

Marginalization of women knows no boundary : A reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* ('Breast Giver', 'Draupadi' and 'Behind the Bodice')

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Abstract

Marginalization of women is a recurrent theme in Mahasweta Devi's short stories and other literary works. Her narrative mainly documents the struggle of the tribal communities and specially those of the women's to overcome the oppression and violence brought by high-cast land lords, money-lenders and corrupt government officials. Devi's literary work exposes the legacy of violence that has been passed on into the lives of generations of women and how women have been victimized by the politics of gender, caste and class played at various levels of social relationships.

My paper is based on the reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*, based on those rarely disclosed or constantly overlooked accounts where women are stripped of their honour and their humanity. According to Spivak, the 'breast' of a woman in these stories becomes the instrument of a vicious denunciation of patriarchy. Indeed, breast, common to all women can be constructed as the motif for violence in the short stories 'Breast Giver', 'Draupadi' and 'Behind the Bodice'.

Key words : Mahasweta Devi, Marginalization, Women's body, Breast Stories, Violence, Gender, Politics.

Born in 1926, Mahasweta Devi was one of the famous writers in Bengali, the language of the state of West Bengal in Eastern India, and of neighboring Bangladesh as well. Translations of her work into other languages and into English have brought her national and international recognition. Primarily she writes about peasants, outcasts, women, tribal people who live in the forest region of India, and other marginalized groups struggling to survive and resisting their exploitation by dominant class. Her fictions are marked by a powerful, direct, unsentimental style and by subtlety and sensitivity with which she approaches the theme of struggle and resistance. Although, Mahasweta Devi's early works were motivated by a concern for social justice, it was not until the Naxalbari student-peasant uprising of the 1960s that the lives of tribal people and peasants became the primary focus of her writing. It was during this time that she adopted a pattern of activism that she still maintains, participating in, observing and recording the struggles of the oppressed groups in Bengal. Her experience with the

Naxalite movement resulted in Hazar Churasir Ma (1084's Mother, 1973), a nationally acclaimed novel indicating organized violence on the part of the state. In Aranyer Adhikar (Rights over the forest, 1977), perhaps one of the most famous novels of Devi, she turned to the history of the Munda tribal revolt in Bengal and Bihar in the nineteenth century. Since 1984, when she gave up her academic profession, she has devoted her time entirely to grass-root works among tribals and outcastes in rural Bengal and Bihar. She also edits a quarterly journal, the main contributors to which are people from these marginalized communities.

Her *Breast Stories* are based on those rarely disclosed or constantly overlooked accounts where women are stripped of their honour and their humanity. According to Spivak, the 'breast' of a woman in these stories becomes the instrument of a vicious denunciation of patriarchy. Indeed, breast, common to all women can be constructed as the motif for violence in the short stories 'Breast Giver', 'Draupadi' and 'Behind the Bodice'. Trying to re-read Devi's Breast Stories from the point of "gendered" marginalization, we see Mahasweta Devi's literary work exposes the violence that has been meted out to generations of women and how women have been victims of the politics of gender, class and caste played at various levels of social relationships. We see how Jashoda of 'Breast Giver' has been exploited and degraded for years. We also come across Dopdi and Gangor, the protagonist of other two short stories 'Draupadi' and 'Behind the Bodice' respectively. We visualize the horrific tales of these women forcibly straight-jacketed into the mythical assumptions of 'womanhood' perpetuated through patriarchal ideology. Devi also documents Dopdi and Gangor reprisal against subjugation which becomes the means to their potential emancipation. Mahasweta Devi's fictional works are based on those rarely disclosed or constantly overlooked accounts where women are stripped of their honour and humanity. It is the physical, emotional and psychological rape that forces woman to strip the cloak of chastity obedience and meekness off her, transforming this act of disrobing into a symbol of female power. The *Breast Stories* are really horror stories. The Breast, as Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, the translator of the three stories, says, is much more than merely a symbol in these works. The breast becomes the object of attention of the male gaze and ultimately the national gaze as well. It becomes a bizarre tool of attack, a conscience-searching counter-offensive in itself. These stories are an indictment of a social system which is exploitative.

