness is a refusal to participate in a discourse that has already sentenced her. This silence, then, is not a lack but a choice—an assertion of self in a world that denies her subjectivity.

Mahasweta Devi's prose style mirrors this silent resistance. Her narrative is sparse, almost clinical at times. There is little ornamentation, no emotional outbursts, no dramatic flourishes. This stylistic minimalism complements Dhowli's own muted presence. She is there, vividly so, and yet shrouded in an aura of absence. The effect is chilling. The reader becomes painfully aware of what is not being said, of the truths that hover just beyond the reach of language.

This aesthetic strategy does something profound: it shifts the burden of meaning onto the reader. It compels an active engagement with the text, a willingness to listen to the silences and to confront the discomfort they produce. Silence, here, is not merely the opposite of speech—it is a mode of presence, a way of being in the world that demands recognition and respect.

Dhowli's silence is not purely abstract or psychological—it is also profoundly embodied. Her body bears the testimony that her words cannot carry. It is through her physical state, her gaze, her withdrawal from communal life, and her occupation as a sex worker that

her story is told. The village sees her body every day and yet refuses to acknowledge the truth it represents.

In this way, her body becomes a site of testimony. It bears witness to betrayal, to abandonment, to survival. Unlike official documents or verbal confessions, the body cannot lie. It is a living archive of trauma and memory. And because it cannot be fully controlled or erased, it threatens the community's desire for moral cleanliness and historical forgetting.

Silence, then, is intimately tied to the body. It is not the silence of invisibility but of hypervisibility—of being seen but not heard, present but unacknowledged. Dhowli's silent presence in the village becomes a constant reminder of what the community has done and continues to deny.

In Dhowli, Mahasweta Devi also implicates the reader. What does it mean to listen to silence? How does one read a story that withholds more than it reveals? These questions are central to the ethics of representation and reception. Devi does not make it easy for us. There are no narrative resolutions, no redemptive arcs. We are left with silence—and with it, the responsibility to interpret it without violating it. To listen ethically to Dhowli's silence is to resist the urge to explain it away. It is to sit with the discomfort it generates and to acknowledge the violence that made such silence necessary. It is to recognize that not all truths can be told, and that the unspeakable is not less real but perhaps more so. Silence, in this context, is not the end of meaning—it is its most difficult and profound expression.

The motif of silence in Dhowli resonates with broader themes in postcolonial and trauma literature. Gayatri Spivak famously asked, "Can the subaltern speak?" In Dhowli, the answer is not a simple yes or no. Dhowli's silence is not mere muteness but a complex mode of speaking that defies the logic of dominant discourse. She speaks, but not in ways the village—or the reader—may be ready to hear.

In trauma literature, silence is often read as a symptom of unprocessed suffering. But Dhowli suggests that silence can also be a deliberate act of self-preservation. It is a refusal to allow one's story to be consumed by systems of power, spectacle, or pity. It is the articulation of a boundary: this far, and no further. This is a silence that demands to be respected, not corrected.

Narrative Voice and Ethical Storytelling: Mahasweta Devi's role as a narrator must be interrogated through the ethics of representation. Devi is not a Dalit woman, and her portrayal of Dhowli raises questions about who gets to speak for whom. However, rather than assuming a position of omniscient authority, Devi writes with restraint and responsibility. She provides narrative space for Dhowli's silence to speak volumes.

The narrator in Dhowli is observational rather than interventionist. The minimalism of commentary and the careful withholding of judgment allows readers to grapple with the

gravity of Dhowli's experience without being directed toward a specific emotional response. This narrative strategy demonstrates ethical awareness: Devi does not appropriate Dhowli's voice; she facilitates its haunting presence. literature that engages with trauma, marginality, and systemic injustice, the narrative voice plays a crucial role—not only in telling the story but in shaping how it is understood, interpreted, and felt. In Dhowli, Mahasweta Devi crafts a narrative voice that is both distant and deeply intimate, clinical yet compassionate. This dual tone is no accident—it reflects a commitment to ethical storytelling in which the subject of the narrative is never reduced to an object of pity or voyeuristic fascination. Through her careful narrative choices, Devi addresses the challenges of speaking for the oppressed while allowing the oppressed—Dhowli—to retain her own silent yet potent presence.

