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MOTHERHOOD, COMMODIFICATION AND PATRIARCHY IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S
BREAST GIVER

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Abstract

India witnessed a constant idealization of mothers and her procreative powers irrespective of the evolution that the societies underwent in different ages. Regardless of the continual developments and progresses, what remains perpetual is the strong anchoring of the mothers to the patriarchal rules and regulations, often shrouded in concealment from the external pomp and glory of motherhood. The real agenda of feminism lies in the unveiling of the creations of the women writers—characters who defy the monolithic and fabricated phallic culture—who unabashedly champion their femininity and motherhood even on the verge of getting extinguished by the societal norms. And Mahasweta Devi is one such writer who consciously explores the feminine experiences, helping the readers to develop significant insight into various atrocities on the mothers and their motherhood. Devi through her fictional characters, challenges the patriarchal paradigms of motherhood, creating powerful discourses out of the lived realities of the mothers' lives. This article deals with the engrossing tale of motherhood as depicted in Mahasweta Devi's short story *The Breast Giver*, bringing to the surface the hidden dichotomies prevalent in the patriarchal worshipping of mothers' prowess.

Key words: Motherhood, Mothers, Patriarchy, Exploitation

Stanadayini or *Breast Giver*, the second story in Mahasweta Devi's short story collection *Breast Stories*, translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, brings to the forefront the commodification of a mother's milk in a patriarchal setup. Mahasweta Devi in *Breast Giver* vehemently criticises the socio-political neglect of the mother and her experiences of motherhood—amplified by the whims of phallogocentric regime.

The protagonist of the story, Jashoda, a poor Brahmin woman, takes up the role of a professional wet-nurse to the offspring of Haldar household,

when her husband Kangalicharan becomes crippled for life in an accident. Jashoda, destined to be a professional mother, never envisages her maternal body to be deficient of fertility. Always on the verge of giving birth, "Jashoda doesn't remember at all when there was no child in her womb...She never had the time to calculate if she could or could not bear motherhood. Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings" (Devi, "Breast Giver" 1069).

As Jashoda embarks upon the journey of professional motherhood, and her new role

demands her maternal body to be continuously pregnant, her responsibilities as a biological mother and as an uninterrupted mothering subject start intermingling with each other. Jashoda's capacity to embrace biological motherhood, therefore, becomes the sole pertinent solution for her, to promote herself continuously in the professional and familial field. However, the perks of promotion for Jashoda were very short lived as she was reduced to a mere "castrated" being at the end of her life.

Nancy Chodorow discusses the complexity of the obvious and ostensible connection "between women's childbearing and lactation capacities and their responsibilities for child care" (2) and confirms that this ubiquitous equation is—perhaps the most dreaded for women's motherhood. Because society has dictated women to be the primary care-givers and nurturers that men are not supposed to be or the men being "rarely a child's primary parent" (3), women's mothering capacities, which are of profound importance for the family structures are always taken for granted.

While the beginning of the narrative sets forth the rhythm of critical apprehension by displaying Jashoda's apparent empowered status as a professional mother, the omniscient narrator makes disparaging conjectures at Jashoda's ingrained traits as an Indian woman. The narrative thus hints at the futility of the "unreasonable, unreasoning, and unintelligent" (Devi, "Breast Giver" 1073) display of devotion of the Indian women towards their phallogocentric culture. From mythology to popular fiction and cinema, Mahasweta Devi affirms in *Breast Giver* that motherhood has played a crucial role in subjugating women's consciousness into accepting the culture of the logos and imbibing the traits of the symbolic order.

Jashoda, in fact, becomes the harvester of motherly acts of sustenance and nurturance—both biologically and otherwise—not only for her biological and surrogate children but also for her husband Kanganalicharan. The omniscient narrator in *Breast Giver* broods over the phallogocentric manifestation of mother figure in every Indian woman and the reinforcement of the same in the character portrayal of Jashoda. "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" (1074).

Uma Chakravarti reiterates on the apotheosis of Indian women as mothers and the apparent ennoblement of her Matr Shakti for satiating patriarchy's selfish agenda. The ritual of kanyadan in marriage, Chakravarti maintains, is actually the giving away of the reproductive powers of the woman so that a new *vamsa* can be initiated (Chakravarti 33). Therefore, it is no wonder that the reproductive power of Jashoda is the reaping ground on which structures of love, lust and progeny can be built and rebuilt. Mahasweta Devi ironically refers to the adult devourers of this Matr Shakti as the "Indian cubs" (Devi, "The Breast Giver" 1074).

