

Bearing the Unbearable: Maternal Sacrifice and the Constraints of Choice in Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-giver"

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's short story "Breast-giver" skilfully portrays the objectification and commodification of women through the poignant and painful lives of Jashoda and the daughters-in-law. The narrative exposes the harrowing realities women silently endure, perceiving themselves as status symbols and mere instruments for procreation and the preservation of family lineage. In striving to fulfill societal and familial expectations, they lose sight of their own existence. Tragically, not only the society and their male counterparts view them as vessels for these roles, but women themselves internalize this perception, leading to their subjugation and causing them to see their sacrifices as inherent duties rather than unjust and forced demands.

This paper explores themes such as the exploitation of women as sexual beings and status symbols, their commodification, gender oppression, the survival of the fittest, and the dehumanization of marginalized groups. It also examines the apathy and indifference that characterize patriarchal and capitalist systems toward the poor. In addition to highlighting the more negative, repressive facets of disadvantaged lives, this paper also sheds light on the bright side—a glimmer of hope that can be found in Jashoda's resilience, bravery, altruism, and will to keep going, all of which give other women strength.

Keywords: objectification, commodification, dehumanization, marginalization, patriarchy, capitalist, status symbol, sacrifice, marginalized, resilience, utilitarian, transactional

Introduction

The pen is a powerful weapon which, if wielded by a conscientious writer, can become a tool to expose the moral and ethical decay of society. It can also enable us to prevent the death of humanity by reminding us to uphold our values and principles, embrace every individual with empathy and dignity, and strive to become better and more compassionate human beings every day. Driven by the noble intention to humanize people and create an egalitarian, fair society, Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016), an Indian writer, feminist, and social activist, wrote short stories revolving around themes of poverty, tyranny, injustice, violence, objectification, and inequality based on gender, caste, and socioeconomic status, presenting the harsh reality of an unfair societal structure. Her narratives foster a deep understanding of the marginalized experiences of deprived sections of society, portraying ordinary people—such as tribal communities, landless laborers, rebels, the destitute, and women—as central figures combating patriarchal, social, and economic forces.

Mahasweta Devi's prestige does not rest on writings filled with falsehood, fantasy, or romance, nor on protagonists from the higher strata of society. Instead, her stories bring to life the experiences of marginalized groups who regularly face the denial of their dignity and equality. What troubled her most was that, despite the fundamental human rights meant to ensure dignity for all, these communities were continually deprived of them, making them easy targets for exploitation and humiliation. She was deeply troubled by how the marginalized remained vulnerable to exploitation by those in power. Determined to make a difference, she resigned from her lecturer's position in 1984. Beyond writing incisive works to raise global awareness, she actively fought against oppression and discrimination. Despite facing countless challenges, her activism and literature brought real social change, influencing policies that improved lives. In recognition of her contributions, she received some of the highest honors, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Jnanpith Award, the Ramon Magsaysay Award, and the Padma Vibhushan.

"Breast-giver," originally written in Bengali as *Standayini*, is one of the three stories in *Breast Stories*, translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Like many of Mahasweta Devi's work, it lays bare the harsh realities of gender exploitation, female objectification, the dehumanization of the poor, and systemic injustice fueled by patriarchy and capitalism. Yet, through Jashoda's character, the story also highlights resilience, showing how even in the face of relentless adversity, women find ways to persevere. The narrative raises a powerful question: Are women seen as human beings at all? At the same time, it challenges readers to reflect, empathize, and recognize the urgent need for social change.

Mahasweta Devi masterfully captures the intertwined forces of patriarchy and capitalism, showing how they work together to strip women of their dignity, identity, and fundamental rights. Despite being a Brahmin, Jashoda suffered double oppression—first by a patriarchal society that views her solely in terms of her reproductive role, and then by the wealthy Haldars, who exploited her economic desperation and reduced her to an object of utility for their own gain. Her existence becomes defined by her ability to provide milk for their infants, highlighting the cruel reality that women's bodies are often commodified with little regard for their well-being.