While reading the three texts, the idea that constantly haunted my mind was the gendered identity of the protagonist.

The short story "Breast-Giver" talks about Jashoda a poor Brahmin woman, whose milk laden bosoms serves as the bread provider for herself and her family and ultimately becomes the root cause of her suffering in isolation leading to her demise. The "breast" is one-of-a-kind to a female identity and is considered to be the emblem of motherhood. Jashoda has made a career out of the feminine and maternal process like gestation and location. But this ultimately becomes the cause of her acquiring a life threatening disease like breast-cancer. Throughout the story Devi focuses on the

hypocrisy, superstition, selfish greed and callousness that are the cause of the gendered violence.

How Jashoda has been exploited by the rich upper class Halder family is quite evident throughout the story. However, what intrigues me is that not only Jashoda but all the other female characters in the story are also at the receiving ends of patriarchal marginalization. We get a glimpse of it through the cook. One afternoon, the boy of Halder family, “created” diligently following the timings according to the astrological calendar, tries to force himself upon the family cook but does not succeed. The cook decides to keep quiet about the incident. But the boy fears that she might tell the family about his misdeed. So he gets her dismissed from her job on a false accusation of thievery. This female cook becomes another marginalized character in the story for she is humiliated, thrown out and is never to be heard of again. Even after knowing the whimsical character of the boy, nobody bothers to know the details of the stealing.

Perhaps, it could also be said that Jashoda’s profession as the wet-nurse was also an outcome of marginalization of women of the Halder family. The sons of the Halder family “starts creating progeny as soon as the almanac gave a good day, with love or lack of love, with irritation or thinking of the accounts at the works.” The women became mothers as long as possible. Nobody asked them their wish but it was as natural as things were meant to be. However, other than motherhood, the sons also demanded beauty from their wives. It was quite natural that progressive suckling will ruin the shape of the wives. Then if the sons look outside, or harass the maidservant, the wives won’t have a voice to object. “Going out because they can’t get it at home,” is considered just. Thus, Jashoda was proposed as the solution to this problem. While she becomes the infant’s suckling mother, the sons of the Halder family could enjoy the beauty of their wives without caring significantly about the progeny.

Much like the rich Halder wives, Jashoda’s condition was also not very different. “Jashoda does not remember at all when there was no child in her womb, when she didn’t feel faint in the morning, when Kangali’s body didn’t drill her body like a geologist in the darkness lit only by an oil lamp. She has been the mother of twenty children, living or dead, counted on her fingers.” 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 being. Jashoda was a mother by profession, a professional mother. Thus, it is this ‘womanhood’ which transcends the boundary of class and caste and puts the master or rather the mistresses and the servant equally marginalized.

Jashoda considers her husband to be her teacher, guide and master, and she blindly follows his dictates. According to Mahasweta Devi, Jashoda encompasses all the ideal qualities required of an Indian woman, that is, an “unreasonable, unreasoning and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children.” She is the quintessential Indian woman who believes that the female species exists only for reproduction and nurturing mankind.

However, misfortunes dawned upon Jashoda as soon as her ability to bear children vanished. While suckling her twenty children as well as thirty babies from the Halder family, Jashoda is given the status of the “legendary cow of fulfillment” (known

as Kamdhenu in the Hindu religion) Jashoda convincingly becomes a ‘year-breeder.’ She remains trapped in the notion of motherhood which allows life to be ‘sucked’ out of her body in order to rear those around her. Jashoda’s relatives ‘painlessly’ reject her during her illness because she fails to live up to their image of ‘mother.’ In their view, mother is a healthy, homely and strong personality. The shriveled, comatose woman with ‘stinking’ flesh of her breast is as good as dead to them. Hence, despite rearing fifty children, Jashoda dies alone. Moreover, it is Jashoda’s status as a devoted brahmin woman which pulls her to the trap of patriarchy endlessly.