Naturally and consequently, Jashoda becomes the reincarnation of mother-earth for Kanganalicharan. It is, however, worthwhile to note that Jashoda takes upon herself the so-called righteous act of appeasing her husband in her capacity of a mother. Jashoda's ingrained patriarchal ideology of selflessness never allows her to look beyond the horizon of mothering. Jashoda's "mother-love wells up for Kanganali as much as for the children. She wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest" (1073).

Jashoda becomes a symbol of 'divinity' for Kanganalicharan as well as for Halder household as soon as she enters into an agreement to breastfeed the progeny of the Haldars. For Kanganalicharan, she is a goddess because of her faithfulness to her husband. For the Halders, her 'divinity' emerges from her caste and her power of lactation. Mahasweta Devi ironically compares the protagonist, Jashoda with the mythological and historical figure of Jashoda, the foster mother of lord-Krishna. While Devi Jashoda's maternity is idealised and idolised till today by the masses because of her nurturance of lord Krishna in a selfless manner, the Jashoda of Mahasweta Devi's text is a mere biological figure—a mothering subject anticipating economic prosperity in response to her self-less service.

The Goddess manifest Jashda, therefore, basks in the glory of her righteously earned divinity. But her idea of divinity instead of becoming her shield against the atrocities of life, makes her surrender to Kangalicharan with gratitude and thankfulness. Her staggering testimony of gratitude to Kangalicharan is mind-boggling and unnerving. Jashoda testifies, "You are husband, you are guru. If I forget and say no, correct me. Where after all is the pain? Didn't Mistress-Mother breed thirteen? Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit? (1076). Jashoda's equating of herself with the tress bearing fruit, therefore, becomes a cautious reminder of the indignancy that has been ascribed to women by the phallogocentric regimes— reducing them to mere breeding machines.

Therefore, the question that remains unanswered is that does motherhood and its varied metaphors within the constricted Indian ambience become a prey in the often-conflicting binary opposites of empowerment and subjugation?

"The nationalist discourse drew on the traditional sources and glorified not only the notion of a heroic motherland but also the notion of a brave mother-figure capable of nurturing her fearless nationalist sons" (Chowdhury, "Redefining" 217). In India, the allegories of nationalistic fervour and political victory have victoriously sheltered themselves within the cushioning of heroic maternity, which, however, form the crux of dehumanized and barbaric reality of the commonplace Indian mothers. If not worsened, the prefixed heterosexual and already retrogressed status of women did not even ameliorate in the post-independent, industrialized and globalized India. Therefore, this contextualising makes it impertinent for us to ask ourselves the question: "Are the mothers in a position to complain?" (Snitow 33)

This precisely sums up the relevance and importance of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Giver* and its portrayal of an abject and forlorn mother, Jashoda. What Mahasweta Devi investigates throughout her narrative is the choices and compulsions, the acceptance and denials, the fantasies and the nightmarish realities of motherhood delimited by the logos. If we systematically decipher the

contouring of patriarchal power politics in Jashoda's life and her motherhood, we can derive the counterfeited narratives of salvaging her deeply ruptured maternity—by securing her alienation from her biological children and by reinforcing her status as a colonized subject—aggravated by her self-imposed image of mother-India.

Jashoda eventually is deified to the status to mother-goddess by the Halder household—the revered milk-mother to the future Halder scions. Jashoda was drenched by the heavy downpouring of praises. Even the maids uttered with reverence: "Joshi! You came as the Goddess!" (Devi, "Breast Giver" 1077). But the narrative of appeasement was destined to change. Soon after Jashoda's milk-sons and milk-daughters started growing up into adults, they started shifting to various corners of Kolkata on the pretext of rapidly rising memberships in the house. Therefore, with the lapse in time starting from the infancy to adulthood of Jashoda's milk-children, Halder landlord's dream of "filling half Calcutta with Halder" (1078) perished with its ambitious propaganda. Significantly or, perhaps most importantly, what went unnoticed in this collapsing of phallogocentric desires is Jashoda's gradual dethroning from the status of pious mother to a barren body.