Through the Haldars, Devi critiques the apathy of the privileged, exposing their failure to recognize the humanity of the poor. Yet, Jashoda's story is not just one of victimhood—it is also a testament to the immense mental and emotional strength of women. While society may see them as physically weaker, their resilience, selflessness, and ability to endure suffering for the sake of their families speak volumes about their inner strength. However, this resilience should not come at the cost of their dignity, and Devi's narrative makes it clear: a just society must recognize and respect the worth of every individual, regardless of gender or class. In addition to highlighting the more negative, repressive facets of disadvantaged lives, this paper also sheds light on the bright side—a glimmer of hope that can be found in Jashoda's fortitude, bravery, altruism, and will to keep going, all of which give other women strength.

Discussion

The self-contained title "Breast-giver" depicts the agonizing journey of Jashoda, who consented to use her nursing breasts as a source of nutrition for the infants of the wealthy Haldar family and as a means of livelihood and survival for her own family following her husband's disabling accident. Her terrible death from cancer was ultimately caused by the

very breasts that had once nourished countless people. It highlights women's importance as objects of utility in an unfair patriarchal society by reflecting the capitalist mindset of the wealthy, who valued Jashoda just for her breasts and the milk they produced, disregarding her as a human being.

The extreme injustice and humiliation that women like Jashoda endure on a regular basis highlight society's disregard for women's identities and their value as equal human beings. Through Jashoda's conditional respect, care, and elevation to the esteemed position of the "chief fruitful woman" (Devi 48) until her usefulness to the Haldar family expired, the story also foreshadows the utilitarian and transactional worldview of capitalists. Through breastfeeding, Jashoda performed a noble and life-giving act; however, this very noble act became the source of her exploitation, leading to abandonment by the Haldars and even her own family, ultimately resulting in her tragic death from cancer. Her story echoes the lives of all those women who bear the roles of mothers, wives, and caregivers, often at the expense of their own personal growth and self-expression, receiving ingratitude as their reward despite their sacrifices.

"Breast-giver" delves into the heart-wrenching journey of Jashoda, a "mother of twenty children, living or dead," (Devi 34) whose impoverished circumstances drive her to adopt "motherhood as a profession" (Devi 35) and endure immense sacrifice, exploitation, and dehumanization to sustain her family. However, as an uneducated woman, she fails to realize her exploitation and commodification of her body. In the process of supporting her family, she transforms into a "legendary Cow of Fulfilment" (Devi 44), a role glorified not only by others but also by herself until her utility fades.

Her story illustrates how poverty and helplessness can drive individuals into dehumanizing circumstances, erasing their autonomy and intrinsic worth. The narrative emphasizes the upper class's indifference and apathy, as they frequently overlook the hardships and suffering of the impoverished because they believe they are unimportant and undeserving of justice, dignity, respect, and compassion. This inability to recognize the impoverished as fellow human beings signifies a decline in humanity, a loss of empathy, and the privilege-driven mentality of capitalists.

As the narrative develops, "Breast-giver" exposes other forms of abuse that even privileged women encounter and endure. The story sheds light on the lives of wealthy women—the daughters-in-law—who too, irrespective of their financial status, could not escape an oppressive patriarchal system that treats them as mere objects and puppets under their husbands' control. Directly or indirectly, their objectification and commodification begin when, rendered vulnerable and enslaved by patriarchal ideologies, they allow their husbands to dictate their lives, thereby enduring the psychological pressure to appear beautiful and attractive to prevent their husbands from straying.

Jashoda's oppression and suffering are an indirect result of the psychological pressure imposed on the daughters-in-law by their male counterparts, illustrating how patriarchy victimizes both wealthy and underprivileged women alike. Under the pressure to live up to marital and cultural expectations, the daughters-in-law became blind to their own oppression—forsaking intellectual growth, becoming economically dependent, and living in constant fear of abandonment—all in an effort to preserve their marriage and beauty.

Their silent acceptance of their husbands' irrational desires suggests that women are conditioned from childhood to endure abusive marriages and tolerate infidelity in silence.

