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Objectification of Motherhood in Mahasweta Devi's “Breast Giver”

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi, a renowned and voluminous writer of our times, never acknowledged the feminist tag attached to her writings but her female protagonists certainly overshadow the male characters in her writings. The short stories included in *Breast Stories* are all women centric and the discourse of doubly burdened denizens of this country. *Breast Stories*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 2002, includes three stories where ‘Breast’ is the common motif. “Breast-Giver”, included in this trilogy, is a critique of Indian womanhood that has so completely and passively imbibed the patriarchal idea of motherhood as projected in Legends and Epics.

In this story breast becomes a metaphor of exploitation and torture. It symbolises a burden of gender. The story is built on the matrix of Caste, class and patriarchy. Jashoda, the protagonist, becomes the symbol of exploitation of a woman’s body. She becomes a wet-nurse for family of landlords after her husband is crippled by a rich spoilt brat from the Haldar family. To maintain the uninterrupted supply of milk, she has to undergo annual labour pain. The result is that at the end she has breastfed fifty kids including thirteen of her own. This over exploitation of body culminates with the development of tumour in her breast. In the story Devi debunks at the hypocrisy behind the divine motherhood idea when Jashoda’s own children and milk-children refuse to take care of her malignant breast. Jashoda becomes a victim of gendered violence which, inevitably, is a part of larger socio-economic exploitation. Spivak analyses the “Breast-Giver” according to Marxist Feminist Theory and highlights the commodification of motherhood in the story. The present paper seeks to show how the patriarchal ideology, in collusion with consumerism, exploits the female body to reap the benefits.

Mahasweta Devi strongly dismisses the tag of a feminist writer. But she finds “that woman suffers because of her class and she suffers because of her body.” Devi projects women in her works as she finds them as an activist in society. The writer’s choice of not being feminist, does not underplay her concerns with downtrodden women.

Numerous women characters, in her stories, come from different historical backgrounds and social milieu. The gender sensitive portrayal of women character by Mahasweta Devi is linked to the issue of class, caste, tribe, economic condition etc. Women, in her works, come from different social backgrounds. They are dalit and upper caste, educated and uneducated, tribal and non tribal labourers and working class revolutionaries and rebels. They come from across sections of Indian society. What binds them together to be Devi's daughters is that they all are oppressed and exploited. They are mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, bonded labourers, witches, prostitutes, rape victims etc. but they are survivors and winners. Their resistance and refusal to be victims of oppressive system encompass the whole narrative of Mahasweta Devi. The system oppresses them at physical, sexual or psycho-emotional level, but these daughters of Devi, with their indomitable spirit, herald a new dawn of optimism for their other sisters. The lesson drawn at the end of the day is courage. This is the courage to cry at the death of the oppressors; courage to stand named in the front of the oppressors; courage to shout at an insensitive husband.

Basically she is a social activist and her writings are an extension of her social activism. She explores the tortured consciousness and split personalities of the oppressed and the exploited. She leaves no stone unturned in raising her voice against the atrocities done to the poor and the *Adivasis* who are quite innocent and illiterate people knowing almost nothing about their rights. The writer also targets the welfare policies being undertaken by the Govt. to raise the standard of life in the most backward and undeveloped tribal regions of West Bengal. She acts as a guardian to this suffering tribal community and takes it her duty to bring to light the unholy nexus of bureaucrats, feudal lords and politicians who are responsible for the wretched life of tribal community. Economic exploitation, sexual oppression and state violence make the lives of tribal women miserable. Mahasweta Devi brings out the pain and plight of these women in most of her major works. Devi had a long association with tribal women. She understands and comments in *Imaginary Maps* when she says:

Bits of their old culture can still be glimpsed. In the nineteenth century, for example, mainstream Indian reformers had to struggle to pass *Widow Remarriage Act* in caste-Hindu society, the society that is generally called Indian. Among the *Austrian* and *Dravidian* tribes of India, on the other hand, in the state of West Bengal and Bihar alone there are Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, Lodhas, Kherias, Mahalis, Gonds, and more widow remarriage has always been the custom. In tribal society, there is no dowry system, only bride price. (*Imaginary Maps i*)

Works of Mahasweta Devi are 'telling tales' of the exploitation of the marginalised and dispossessed groups by the ruling and dominant castes. This oppression is further aggravated by greedy bureaucrats and cunning politicians. The literary representations of oppressing circumstances in which Devi's victim-protagonists are placed, are not mere a record of oppression. In fact, Mahasweta Devi deciphers the code of courage and resilience with which these survivors retaliate and bounce back. The repressive situations don't cripple them permanently.