Jashoda's energetic milking/mothering capacities underwent a phallogocentric castration as her maternal power got severed from its point of origin—her capacity of birthing. Annihilated and overthrown from the Halder house, Jashoda seeks refuge in her domestic sphere. However, Jashoda's discovery of Kangali's amorous flirts with Golapi on the domestic front strengthens her belief in the ineffectiveness and unprofitableness of a desexualized maternal body. She, therefore, takes recourse to her new empowering agency in the Halder house—in her capacity as a desexualized cook.

Judith Butler's psychoanalytic concept of "feminine identification with a position of castration," (Butler 104) plays a crucial role in situating Jashoda's forcible maternal castration. Butler argues that since women are universally treated as castrated beings for their penis envy, this

feminine idea of castration legitimates the symbolic denial of women's entry into the sphere of imaginary. As Butler regards that "Identification is constantly figured as a desired event or accomplishment, but one which finally is never achieved; identification is the phantasmatic staging of the event" (105), the forlorn Jashoda of the narrative never accomplishes the maternal fulfilment. Even after birthing twenty children and suckling twentyfold others, her maternal attachment to children never settles for a closure and perhaps, demands constant identification with them. Once Jashoda returns to the Haldar house after getting abused by Kangalicharan, what she vehemently starts missing is "a child at her breast" (Devi, "Breast Giver" 1081). She recognises that her mothering practice of suckling the children has been an obsession and addiction for her. Devi, too, acknowledges Jashoda's deplorable state of affairs in absence of her mothering capacities. She writes, "Jashoda's good fortune was her ability to bear children. All this misfortune happened to her as soon as that vanished. Now is the downward time for Jashoda, the milk-filled faithful wife who was the object of reverence of the local houses devoted to the Holy Mother" (1081).

Dethroned from the dignity of mother-Goddess, Jashoda becomes the receiver of everyone's scorn and vengeance. Her deplorable breasts become the breeding ground of cancer. *Breast Giver's* dramatization of the gruesome suffering and death of the professional mother—the merchandise and the commodity of the Haldar house—is horrifying and shameful. Saddened by the status of Jashoda's vulnerable body, Kangali seeks penance for his wrongdoings from his "faithful wife." But this brings the least amount of relief to Jashoda. Here Mahasweta Devi jeers at Kangali's wholehearted/dubious distancing of himself from Jashoda's frail body. She invokes the traditional and normative expectation of patriarchy's image of the mother to allow us to search for a counter-narrative of such disgusting realities. As Kangali distances himself from Jashoda, he rationalizes and muses over his decision, "Mother meant hair in a huge topknot, blindingly white clothes, a strong

personality. The person lying in the hospital is someone else, not Mother" (1087).

When Jashoda becomes aware about the true connotations of motherhood in a normative society, she was already decapitated to think rationally. She starts hallucinating about the presence of her milk-sons, who she thinks, came for her resurrection. Mahasweta Devi reveals in a tragic tone, "In her weak, infected, dazed brain she thought, has some son of Haldar house become a doctor? No doubt, he suckled her milk and is now repaying the milk-debt?" (1087). Sadly, these were the distant dreams of Jashoda.

Structured within the socio-political set up of subaltern ethos, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's apt and acute observation of Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of an empowered mothering subject brings us one step closer to feeling intensely about her agony. As Devi narrates Jashoda's moment of departure from her breeding ground, we are petrified by her presentation of a pensive reality, "the sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes" (1088).

Jashoda's mortal and lifeless body is left stranded in the mortuary. As nobody comes to perform the final rites, it is cremated by an untouchable. Mahasweta Devi ends the narrative in a poignant tone as she writes "Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerade as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone" (1088).

In *Breast Giver* Mahasweta Devi visualised Jashoda's sacrifice as the mirror image of "India after decolonization," (1086) with Jashoda's exploited, milked and oppressed maternal body showcasing a horrific and heinous mindset of the nouveau-rich class in the post-colonial India.

As Luce Irigaray affirms in *This Sex Which is Not One*, "The use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and the reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as "subjects,"" (84) the phallus and its male "subjects" in *Breast Giver*

become the active devourers of Jashoda's sexual and maternal prowess and the subaltern and gendered woman in Jashoda— in her capacity as a wife and mother—becomes the nameless fatality of the patriarchal regime.

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