The analysis reveals a patriarchal strategy designed to curtail women's autonomy by confining them largely within the home, forcing them to focus on their beauty and appearance, and stifling their intellectual growth while instilling a fear of abandonment if they fail to keep their husbands content and happy. This distorted ideology completely disregards the psychological toll imposed on women's physical and mental health, intentionally sustaining gender inequality and reducing them to mere sexual objects.

Dehumanization, Poverty, and Commodification of Women

"Breast-giver" eloquently illustrates how gender and socioeconomic standing play a role in the dehumanization and commercialization of women. Jashoda, the central character, embodies this theme as her worth is solely determined by her capacity for reproduction and nursing. The privileged Haldar family and Jashoda's husband, Kangalicharan, view her as a mere tool for their personal gains, disregarding her as a fellow human being. They value her primarily for her ability to breastfeed children, disregarding the potential emotional and physical burden of breastfeeding and many pregnancies on her. Those involved in her oppression fail to acknowledge that "women are not just commodities to be possessed; that they are not there simply as sexual objects, that women are as human as men are" (Kaur, 200). This portrayal emphasizes the dehumanizing consequences of exploitation and the lack of humanity and empathy exhibited by the Haldars and Kangalicharan. Jashoda's value becomes intricately tied to her ability to fulfill her prescribed roles, pushing aside her humanity in favor of her utility. Once she exhausts her role, the Haldar family's acknowledgment of her existence diminishes, underscoring a larger societal pattern where the suffering of the weak and disadvantaged is dismissed as inconsequential. The story prompts a crucial examination of prevailing value systems that perpetuate this disregard for those lacking power and privilege.

In this theme, "Breast-giver" raises critical questions about the intersection of poverty, gender, and societal norms. It compels readers to grapple with the dehumanizing consequences of societal expectations and the implications of assigning value based on utilitarian roles. Mrs. Haldar justifies hiring Jashoda as a wet nurse to dissuade her sons from pursuing relationships outside the family, revealing the oppressive expectations placed on women. This justification is evident in her statement: "Going out because they can't get it at home—this is just..." (Devi 45). For the second son, who wanted his wife to maintain her beauty and figure even while being pregnant, the solution lay in "hearing from his wife about Jashoda's surplus milk..." (Devi 45). The wives themselves had their own interests in employing Jashoda as a wet nurse so they could "keep their figures" and wear "blouses and bras of 'European cut'" (Devi 48). Kangalicharan, upon hearing the proposal, focuses solely on "the amount of grains-oil-vegetables coming from the big house" (Devi 48). This distorted rationale for employing Jashoda as a wet nurse highlights the twisted ways in which those in positions of power exploit less privileged individuals to serve their own interests.

Mrs. Haldar's decision and her daughters-in-law's interest in hiring Jashoda as a wet nurse illustrate how even women from affluent backgrounds can perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes. This choice dehumanizes Jashoda, reducing her to a tool for the Haldar family's benefit. "Breast-giver" critically examines the social dynamics stemming from deep-seated hierarchical and class-based structures, highlighting the stark contrast between the privileged Haldar family and the impoverished Jashoda. Jashoda's value is solely based on her physical capabilities, reflecting the common practice of valuing women according to their usefulness to men. The daughters-in-law exploit Jashoda to achieve their goal of combining "multiple

pregnancies and beauty," (Devi, 45) showcasing how the pursuit of societal beauty standards can lead to the exploitation of individuals like her.

This narrative highlights the systemic inequities, our perceptions, and attitudes towards others, where an individual is respected or disrespected, loved or hated, valued or unvalued, included or excluded, uplifted or oppressed, acknowledged or ignored, empowered or marginalized, based on their gender, caste and socio-economic background. It sheds light on the deeply ingrained biases and prejudices that determine our interactions, relationships, behavior, and treatment of others, revealing the depths to which we can stoop by valuing individuals based on their socio-economic status or caste rather than their inherent worth and dignity. The story challenges us to reflect on our perceptions and attitudes, urging us to confront our biases, cultivate empathy, dismantle systemic inequalities, and create an inclusive, compassionate society for the less privileged who, like others, deserve respect, love, recognition, empathy, and the right to live with dignity.