The violation of human rights, custodial rapes, forced labour, poverty, prostitution, exploitation due to caste and class hierarchies etc. do not deter them from achieving their aim, i.e. survival at any cost. Nowhere, even for a once, Devi's daredevils surrender to oppressive conditions. They win even in their deaths. They show phoenix like capabilities of rising from their ash. The state and its long list of rights fail to protect them from the cruel hands of their oppressors. But the dignity of life is ultimately protected by the strength of indomitable will power. Devi has many tribal women who are extremely courageous and independent. She places her women characters in such historical circumstances so that their social-political positioning brings about the real causes of their oppression and marginalization. The tribal Women's exploitation is the direct outcome of their community's exploitation as a whole. In the process of class exploitation, tribal women became easy prey for outsiders known as *diku*. Devi's essays included in the *Dust on the Road* highlight the statistical details of the working condition of tribals, dalit women and other poor women who work as migrant and bonded labourers in the state of Bihar, West Bengal and Punjab(*Dust on the Road* I-24, 87-96).

The poor and exploited people inhabit a vast portion of India. Independence has brought change only in the life of the rich, the poor children only sell paper flags and work as usual on Independence Day. The modern economic policy of globalisation, industrial revolution and urbanisation has resulted into the haphazard expansion of cities, ever growing unemployment, loss of land for farmers, large scale migration of labourers from their native places, discontent among youth, ever increasing number of urban poor in the cities.

Violence against women has another dimension of emotional or psychological violence, inflicted directly or indirectly through threat, harassment, coercion or any other mean. Physical or sexual violence is the overt expression of violence, but emotional violence is an important component of domestic violence used by the near relatives of the victim. It is inflicted by fiddling with the emotions of the individual. Indian women are made to assimilate the images of 'Indian womanhood' since their childhood. It equates them with goddess 'Durga' or 'Sita'. They are taught to accept the male hegemony and patriarchal structure of protection. These values are so imbibed that they silently suffer mental abuse with much appreciated endurance. They forget their dreams, their aspirations for the honour of *Khandan*. Jasodhara Bagchi observes that this myth of Indian womanhood has naturalized gender oppression. The representation of a woman as a 'Mother' has long journey in the history of Indian literature. Literary critics, particularly women-writers, have found that stereotypical image associated with women has led to the oppression of women. The biological role of women as the mother of children has been superseded by culture role of women as 'Divine Mother'.

Woman, in our culture, has been identified and worshipped as 'mother goddess' who is expected to sacrifice every comfort for the sake of 'her family'. Every scripture glorifies a woman as the chief nourisher: one who is an axle around which the whole wheel of the welfare of the family revolves. If any member of family goes astray, it is because the women or the mother in the family have not discharged their duties properly. During the freedom movement, the figure of Indian women came to be identified with 'Mother India' whose honour was to

be saved by the patriotic sons of India. Most of the women are not allowed to jobs and to go outside because their family and children are thought to be their first priority. “Maternal responsibility is used as an alibi to exclude a woman from power, authority, decisions and a participatory role in public life”, observes Maithreyi Krishnaraj . Contemporary gender studies in India now focus on these stereotypical images of Indian motherhood ingrained in our social structure that led to the physical, psychological and emotional abuse of Indian women.

Mahasweta Devi in her various works has fathomed the unknown and unheard stories of motherhood. Her portrayals of mothers are drawn from history, religion, myth and contemporary life. In the famous story “Breast-Giver” she uses the metaphor of breast to highlight the oppression of women by using lactation process as commodity to be sold in lieu of money. Her pathbreaking novel *Mother of 1084*, projects a middle class working mother, Sujata who, after the death of her son, grapples with the causes of Naxalite movement of 1970s. The stories in the collection, *In the Name of the Mother* are heart rending portrayals of mothers who are forced to sell their female children. The mother are helpless as in “Douloti the Bountiful” when Douloti is sold to Parmananda on a false promise of marriage.

Douloti and her mother were two stones clasping each other. The mother was running her hand gently and constantly over her daughter’s body. A split, broken hand. Running her fingers she was weeping and humming, what is the mother, I never heard such a thing. (“Douloti” the Bountiful”51).

Noted critic and translator of Mahasweta Devi’s writings Samik Bandyopadhyay comments in the “Introduction” to *Five Plays*:

Characters that have dominated Mahasweta Devi’s stories and novels in the seventies are the mothers bearing the brunt of social and political oppression and enduring and resisting with indomitable will (ix).

“Breast-Giver” is a very powerful and heart touching breast story where the protagonist, Jashoda, becomes the symbol of exploitation of a woman's body. Jashoda’s lactative glands become the root cause of her suffering and her death. Jashoda readily and happily accepts the motherhood to support her crippling husband. Mahasweta Devi keeps Jashoda’s name unchanged from the mythical Jashoda- the foster mother of Lord Krishna. Here Jashoda becomes a professional mother – ‘a wet nurse’ – for Haldar family after her husband Kanganalicharan is crippled by a rich spoiled brat from the Haldar family.