Mahasweta Devi's narrator in Dhowli is notable for its restrained tone and matter-of-fact presentation. There is no overt sentimentality, no dramatic flourishes, and no authorial intrusion telling the reader how to feel. This narrative minimalism serves a profound ethical function. It prevents the reader from being manipulated into a moral reaction; instead, the narrative invites slow, uncomfortable reflection. The narrator acts almost like a documentarian—recording the facts, presenting the events, and letting the starkness of Dhowli's life speak for itself.

This strategic distance also avoids the danger of appropriating Dhowli's voice. Mahasweta Devi does not speak as Dhowli. She does not try to mimic her inner thoughts, nor does she project imagined emotions onto her. Rather than “giving voice to the voiceless” (a problematic and patronizing phrase often used in activism), Devi provides a space where silence, presence, and narrative form combine to let Dhowli be seen and felt without being overwritten.

Writing the story of a subaltern woman—a poor, Dalit, rural woman who is sexually exploited, ostracized, and pushed into sex work—is a profound ethical challenge. Literature has historically objectified women like Dhowli, turning them into metaphors for suffering or sacrifice. Mahasweta Devi does something radically different. She writes Dhowli's story with a sharp awareness of the power dynamics involved in storytelling. Her voice is not omnipotent; it is aware of its own limits. Devi's storytelling avoids the trap of romanticizing victimhood. Dhowli is not depicted as a tragic heroine, but as a fully human being—flawed, suffering, resilient, and quietly defiant. The narrative respects her complexity. It does not demand redemption, nor does it offer salvation. It simply insists on presence—on witnessing a life that society would rather erase.

This is what makes Dhowli ethically powerful: it does not console the reader. It implicates them. It demands recognition, not rescue.

One of the most striking aspects of Dhowli is how the story is told in the style of a field report. The narrator refers to places, events, and social structures with precision, almost like a journalist or ethnographer. This documentary tone is not accidental. It reflects Mahasweta

Devi's own life as a writer-activist who traveled across rural India, recorded oral histories, and worked with marginalized communities, particularly tribal and Dalit women.

The blend of fiction and reportage challenges the reader's assumptions about genre and truth. By collapsing the boundary between storytelling and documentation, Devi reinforces the reality of what we are reading. Dhowli may be a fictional character, but the world she inhabits—its brutality, hypocrisy, and silencing—is entirely real. This technique also builds trust. The narrator does not embellish or exaggerate. This narrative restraint gives moral weight to every word. It ensures that Dhowli is not a spectacle, but a subject. Not a symbol, but a person.

Another aspect of Mahasweta Devi's ethical storytelling is the absence of closure. Dhowli ends without catharsis. There is no justice served, no revenge exacted, no systemic change hinted at. Dhowli continues to exist on the margins, neither redeemed nor rescued. This non-resolution is a deliberate ethical act. It resists the typical narrative arcs that offer emotional satisfaction or moral lessons. Instead, it presents reality in its raw and unresolved form.

By ending the story without tidying up its moral messiness, Devi asks the reader to bear the weight of that discomfort. The story does not give us peace—it gives us responsibility.

This refusal of resolution also mirrors real-life systemic oppression. The structures that harmed Dhowli do not disappear. They persist—within the story and beyond it. Ethical storytelling, in this case, means telling the truth even when that truth offers no comfort.

The Body as a Memory Archive: Dhowli's body becomes the site where memory is inscribed. Each act of violence, rejection, and survival is written onto her physical being. The story does not indulge in graphic descriptions, yet the trauma she carries is evident in her demeanor, her choices, and her silence.