Women as Instruments for Societal and Familial Goals

In "Breast-giver", Mahasweta Devi skillfully portrays the objectification and commodification of women through the poignant and painful lives of Jashoda and the daughters-in-law. The narrative exposes the harrowing realities women silently endure, perceiving themselves as status symbols and mere instruments for procreation and the preservation of family lineage. In striving to fulfill societal and familial expectations, they lose sight of their own existence. Tragically, not only the society and their male counterparts view them as vessels for these roles, but women themselves internalize this perception, leading to their subjugation and causing them to see their sacrifices as inherent duties rather than unjust and forced demands. The story powerfully underscores that "the oppression of women has its cause in the will to perpetuate the family and to keep the patrimony intact" (Beauvoir, 112), highlighting how women's bodies are regarded as symbols of prestige and mere instruments for fulfilling familial and societal expectations.

The story reveals the patriarchal mindset of the Haldars, who view Jashoda and the daughters-in-law not as individuals with desires, dreams, and identities, but merely as tools to achieve their objectives. This stripping of individuality is evident in Jashoda's transformation; initially, she breastfeeds the numerous children of the Halдар family to support her own. Eventually, driven by a sense of pride in her role, she becomes a child-breeding and feeding machine, ultimately losing her personal identity and life in the process.

Similarly, the daughters-in-law, fearing that their husbands might seek sexual fulfillment elsewhere, neglected their own personal growth and identities. Instead, they prioritized physical appearance over their inherent qualities, unaware that they were reducing themselves to mere symbols of status and reputation, ultimately rendering their identities invisible. The actions of the daughters-in-law demonstrate that when objectified, women—like men—begin to see themselves as objects to be looked at, admired, and desired, inadvertently contributing to their own oppression. The moment women begin to internalize their male counterparts' concept of beauty and value themselves primarily for their looks, they start objectifying themselves and endorsing the patriarchal notion that beautiful women enjoy more advantages and opportunities than those deemed less attractive.

The patriarchal system plays a major role in promoting these ideologies, imposing specific beauty standards on women and compelling them to conform. They are raised with the belief that beauty brings pleasure and that maintaining it makes them indispensable to men, thereby securing their future; however, in the process, they change their appearance instead of transforming their environment. Falling into the trap of deceptive patriarchal ideologies, women often prioritize superficial beauty and the illusory advantages it promises—such as protection and support from men. Unknowingly, they become so dehumanized that they fail to muster the courage to leave relationships that reduce them to mere objects.

Gender Oppression and Double Standards in a Patriarchal Society

The story highlights the repressive roles that a patriarchal society expects women to perform with the malicious intent of downplaying their capabilities. Often unknowingly, these detrimental gendered stereotypes and norms perpetuate violence against women, ultimately evolving into mechanisms of subordination. The deeply entrenched social norm, *happy husband, happy life*, ingrained in women from infancy, relegates them to supportive roles, emphasizing their primary duty of catering to their husbands' well-being. Such harmful stereotypes, passed down through generations, seem indisputable and go unchallenged and unaddressed by both women and society at large. This mindset of *happy husband, happy life* is evident in the daughters-in-law, who internalize the belief that their well-being depends on their husbands' happiness, viewing it as essential for their survival and security. The fear of being abandoned by their husbands drives them to transform from flesh-and-blood individuals into mere puppets, enduring irrational demands in exchange for financial security and social status. Gender disparity stems from various fears—fear of abandonment by a spouse, which leads to social stigma primarily placing the burden on women; fear of losing financial security; and fear of losing social status, which often pressures women into enduring victimization.

