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VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: A STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S  
*BREAST STORIES FROM A SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE*

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi has been a social activist and a vigorous voice from India. Her writings unravel the harsh realities of the marginalised people. Her stories are protest against the atrocities inflicted on the subaltern class. She is journalistic in her writings. And this kind of social activism makes her distinguished. Through her writings she has guarded the interest of the tribals by highlighting the corrupt system run by officials, feudal lords and politicians. This article aims to explore the short stories of Mahasweta Devi from subaltern perspective

Keywords: Subaltern, Resistance, Agency

The definition of "subaltern" is "of inferior rank" or position, subordinate in terms of status, ability, jurisdiction, and behaviour. Stated differently, it alludes to the subjugation of race, gender, caste, class, language, and culture. Additionally, it makes reference to the social groups that the governing classes control. Generally speaking, peasants, labourers, and other groups that have been excluded from "hegemonic" power are considered subaltern classes. The Italian Marxist political dissident Antonio Gramsci first mentioned the concept of the subaltern in his piece "Notes on Italian History," which was eventually published as a part of his most widely recognised book *Prison Notebooks*, which was written between 1929 and 1935.

Subaltern studies in India started with the writing of book reviews. According to Ranajit Guha, Subaltern Studies is 'a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way' (Guha, vii). As per Guha (1982), the subaltern signifies "the demographic difference between the entire Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite."

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who is a widely celebrated postcolonial critic describes herself as practical, deconstructionist feminist Marxist in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* intervenes the historiographical and Marxist discourse by including the "women" question.

She critiques the postmodernist, Marxist and deconstructionist

...the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence.' It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. . . (Spivak,28)

She through a series of formulations, case studies and discussion on postcolonial theory concludes that Subalterns cannot speak for themselves. She is also conscious of the fact that subaltern history and subaltern subjectivity have been subjugated under the force of Western philosophical and critical metanarratives and how the subalterns are not given any sense of agency, voice and power. These are always marginalized. Another issue that she raises is that natives cannot recover their agency as they are divided on the basis of gender, caste, class and other hierarchies.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the eminent writers from India who writes about the lives of these marginalised people . She was born in Dhaka (Bangladesh) in an artistic family. She resigned from the post of lecturer of English literature to work as reporter for a Bengali Newspaper . Her stories revolve around the lives of the tribes from the undeveloped regions These people lead a life of depravity . They have no facility of water or healthcare. As she admits: I often say that my world is divided between two things- the needful and the needless. I am interested only in the former. I don't have much use for the

needless.( Mahasweta Devi quoted by Nalini Sharma)

According to Gayatri Spivak, Mahasweta Devi articulates postcoloniality in a space of difference – "the decolonized terrain" ("Woman in Difference" 105). Devi's problematic representations of decolonization belong to a negotiated political independence. She is also committed to the battle of the tribal communities of West Bengal, women and the marginalised populace in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. She has documented the lives of the deprived at grass root level and raised her voice for their social mobilization. Her remarkable works *Mother of 1084*( *Hazaar Churasir Maa*), *Aranayer Adhikar*, *Jhansir Rani* etc. She is very straightforward in writing about the lived experiences of the marginalizeds. Spivak has translated two collections of Devi's stories – *Imaginary Maps* and *Breast Stories* – in English.

*Breast Stories* is a collection of three short stories – "Draupadi", "Breast giver" and "Behind the Bodice" by activist and feminist writer Mahasweta Devi though Devi writes for feminine issues but she doesn't want to be referred as feminist. Breast stories voice the protest and resilience of subaltern women against multiple forms of oppression . Breast stories was translated into English by eminent postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1997.

Breast here serves more than a symbol of femineity but it becomes a means of indictment of social harshness. Gayatri Chakravorty says in the introduction of this translation :

'Breast is not a symbol in these stories. In Draupadi it is an erotic object transformed in the object of torture and oppression and in Breast Giver it becomes the object for survival. In Behind the Bodice she bitterly decries the supposed normality of sexuality as male violence.(introduction,vii)

One of her most powerful short stories included in this collection is Draupadi that first appeared in her collection *Agnigarbha*. Draupadi is the story of a tribal woman Dopdi who along with her husband Dulna is in the list of wanted by the police officials. Dulna and Draupadi both are associated with the group of Naxalites. They are notorious for being involved in some criminal activities. They are skilled in the use of primitive weapons. The name Dopdi is a distorted form of her name Draupadi given to her by the mistress, wife of Surja Sahoo who was killed by Dopdi and her husband. The story of Draupadi is inspired by the cultural credential Mahabharata. The wife of Pandavas Draupadi was in pluralized legitimation. She was in polyandrous marriage. Her eldest husband stakes her in the game of dice and finally loses her. She is brought in to the court and humiliated. She is ordered to be made stripped publicly. But the intervention of Lord Krishna saves her honour. Mahasweta Devi rewrites the same episode. Unlike Draupadi of the epic Mahabharata, Dopdi who is a tribal insurgent is in monogamous marriage. Draupadi's husband Dulna is killed. Both Dopdi and Dulna were involved in same crime but the punishment differs on the basis of their gender. On the one hand Dulna is killed, for Draupadi an order is issued to "make her and do the needful" by Senanayak.