In trauma studies, the body often functions as a non-verbal archive of memory, especially when language fails. Dhowli's body communicates more than words can. Her refusal to return to "normalcy," her rejection of reintegration into village life, and her isolation are all bodily assertions of memory. The body resists forgetting, even when society wants to move on. Mahasweta Devi's Dhowli, the protagonist's body becomes more than a physical presence—it becomes an archive that stores and expresses trauma, abandonment, and survival. Deprived of voice and denied institutional justice, Dhowli's body silently bears the burden of memory and social inscription. Where the spoken word fails, and where social structures erase or rewrite truths, the body steps in as a residual, visible, and enduring record. This chapter explores how Dhowli's physical existence becomes a memory text—one inscribed with caste violence, gendered exploitation, and emotional loss—and how Mahasweta Devi uses bodily representation as a form of historical documentation.

Dhowli's life is defined by social and physical trauma: caste-based exclusion, sexual

exploitation, rejection by her lover, and her forced descent into sex work. These traumas are not simply emotional—they are inscribed onto her body. Her skin, posture, clothing, gaze, and silence all reflect the aftermath of what has been done to her. As a character, she may speak little, but her body constantly communicates the residue of betrayal and dispossession. In the absence of written records or legal acknowledgement of her suffering, Dhowli's body becomes the only reliable archive of her experience. It bears the invisible marks of caste-based sexual violence, the visible consequences of being pushed out of village respectability, and the emotional exhaustion of being forced to sell her body for survival. Her body carries these "truths" not as metaphor but as material memory.

Thus, Devi presents the body not merely as a victimized object, but as a site of testimony and historical registration—a living witness to the violence of patriarchy and caste hierarchy.

In India's caste-based rural societies, Dalit women like Dhowli are not included in official narratives of history. They are absent from judicial records, unacknowledged by the state, and erased from collective memory. Their experiences exist in a liminal zone between visibility and erasure.

This archival absence forces the body to carry memory. Dhowli's physical presence becomes the repository of her unacknowledged past. Her aging face, tired limbs, and worn clothes silently recall the injustices she endured. There is no diary, no police report, no testimony in court. Instead, her body "remembers" what society prefers to forget.

This turns the body into what theorists like Diana Taylor would call a "repertoire"—a system of embodied memory that exists in contrast to the "archive" of official documents. Taylor suggests that performance and physicality hold memories in ways that archives cannot. In Dhowli, Devi demonstrates this by allowing Dhowli's bodily presence to function as a repertoire of caste and gender violence, silently challenging the social amnesia of the village. Dhowli's body is hyper-visible to the villagers, particularly after she becomes a sex worker. Her body becomes a public reminder of the shame, scandal, and sin that the village has conveniently projected onto her. But this visibility is not recognition—it is surveillance and punishment.

Her body is used to both remember and erase. The villagers "remember" her dishonor through her body, but they refuse to remember their own complicity. The collective memory of the community is externalized onto her figure. She is seen daily at the temple steps, at the market, and at her home, and yet she is socially invisible. She lives in a paradox: perpetually seen, never acknowledged.

This transformation of her body into a site of communal shame reflects how gendered memory is constructed. The community does not preserve her dignity, but they preserve her as a bodily object to project blame and moral failure. Mahasweta Devi exposes this cruelty by

keeping Dhowli physically present but socially abandoned, thereby forcing the reader to recognize the bodily embodiment of caste patriarchy's memory. After her abandonment and ostracization, Dhowli turns to sex work—a decision that is both forced and strategic. Her body becomes both a commodity and a weapon. It is here that the body as archive takes on a new, political layer. Through her eroticized labor, Dhowli's body remembers and repeats the conditions of her social marginality.

Sex work turns the site of her initial exploitation into her means of survival. This irony is central to the narrative. Her body becomes an economic archive: a site where caste and class inequality converge. Through each transaction, her body repeats the memory of abandonment by the upper-caste Sanichari boy and the silence of her mother, the priest, and the entire village. But it is also through this labor that Dhowli enacts a subversive agency. While her body is read as a space of impurity by the villagers, it is also the body through which she survives—reclaiming control in a world that denied her respectability. Mahasweta Devi refuses to romanticize this act, but she allows Dhowli's choice to remain unjudged. This ethical ambiguity reinforces the body's role as an ambivalent archive—one that carries pain, but also persistence.