Devi observes that women face gender-based oppression and violence not only at the hands of men but also from women like Mrs. Halder, who, due to their double standards rooted in patriarchal ideology, perpetuate gender disparity and systemic oppression. Her double standards are evident in how she justifies her sons' infidelity, deeming it acceptable if their wives fail to appear attractive or meet societal beauty standards. She disregards the psychological scars that such societal pressure inflicts on women, who struggle to maintain their appearance—even after multiple pregnancies—in a desperate effort to keep their husbands' attention, fearing abandonment. The story highlights how, despite being pressured to bear children, women are constantly fed the idea that they must also look thin and attractive to prevent their husbands from straying, often at the expense of their own self-worth and personal aspirations. It is unjust to expect women to produce children annually, breastfeed them, and maintain their beauty and figure to keep their spouses interested. Society places blame for men's infidelity on their wives, their physical appearance, and their inability to meet the expectations of their male counterparts. Ironically, regardless of how men themselves appear, the unattractive physical appearance of women is a common reason for failed marriages, granting men the freedom to seek other alternatives.

The irony here is that women are not seen as equal humans; instead, they are perceived as entities solely existing to serve men. From a young age, women face societal pressures to prioritize their physical appearance to ensure successful marriages. This oppressive belief ingrains the idea that physical attractiveness is a crucial factor in establishing and sustaining

robust and enduring marital relationships. The reinforcement of such ideas from childhood contributes to the continued marginalization of women.

All education of women must be directed towards men. To please them, to be useful, to be loved and honoured by them, to raise them when they are young, to care for them when they are adult, to advise them, to console them, to render their life agreeable and pleasant--these are women's duties from their infancy on. (Vegetti Finzi 123)

Survival and Self-preservation

“Breast-giver” delves into the themes of survival and self-preservation within a challenging societal context. The story illustrates these themes through Mrs. Haldar and daughters-in-law who exploit Jashoda's role as a wet nurse and her husband, Kangalicharan, who, being physically disabled and unable to provide for the family, allows her to endure physical exploitation for his comfort and survival. The daughters-in-law, in an attempt to preserve their beauty as desired by their husbands and protect their marriages from infidelity, hired Jashoda as a wet nurse, which ultimately led to the infidelity of Jashoda's husband. While they succeeded in keeping their husbands from straying, Jashoda's physical decline from multiple pregnancies and nursing made her less attractive to Kangalicharan, causing him to seek the company of other woman. To escape the stigma of abandonment by their husbands and the intolerable life that would follow, the daughters-in-law chose to exploit Jashoda's poverty, using her as a scapegoat to protect their marriages. To avoid the trauma of infidelity, financial insecurity, and losing their husbands' affection, they prioritized their own needs, desires, and pleasures at the cost of Jashoda's emotional, mental, and physical well-being, ultimately becoming the architects of her downfall. Their selfish actions contributed to Kangalicharan's infidelity, Jashoda's abandonment, homelessness, and eventual death.

Through her portrayal of the daughters-in-law, Mahasweta Devi not only exposes the psyche of the wealthy—who completely disregard the physical and emotional devastation their choices inflict on the poor—but also highlights the insidious nature of power dynamics and how wealth can compel the oppressed, the daughters-in-law, to become oppressors in order to protect themselves. Despite being victims of societal pressure and patriarchal ideology, the daughters-in-law, driven by self-interest shift their burden of conforming to societal beauty standards onto Jashoda, exploiting her as a wet nurse to safeguard their marriages and social status. The deep-seated selfishness of the daughters-in-law, despite being oppressed themselves, highlights how their conditioning within oppressive structures leads them to accept unjust treatment. In their struggle for survival and escape from their own challenges, they become complicit in Jashoda's exploitation, transforming from victims to oppressors. Their behavior demonstrates how the fear of insecurity fosters apathy, disconnecting individuals from the feelings and needs of others and compelling them to prioritize their own survival, regardless of its impact on those around them.

This dynamic reveals a bitter truth: even privileged women were not exempt from patriarchal oppression. Both the daughters-in-law and Jashoda suffer under the same exploitative system. Mrs. Haldar, fearing that her sons would seek sexual favors elsewhere and tarnish the family name if their wives became unattractive due to multiple pregnancies