Senanayak represents the patriarchal as well as political power. Draupadi challenges this power. She is stripped and gang raped but unlike the mythical Draupadi she doesn't pray anyone to dress her rather she with her wounded breast and bleeding thighs refuses to put on the clothes.

Draupadi is one of the marginalized tribal women. She while defying Senanayak raises her voice and breaks the chains of patriarchy. She pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid (Spivak, 196)

Senanayak and his staff had no courage to face the violence they perpetrated on her body. They wanted to cover it but Draupadi refuses. She asserts her own agency, As Spivak says:

"It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could only happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful 'subject' (389).

The other short story in this anthology is "Breast Giver". "Breast Giver" or Standayini again brings the female body into the discourse. Female body is considered as a commodity to be used for diverse purposes. It is ironical that women have no right on their bodies too. Breast as Spivak clarifies in the beginning are more than a symbol deployed by Mahasweta Devi. Where as in Draupadi the name and the story outline are inspired from the mythological character Draupadi similarly in Breast Giver, the name of the protagonist Jashoda connects it to the mythological character Jashoda who was the foster mother of Lord Sri Krishna. Here Jashoda is a brahmin woman but belonged to the economically weaker section of the society.

Jashoda is the wife of a brahmin Kanganalicharan who stirs the vat in the shop of Haldar and in return gets some rice for his survival. Jashoda is the mother of twenty children. As "motherhood was always her way of living and keeping her alive the world of countless beings" (Devi, 39). It was the accident of Kanganalicharan that led Jashoda seek the mercy of Haldar Family to run her family. Being a devoted wife and mother, Jashoda couldn't see her husband and children starving. She asks the mistress to provide her meal but she is offered a new portfolio that is to become the infants' suckling mother. These children were the progenies of Haldar's sons who in order to relieve their wives suggested their mother to hire Jashoda and Jashoda readily accepts it thinking her breasts as the "most precious objects" (51). Her husband Kanganalicharan explained to Jashoda that she can get milk in her breast only if she bears child" so he became the

professional father and she became professional mother (Devi, 52)

Jashoda becomes the breadwinner for her family by using her precious objects i.e breasts and Kangalicharan starts taking care of the household. According to Spivak, Jashoda's selling of her mother body to a wealthy family in order to maintain her own family successfully reverses the conventional sexual division of labour between men and women (p.126). A woman's ability to procreate and nourish the children is exploited economically. Jashoda's repeated gestation and lactation support her husband and family. By the logic of the production of value, they are both means of production (p.126).

The second part of the short story set in the wake of feminism. The women in Haldar family started saying no to the annual breeding and this led the disappointment to their mother-in-law as she commits suicide. Haldar Family is divided and this worsens the condition of Jashoda whose services were not required further. Kangalicharan gets a new companion as according to him Jashoda was no more useful neither to Haldars nor to her own husband Kangalicharan.

Excessive suckling had brought her to the verge of death. She was diagnosed with breast cancer and dies in the hospital as an orphan. A woman who was hailed as a milk mother was ignored by everyone in the last phase of her life. It is her productivity that kept her useful to the family and her employer but the later years of her life when her body became fragile and was not so productive, she was abandoned by everyone.

"Behind the Bodice: Choli ke Peeche" the third and the final story in the collection uses breast as object of lust and torture. The name of the protagonist Gangor is the distortion of Ganagauri (Spivak, viii). Gangor is a migrant tribal woman who comes to Jharoa to work. It is the utter poverty that drags these folk to Jharoa in search of livelihood. Upin is hunting for the

sizzling story for the newspaper snaps her feeding her child. His intentions were not to violate her body. Gangor notices him clicking her photograph and demands money. She refers him as camera man. The domestic life of Gangor is also abused. The picture of Gangor is published in the magazine and it benefits Upin financially. Her mammal projections become the object of male gaze as those were statuesque. Upin could not liberate himself from her breasts though he knew that breasts are only lactating glands but the breasts of Gangor were natural and unique unlike those made of silicon and that's why they were endangered. When he realizes the gravity of his thoughtless act, he goes in search of Gangor.

Gangor's rage is reflected in the satiric smile she reverts to Upin. She was sexually assaulted. Unable to get any other way to survive, she pushes herself to prostitution. Her breasts were mutilated as Upin discovers:

"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'. (Devi, 156).

Upin's photos led to Gangor's humiliation and sexual assault. She decries the basic preconceived idea of male dignity. Upin was completely shocked. He "comes out, Gangor is still screaming, talking, kicking the corrugated tin walls with abandon. Upin runs. There is no non-issue behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it, Upin would have known if he had wanted to, could have known. (Devi, 156) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers the breast as a concept metaphor of police violence in democratic state (Spivak, x)

### Conclusion

Through these stories Mahasweta Devi confronts the problematics and complexities of subaltern women's lives. Her female protagonists are victims of capitalist and

patriarchal hegemony . They are tormented and commodified. Yet they resist actively or passively. They assert their agency to overthrow the regime . In her short stories , subaltern not only speak but also heard by the addressee thus the portrayal of these women broadens our perspective into the participation of gendered subaltern in speech, representation and resistance. Her writings are centred on the body, which is articulated into the speech and shifts the discourse into a different direction. All the three stories complied in this anthology decentralize the politics of gender. The domination of the elites ensuing oppression of the marginalized is replied with resistance. In her short stories , Subaltern women resist violence and exploitation and speak for themselves through their wounded body.

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