Jashoda became a professional mother after she suckled a child of sick mother of Harldar family. The mistress of the house noticed the full breast of Jashoda. “ She looks in charmed envy at Jashoda’s mammal projections and says: The good lord sent you down as the legendary cow of fulfillment. Pull the teat and milk flows! The ones I’ve brought to my house, haven’t a quarter of this milk in their nipples!”(48). She immediately

hires Jashoda to breast-feed her grand children as it'll keep them healthy and her daughter-in-law will remain slim and beautiful so as to stop young male Haldars from 'looking outside' or 'harassing the maid-servants'.

In lieu of her service Jashoda would get her daily meals, clothes on feast day and some monthly pay. Jashoda never complains, she never blames her husband for her misfortune. In fact, she is "fully an Indian woman, has an unreasonable, unreasoning and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children" (45). She wants to become the mother earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest. The Hindu religion states that every woman is an incarnation of 'Divine Mother' and every man is the 'Holy child'. "Such is the power of the Indian soil that all women turn into mothers here and all men remain immersed in the spirit of holy childhood"(46).

Jashoda is given the status of *Kamdhenu*, the legendary cow of fulfillment, by her employers and she is the most revered woman in the village. Her husband, though crippled but sexually active, gives her 'the tips of the trade'. He, illuminated by the spirit of Brahma- the Creator', explains:

You will have milk in your breast only if you have a child in your belly. Now you'll have to think of that and suffer. You are a faithful wife, a goddess. You will yourself be pregnant, be filled with a child, rear it at your breast, isn't this why mother comes to you as a midwife? (*Breast Stories 50*)

Jashoda, the poor victim of circumstances, accepts all the labour pain. She says. "Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit?"(50) . With the result ,at the end, she has suckled fifty kids, including thirteen of her own. But after the demise of Haldar Mistress, Jashoda's services were not required in the house as the new daughter-in-law adopted family planning. Jashoda's usefulness had ended not only in the Haldar family but also for her husband Kanganalicharan. Jashoda begins to feel a strange pain in her armpit and breast. She develops breast-cancer. There is little hope of her survival. The doctors put her on sedatives and she hangs about a month in a hospital.

During her last days, no visitor came to her room because of the stench. She lies discarded by all her children and milk- children. There is nothing magnificent and glorious about her 'mother image'. She has been ruthlessly exploited by all her children, her milk-children, her husband and her masters. The breast, a woman's feeding potential, and her body again prove to be a 'burden of gender'. Marxists believe that women's domestic duties of child bearing and feeding have economic value. And economic revolution will begin only after women demand income in lieu of their maternal services.

"Breast-Giver" is a critique of Indian women's complete identification with patriarchal notions of motherhood. In fact, a woman who fails to deliver a baby, has to bear a social stigma in her whole life. She is considered as an inauspicious and unwelcome during certain religious rituals. From Legends to Epics, so much glory is attached to mother image that no married woman can think of not being a mother. Jashoda becomes a victim of gendered violence which, inevitably, is a part of larger socio-economic exploitation. "Breast-Giver",

thus, exposes how the patriarchal ideology in collusion with capitalism uses the female body to reap the benefits. Gayatri Spivak analyses the “Breast-Giver” according to *Marxist Feminist Theory*. She refers to milk produced by Jashoda for her own children as ‘use value’ and after that she uses the ‘superfluous milk’ for ‘exchange value’. But even when the superfluous milk leads to no ‘capital gain’, she is dumped by all who were thriving on her labour. Jashoda dies all alone. “She was cremated by an untouchable. Jashoda’s death was also the death of God”(74). She was a “mortal masquerading as God”. She is forsaken by humanity. She herself applies this ‘Godliness’ to herself and ironically becomes a victim of humanity.

Devi debunks at the hypocrisy behind the ‘divine motherhood’ idea when Jashoda’s own children and milk-children refuse to take care of her ‘malignant breast’. She depicts how the ‘divine mother’ with her ‘Kamdhenu breasts’, having exhausted her utility, is pushed to the margins. Mahasweta Devi does not reject the value of love and care that are traditionally associated with motherhood, but she does it without romanticizing and glorifying the ‘divine mother’ image that a mother usually accompanies in the traditional Indian literature. As Radha Chakrvarthy notes:

She reappropriates these values for her radical project, locating them in a normal ‘Core’ that contains the possibility of female self empowerment. (“Introduction”, *In The Name of the Mother ix*).

Through her powerful portrayal of ‘Mother’, Mahasweta Devi depicts the motherhood as an ambivalent concept which may restrict or release women from the burden of gender. Her women-like Douloti, Jashoda, Sanichari, Bikhni, Ganor, Chandidasi etc.-embody the dualities that arise when they embark on their journey of motherhood.

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