and nursing—further compounded by the lack of heirs—proposes employing Jashoda as a wet nurse. The affluent daughters-in-law ensure their status by using money as bait for Jashoda, ultimately leading to her premature death. Their self-centeredness is evident in hiring Jashoda as a wet nurse, a role she accepts to navigate her own struggles, unaware of the hardships ahead. The story "Breast-giver" essentially draws attention to the power struggles and economic inequalities that make life pleasant and comfortable for some while rendering it intolerable and painful for others. The Haldars totally disregarded morality, humanity, and violated Jashoda's fundamental human rights in this commercial trade, taking advantage of her weakness for their own gain. Humans have a natural tendency to be selfish and to protect themselves in difficult circumstances, but Jashoda's altruism and self-sacrifice took over her life and left her with nothing. The daughters-in-law agreed to this arrangement to protect their marriages and avoid the fear of desertion and socio-economic isolation. This aspect of the narrative sheds light on the human psychology, observing that when people feel threatened or insecure, they would go to great measures for survival and self-preservation, frequently prioritizing their own interests even at the risk of another's life.

The Bitter Fruits of Sacrifice: Replacement, Isolation, and Tragic Death

The belief that “the greater the suffering, the greater the sacrifice, the greater the sweetness”(Hare) may not always lead to the best or most positive outcomes. This is evident in Jashoda’s case, where her compassionate concern for others and selfless sacrifice became the breeding ground for her own destruction. Stories like “Breast-giver” bring to light the patriarchal strategy of keeping women in an oppressed and powerless state by idealizing their self-sacrificial nature, admiring them for setting aside their desires and aspirations, and conditioning them to prioritize the interests of others.

Historically, society has tended to raise women as selfless caregivers, natural nurturers, emotional supporters, and objects of male sexual gratification. In their pursuit of embodying the ideal of womanhood and succumbing to external expectations, they often fail to recognize that they have lost their own worth. Narratives like “Breast-giver” discourage self-sacrificial behaviors that deprive women of their rights and entitlements, contributing to the dismantling of patriarchal structures that perpetuate their oppression and objectification.

Sacrifices and compromises within a family foster a nurturing environment and serve as a testament to the depth of love and support among its members. However, the irony lies in the fact that it is primarily women who are expected to relinquish their dreams, happiness, desires, and well-being for the sake of familial harmony. Women, like Jashoda, find a sense of pleasure, happiness, and fulfillment in sidelining their aspirations and desires, enduring personal discomfort to bring comfort to the lives of their loved ones, believing it to be their obligation. However, the psychological comfort Jashoda initially gains from these sacrifices eventually leads to disappointment, exploitation, isolation, and ultimately, her untimely death.

Jashoda, the mother of the world became a burden on the world and was left on her own to fight cancer and die alone. “The mother who self-effaced herself for the sake of children was cremated as an orphan corpse by an untouchable milk-son” (Lakshmi). Her lifelong dedication to her family's well-being ultimately led to her own physical decline and eventual death. Her unwavering commitment to prioritizing her family's happiness and needs, while neglecting her own well-being, underscores the profound sacrifices women like her make in the name of familial duty. The story raises critical questions about why women are

conditioned from a young age to embrace the role of sacrificial lambs. Why aren't they empowered to say 'no' to certain unreasonable demands? And why do women like Jashoda find pride in their ability to sacrifice?

Through the story, Devi illustrates that sacrifices do not always yield rewards, as Jashoda's neglect of her own well-being in her dedication to her family is met not with gratitude or security but is instead rewarded with abandonment by the Haldars' family and infidelity by Kangalicharan. Haldars and Kangalicharan discarded her when her body, no longer youthful and useful after multiple pregnancies and years of nursing, failed to meet their desires. Furthermore, they all abandoned her just when she needed them the most, as a cancer patient. This abandonment of Jashoda was expected from the Haldars, who had a capitalist mindset, devoid of empathy for the poor, and viewed Jashoda merely as an object. However, it was heart-breaking to see Kangalicharan, her husband, turn his back on Jashoda for a younger woman when tragedy struck her life.

Now that he was financially sufficient and had a younger woman to enjoy in his “prime”, Jashoda was a spent resource. Thus, she was alienated from both of her shelters, destined to live as an outcast since her body was of no use anymore. (Basu)

Kangalicharan's infidelity not only highlights the selfishness of a man who fails to appreciate the emotional and physical labor of his wife, but it also exposes the power men hold in a patriarchal society, where women are seen as replaceable if they no longer fit the ideals of beauty or suitability.

