

Motherhood in Mahasweta Devi's Breast-Giver

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Abstract: What makes Mahasweta Devi different from her contemporary writers is her writing style and her commitment towards the oppressed class to bring their unheard voices to the mainstream society. She has the credit of catching the scholars' attention towards her works since feminism aspects are largely seen in her works. The present paper is about a typical struggling woman from Indian society, who despite her sacrifice of whole life deserves not a dignified funeral by her family or the people whom she believed in.

Key Words: Breast, Marxism, Division of labour, Mother

Mahasweta Devi, in her *Breast-Giver*, focuses on the theme of motherhood as a symbolism for women's exploitation in India, which remain unobserved. Devi uses the breast and breast feeding as metaphors for the significance of the woman as a bearer of and nurturer of children with the context of Indian class structure (Manju). *Breast-Giver* translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and collected in *Breast-Stories* represents breast as a commodity of consumption (Manju).

Breast-Giver is the story of a Brahmin woman Jashoda. She is portrayed as an avatar of a dutiful wife having the characteristics like tolerance, chastity, self-restraint and sacrifice. Her husband, Kangalicharan has lost his legs in an accident caused by the youngest son of his Master, the feudal landowner of the locality, Haldar of Harisal. At this critical juncture, Jashoda's motherhood – the consistent lactation provides her a chance to earn money. She feeds the grandsons of the Mistress at Haldar house. With the passage of time, breast-feeding to her children and to the Mistress' grandchildren causes her to suffer from an incurable disease, breast cancer. Her milk is insufficient and at the last stage of her life, she is left alone, abandoned by the Haldar family as well as her own. She dies a shocking death (Agrahari).

Spivak's analysis sees that Jashoda's mammal assets stand as an ultimate aid for both of the family, the Haldar's and Jashoda's. When the survival becomes hard for Jashoda, she visits the Mistress' house and asks for a job. She is offered a paid wet-nurse job under the strict vigilance of the Mistress. In the Marxist sense, the sexual division of labour is reversed (Agrahari).

While Jashoda works outside, Kangali takes the charge of the household. The milk that is produced for one's own children is use-value. When there is a superfluity of use value, exchange-value arises.

As soon as the (exchange) value of Jashoda's milk emerges, her condition changes. Good food and constant sexual intercourse with Kangali are provided to Jashoda so that she could be kept in the prime condition for optimum lactation (Agrahari). Jashoda, through her gift of reproduction, becomes objectified in the market as commodities. (Baker). She is paid for her milk.

“By invoking the theme of Marxist Feminism, Spivak brings to light the classic Marxist theory of labour – a sexual division of labour between productive labour (masculine) and reproductive labour (feminine)” (Agrahari). It is based on the essential notion of sexual difference. This sexual difference of labour has conventionally devalued and ignored the material specificity of women's domestic work, including childbirth and mothering because these forms of work do not directly produce exchange value or money. Spivak puts that Jashoda challenges the assumption prevalent in western feminism that childbirth is unwaged labour (Morton 2007). Jashoda's breast-feeding the grandsons of her Mistress changes her status. She becomes one of the most respected members in the Haldar family. She asserts repeatedly that she is “a mother by profession” (Devi 40). Being a traditional wife and submissive Indian woman, she never blames her husband for the economic adversity.

Every member of each family – Haldar's family and the family of Jashoda – feel happy and are relieved. The maid of Haldar family says, “Joshi! You came as The Goddess! You made the air of this house change!” (54). However, Jashoda's happiness, on the stake of her body, is not continued for long. The Mistress's death brings an end to Jashoda's profession and her source of livelihood. Henceforth, Jashoda is denied lodging in the house. One of the Mistress' daughters-in-law

says, "...Mother sent you food for eight years. She did what pleased her. Her children said nothing. But it's no longer possible" (58). At this stage of her life, Jashoda comes to the full recognition of the terrible waste of her life – her service to everyone. Kangali sets himself up to the temple of the goddess Kali. When Jashoda seeks for his permission to cook food there, he refuses because she has not been cooking for long. The plight of Jashoda forces her to return to the Haldress' house again. She implores one of the daughters-in-law of the late Mistress to permit her to live in the house. It is clear that she will not be treated with respect as in the earlier times. She is allowed to live in the maidservant's room. Clearly regardless of being upper caste, Jashoda as a woman and as a very poor suffers extreme forms of deprivation. The repeated gestation and lactation will result in an incurable disease – breast cancer. In her bearing with the terrible pain and reluctance to show it to a male doctor, Devi sees the ignorance and sense of shame that inhibits most Indian women from receiving treatment in time. When the eldest daughter-in-law of the house comes to know of her disease, she expels her from the Haldar house. The maltreatment and the cold attitude of the Haldress

are visible. She is used till she could provide milk (Agrahari).

The Breast Giver focuses on the selfish attitude of the daughters-in-law, who, in spite of being women as well as mothers show their indifference towards Jashoda. Jashoda's sons inform Kangali about the torment of Jashoda. Kangali comes to take care of his wife with immense patience and hospitalises her but it is too late to cure her. Having no hope of her life, Kangali and all members of her family leave Jashoda on her fate. Moreover, when she dies neither Kangali and his sons nor the grandsons of Haldar come to perform the last rites. She dies a destitute thinking, "if you suckle you're a mother, all lies! Nepal and Gopal don't look at me, and the Master's boys don't spare a peek to ask how I'm doing?" (74).

In conclusion, the story depicts the ungratefulness of children to their mother who has devoted her entire life to them in the hope that she would be looked after during the last stage of her life. From modern feminist perspective, mothers appear as repressed women, living according to male dominated system (Agrahari).

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