If Dhowli's body is a memory archive, the village is a site of active forgetting. The villagers forget their own roles in her downfall—her lover's betrayal, the priest's silence, the women's complicity—yet they do not forget to label her a prostitute. They have forgotten why she became what she is, but they remember what she became. This selective forgetting is challenged by the unerasable presence of her body. Her bodily survival becomes an act of mnemonic resistance. Each day she is seen, she quietly reminds the village of what it has done. In a space where truth is buried under moral hypocrisy and social fear, Dhowli's body is the only thing that refuses to lie.

This is the power of embodied memory: it resists historical revision. It defies official narratives. It exists in the flesh—as a painful, public reminder that the past is not over, and that the violence of caste and gender is written on bodies, not books.

In presenting Dhowli's body as an archive, Mahasweta Devi also raises ethical questions for the reader. What does it mean to “read” a body? Are we, as readers, complicit in the objectification of her suffering? How do we listen to a body without reducing it to a spectacle?

These questions challenge the ethics of interpretation. Devi does not offer easy answers. She neither eroticizes nor sanitizes Dhowli's physicality. Instead, she forces the reader to confront the complex relationship between body, memory, and power. We are made to feel discomfort, not empathy. We are made to reflect, not rescue. The body in Dhowli is not just a passive surface on which history acts. It is an active participant in memory-making. It performs, resists, and testifies. It is a living record of trauma and survival—one that cannot be archived, erased, or morally resolved.

In Dhowli, the body functions as a living memory archive, preserving trauma, loss, and survival in the absence of verbal testimony and institutional acknowledgment. Through Dhowli's embodied presence, Mahasweta Devi challenges the erasures and silences of caste-patriarchal history. The story foregrounds how bodies—especially those of marginalized women—carry history, politics, and emotion in ways that challenge dominant archives. Dhowli's body is a site of pain, but also of persistence; a record of oppression, but also of endurance. Through her narrative, Mahasweta Devi reminds us that some truths cannot be written down—they must be remembered in the body.

Conclusion: Mahasweta Devi's Dhowli is more than a narrative of social injustice; it is a powerful meditation on how memory survives beyond official histories, how trauma is inscribed on the body, and how silence can serve as a form of resistance. While the story originates in the framework of caste and gendered marginality, it unfolds into a broader ethical and philosophical inquiry into the politics of voice, visibility, and archival absence.

The body of Dhowli, marginalized and objectified, becomes a site of lived history—a repository of trauma that resists the dominant culture's efforts to erase or forget. In a world where caste and patriarchy collaborate to silence the subaltern woman, Dhowli's body becomes her testimony. Her silence is not absence; it is an active refusal to conform to expected modes of speech and morality. It forces the reader to reckon with what is not said and to interpret the depth of pain carried through stillness, posture, and labor.

Mahasweta Devi's narrative voice resists sentimentality and voyeurism. Instead, she offers a clinical, almost documentary form of storytelling, presenting Dhowli's life with stark realism and emotional restraint. This choice reflects an ethical approach to writing trauma—not to entertain or elicit pity, but to witness. By refusing to romanticize or redeem Dhowli, Devi respects her dignity and complexity, even as the character is socially ostracized and economically exploited. Memory, in Dhowli, is not preserved in books, law, or religion. It lives in the body, in the public gaze, and in the shameful silence of the community. Mahasweta Devi reveals that forgetting is not passive—it is violent. The villagers' forgetting of their complicity and the institutional absence of justice are not neutral—they are part of a larger system of oppression. Against this backdrop, Dhowli's continued bodily presence becomes a kind of mnemonic defiance, a refusal to disappear. Ultimately, Dhowli functions as a critique of social complicity and archival exclusion, while offering a radical mode of remembering through the embodied experiences of the oppressed. Mahasweta Devi's story teaches us that justice may never come from institutions, and truth may never be spoken aloud—but both live on in the bodies, silences, and sufferings of those who survive. Dhowli, as a character, does not offer redemption or revolution, but something more enduring: resilient memory in a world that would rather forget.

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