The narrative prompts readers to reflect on whether it is justifiable to replace a woman with someone deemed more beautiful, thereby undermining her existence based solely on physical attributes. It highlights the psychological toll that women bear when society's mistaken assumptions cause them to be valued solely for their appearance rather than for their full humanity and capabilities. This focus on looks over competence, shaped by patriarchal norms, fuels a culture that objectifies women and perpetuates oppression and inequality.

Gender Roles, Empowerment, and Resilience

Mahasweta Devi's “Breast-giver” celebrates Jashoda's resilience, empowerment, and courage, presenting her as a beacon of hope for women facing everyday challenges. Her story is a powerful testament to the strength of the human spirit, showing that even the underprivileged can overcome formidable obstacles through determination. Devi's characters are not of noble birth or great strength but come from humble backgrounds—landless laborers, tribal communities, rebels, the destitute, and women—who, rather than succumbing to hardships, rise above them.

Adversity is universal, but our responses define us. Through the daughters-in-law, Devi exposes how patriarchy confines women to their physical appearance, discouraging them from realizing their full potential. This reinforcement of stereotypes keeps women dependent on men for security, limiting their independence and preventing them from asserting themselves. The Haldars' unrealistic expectation that their wives maintain beauty and physique, and the daughters-in-law's internalization of these views, rendered them vulnerable and compliant, inhibiting their ability to challenge these norms. Prioritizing physical beauty over intellect weakened their resilience and independence, making them reliant on male

support and stripping them of identity. In contrast, Jashoda's unwavering perseverance and commitment to protecting her family transform her struggles into stepping stones rather than roadblocks.

The daughters-in-law also suffered under the patriarchal ideology that demanded women to be beautiful. However, to some extent, they managed to escape its full impact— not because they possessed extraordinary perseverance and resilience, but because their financial power allowed them to circumvent such oppressive norms. Jashoda's character demonstrates her indomitable human spirit, as she refuses to submit to patriarchal societal norms that fail to recognize women as breadwinners. Despite her life being a tapestry of challenges, she emerges as an empowered woman who, despite her poverty, commands more respect and dignity than the daughters-in-law. Her life stands as a testament to resilience and tenacity, inspiring other women.

The story "Breast-giver" stands as a powerful tribute to the strength and resolve of those who defy these norms, with Jashoda being a prominent example. It also vividly depicts a society where women are pressurized to prioritize their roles as caregivers, adhering to predefined gender expectations. Shoshana Felman writes:

From her initial family upbringing throughout her subsequent development, the social role assigned to the woman is that of *serving* an image, authoritative and central, of man: a woman is first and foremost a daughter/a mother/ a wife. (118)

Jashoda's selflessness and willingness to embrace her unconventional role as a wet nurse can be understood within the context of her deeply ingrained commitment to familial duties. This cultural conditioning contributes to the portrayal of women, particularly Jashoda, as obedient spouses and devoted mothers who prioritize the happiness and contentment of their male counterparts over their own aspirations. Her acceptance of a task that many might find burdensome serves as a manifestation of the influence of patriarchal ideology, wherein she exhibits a tendency toward unquestioning loyalty to her husband and acceptance of a subservient position.

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 13? Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit (Devi 46)?

Jashoda's willingness to accept her unconventional role as a wet nurse demonstrates her fortitude and courage in the face of adversity, motivated by her steadfast dedication to her family's well-being. Her resilience shines through, especially after Kangali's horrific accident, when she becomes a source of hope and livelihood for her family. Despite facing daunting circumstances and considerable challenges, she refuses to succumb to bitterness or weakness, demonstrating tenacity that contrasts strongly with the docile demeanor of the rich daughters-in-laws.