The second short story ‘Draupadi’ is perhaps the most powerful among the three *Breast Stories*. Through it Devi urges the marginalized to disassociate from the norms for respectability and modesty mapped out by the patriarchal caretakers. The story talks about a tribal insurgent named Draupadi (pronounced Dopdi), who along with her husband Dulna, is on the list of most wanted criminals in West Bengal. They are infamous for their skilled use of primitive weapons like scythe and machete, and being competent in disguise have got away with the murders of numerous wealthy landlords. Both Dopdi and Dulna have the audacity to call themselves soldiers and together they have attacked several police stations and struck terror in the hearts of police officers.

The story ‘Draupadi’ begins with the birth history of Dopdi. She herself is the results of the exploitation of female servants at the hands of their masters. The condition of the masters’ wife is also no better. All she could do is give a pious, domesticated Hindu name – Draupadi, in the usual mood of benevolence felt by the oppressors’ wife toward the bond servant. However, unlike the mythical Draupadi, Devi’s Dopdi is in the habit of creating her own narrative, which she does by killing of his mistress’ husband Surja Sahu. And it is this incident which sets going the events of the story.

Mahasweta Devi shows Dopdi in a comradely, activist, monogamous marriage with Dulna. However, what holds my attention is the way Dulna was killed. He was gunned down in a spread eagle position while he was trying to drink water on his stomach on a flat stone. There was no attempt on the part of the authority to ‘make him do the needful’. Being equal partners in their mission, it was perhaps quite obvious that Dulna would have known as much information about the fugitives as Dopdi. But, it was Dopdi, a member of the ‘weaker sex’ who was made to ‘do the needful.’

Devi’s story questions the idea of singularity by placing Dopdi first in a monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape. In the epic *Mahabharata*, Draupadi’s legitimized pluralization (as a wife among husbands) in singularity is used to demonstrate male glory. She becomes the ‘so called’ cause of the crucial battle. Her eldest husband is about to lose her by default in a game of dice. He has staked all he owned, and “Draupadi belongs within that all.” Her strange civil status seems to offer grounds for her predicament. Being wife to five husbands, it was considered nothing improper to drag her to the court. The enemy chief begins to pull at Draupadi’s sari. She silently prays to the incarnate Krishna. The idea of sustaining law materializes itself as clothing, and as the king pulls and pulls at her sari, there seems to be more and more of it. Draupadi is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly stripped. It is one of Krishna’s miracles.

Devi's story however rewrites this episode. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi – in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. But unlike Draupadi, who prays to be clothed, Dopdi runs her own agency by remaining publicly naked at her own insistence. It is perhaps at this point that the male leadership stops. Dopdi is also what Draupadi – written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power – could not be. It is only when Dopdi crosses the sexual difference into the field of what could happen to a woman only that she emerges as the most powerful “subject,” who, still using the language of sexual “honor,” can derisively call herself “the object of your search,” whom the author can describe as a terrifying super object – “an unarmed target.” Dopdi tells Senanayak (the enemy chief) that he issuing orders for her to be stripped, raped and tortured was a typical exercise of phallic power. But, he is not man enough to force her to cloth herself again.

Dopdi, with the war-cry and her rejection of the choice of saving her modesty offered to her by Senayak, becomes the figure that spells doom for patriarchy. At the end of the story, Senanayak is forced to confront his powerlessness in the presence of a naked Dopdi. It is an easy task for Senanayak to have Dopdi's body forcibly disrobed, raped and mutilated. However, he does not possess the power to cover the marks of violence inflicted upon Dopdi. Dopdi turns her mangled breasts into an instrument of violence with which she disarms and subdues her opponent. Her marginalized female body becomes a site of rebellion against the patriarchal violence and finds emancipation by symbolically toppling her opponents. Dopdi manages to disentangle herself from the chains of dominion that has made their way through history.

The third story ‘Behind the Bodice’ is set on a socio-political background when a famous Hindi song *choli ke piche kya hai* has created an upheaval in the civilized and intellectual society. (A Madhuri Dixit starrer movie named *Khalnayak* has this famous item number *choli ke piche kya hai*, in it, 1993) Mahasweta Devi's short story ‘Behind the Bodice’ (translation of *choli k peche kya hai*) is about a migrant labourer named Gangor who has migrated to Jharoa along with her clan to escape the condition of semi-famine in her village. Gangor's tragedy unfolds when she is being captured in the camera albeit thoughtlessly while she is nurturing her child. This very natural and common phenomenon of suckling her baby becomes the root cause of Gangor's problem.