The central argument of the narrative is that if the Halдар family and society had not put such a high value on physical beauty and appearances, Jashoda could have been able to pursue other opportunities or have her worth recognized beyond her physical qualities. "Her aim was to speak to the Mistress and ask for the cook's job in the vegetarian kitchen" (Devi,

43) however, the Halдар family's unrealistic demands and expectations, combined with her need to care for her family, led to the growth of breast cancer and, eventually, her terrible death in seclusion. Jashoda's desire to work as a cook represents her longing for a meaningful and fruitful job. The contrast between Jashoda's ideals and her ultimate fate highlights the conflict between individual aspirations and societal expectations.

Injustice, Privilege, and Lack of Accountability

In "Breast-giver", Mahasweta Devi powerfully explores themes of injustice, power, and a lack of accountability in the interactions between the privileged and the downtrodden. The narrative brings these issues to life through vivid incidents that reveal the deep divide between those with economic power and those without. The story shows how wealth often acts as a shield, allowing the powerful to shape events in their favour while the less fortunate are left to bear the consequences of systemic injustice.

One striking illustration of this disparity is the Halдар family's youngest son, who avoids punishment for his involvement in Kangali's tragedy and Jashoda's sad circumstances. Another notable discrepancy is the son's skillful manipulation of the situation to deflect responsibility onto his victim, the maid. By falsely accusing the maid of theft after perpetrating a heinous act of sexual abuse, he serves as an example of how people in positions of authority may sway narratives to their benefit and increase the divide between the rich and the underprivileged. His ability to evade responsibility demonstrates how the wealthy can use their financial advantages to gain immunity, sustaining a system in which their acts go unchecked. The story successfully depicts the structural prejudices that allow those in authority to avoid penalties for their crimes, while the less privileged endure the brunt of injustice. In essence, "Breast-giver" is a striking reminder of the inevitable inequities between the rich and the downtrodden, especially in terms of accountability and justice. The narrative skilfully demonstrates how economic dominance may sustain systemic bias and result in impunity. Devi's story challenges readers to consider the pressing need for justice and equity in a culture that frequently dismisses the plight of the less fortunate.

Conclusion

The entire story "Breast-giver" can be concluded with the theme that "selfishness leads to callousness." The narrative effectively highlights the self-serving exploitation of Jashoda, a poor and helpless Brahmin woman, who is hired as a wet nurse with the ulterior motive of making her breastfeed the Halдар family's infants, thereby preserving the beauty and physique of the daughters-in-law. She is conditionally respected and valued only as a commodity, as long as she remains useful. However, once she develops breast cancer and becomes unproductive, the Haldars' callousness is exposed—they abandon her, leaving her to suffer and die in isolation.

Through Jashoda's character, Mahasweta Devi adeptly critiques the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism, urging readers to recognize how these systems together strip women of their identity, rights, and autonomy by exploiting them as laborers and subjugating them as slaves. At the same time, Devi exposes how these oppressive structures dehumanize even privileged women, as seen in the daughters-in-law, who, in an effort to safeguard their marriages and futures, reduce themselves to mere puppets controlled by their husbands. Despite belonging to the capitalist class, they too are victims of patriarchal ideology and are

bound by marital and societal expectations. However, their financial resources enabled them to hire Jashoda as a wet nurse, allowing them to maintain their beauty and fitness, securing both their futures and marriages and ultimately protect themselves from the risk of abandonment.

Through the daughters-in-law's obsession with beauty and their husbands' fixation on appearance, Devi sheds light on the pervasive issue of female sexual objectification in patriarchal societies. In such environments, women's physical appearance is often regarded as their most valuable attribute, overshadowing qualities such as intelligence, skills, talents, and potential. This leads to negative impact on women's self-perception, causing them to disregard their own achievements and self-worth. As a result, they view themselves as inessential and insignificant, questioning their identity as fully recognized human beings.

"Breast-giver" prompts readers to understand the pernicious and long-term effects of stereotypes, such as the belief that girls must prioritize beauty and become skilled in household chores. The evaluation of women based on physical attributes can have profound implications, leading to intellectual deprivation, low self-esteem, mental health issues, and depression, as well as gender-based violence and an imbalance within family structures where women are viewed solely as subordinates. Ultimately, this evaluation creates barriers to the progress of a society that could benefit from the talents and contributions of women.

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