In contrast to Gangor is Shital, another female character in the story, with her silicone implant and is somewhat looked down upon due to the lack of ‘womanhood.’ The common link between Gangor and Shital is Upin Puri, an ace-photographer. He is an urban man who relies on the violence occurring in the backward and rural areas of Bihar and Orissa to earn his livelihood. His photography is of an investigative nature exploring the misfortunes experienced by people. He sells his picture abroad on huge prices to leading newspapers and magazines. His representations of violence undergone by the third world are appreciated by the West. Upin is married to Shital who is a famous Himalaya-climber.

While in a trip to Jharoa, Upin encounters Gangor, a rural woman. Upin is intrigued by Gangor's “statuesque” and natural semi covered breasts. They are complete contrasts to his wife Shital's artificial ones. He clicks several photographs of Gangor's

breasts and sends them for publications to a popular newspaper. Upin tries to highlight the mystery that lies under cover but manages to unleash violence all around him. The message underlying a picture of Gangor's breasts is – “ the half naked ample breasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped. Save the! Save the breasts!” However, this message backfires and becomes the cause of violation towards Gangor's body and breasts. As the picture of Gangor's semi covered breasts reaches Jharoa, it raises patriarchal eyebrows. According to the contractor who hires Gangor's clan, behind the bodice lays pure evil in the form of Gangor's breast. He says that Gangor has made “everyone sin against God.” The picture also comes to the attention of the local police. They stalk Gangor and she is said to be teasing them by constantly evading their paths. As a result, the police nab Gangor, puts her in police custody and gang rapes her. The representation of Gangor's naked breast by Upin thus becomes the cause of her victimization. It becomes the target of the patriarchal gaze where men assume the active role of the looking subject while women are passive objects to be looked at. Here Gangor's half-covered breasts completely overtake her identity.

Gangor's “mammal projection” highlights the reality of the mystery that is behind the bodice. Now her entire clan stays away from her lest she unleash her evil upon them. However, Gangor is not someone to back down. She chooses to file a police complain against her offenders and claiming the rights over her own body, she starts earning her livelihood through prostitution. When Gangor takes off her bodice before a sympathizing Upin, her body reveals the evidence of the violation and Upin could also be held responsible for this. Behind the small piece of cloth lie the bitten, torn and shriveled remains of her ones “statuesque breasts.” The two wounds that have taken the place of Gangor's breasts are hallmark of the violence wrought upon her.

Both Gangor and Shital are marginalized by the patriarchal society despite their class difference. While Gangor is physically abused, Shital's violation is much more metaphorical. The lack of her presence in the narrative of the text as well as in Upin's life is somewhere synonymous to the lack of the voluptuous bosoms in her – the emblem of ‘womanhood’. Physically she stands in sharp contrast to the ample breasted Gangor, but as woman they both are victims of patriarchal politics. It is patriarchy which has come to identify women as mere bodies through centuries.

Thus, trying to bind all the three stories together for conclusion, we get to see how marginalization of women transcends the boundary of class, caste and region. Jashoda, a pious Brahmin woman falls prey to the ideal trope of patriarchy – motherhood. In the story ‘Breast Giver’, her belonging to the so called upper caste leads to her imminent doom. Dopdi and Gangor however belong to the lower class. Even after belonging from two different regions marginalization parallels their conditions. While Dopdi is a tribal woman of Bengal, Gangor is an immigrant of Orissa. But, incidentally both of them bears marks of sexual violence in their bodies and eventually uses it as a means of emancipation in their own way. It is as if these women have no other identities apart from ‘female bodies.’ They are merely bodies through which patriarchy propagates itself.

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Bio Note

The author is a research scholar of Visva Bharati University and her area of interest is gender studies. She is a theatre worker herself and currently she is appointed as a lecturer in Santiniketan Institute of Polytechnic. Her present endeavour lies in the canonization of women playwrights.