

Female Body An Onslaught Terrain In Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast Stories'

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Abstract:

Mahasweta Devi's provocatively potent and satiric fiction "Breast Stories", translated by Gayatri Chakrovarty Spivak has women's breast as its focus. Bringing women protagonists from diverse backdrops of life Devi questions the unfathomable realities of third world social systems bringing into account the breast of a woman as a body part with different symbolic elucidations. This cluster of short fiction comprises three stories namely "Draupadi", "Breast Giver" and "Behind the Bodice". The thread that cords these three stories is: the Breast. This research involves reflecting on the female body as an onslaught terrain. In "Draupadi" the protagonist Dropdi Mejhen is a tribal revolutionary whose breast becomes a symbol of brutal sexual assault. Next, "Breast Giver" is a story of Brahmin wet-nurse Jashoda whose breast become a denotation of food and livelihood for her children and a crippled husband. Unlike the above women's mythical counterparts these women meets their ruinous ends. The final fiction in this collection is "Behind the Bodice" where the migrant laborer Gangor's breast fall for a symbolic fascination for an itinerant ace-photographer which finally becomes the reason of her own victimization. The proposed paper seeks to respond to the normative sign system where the women and their body parts provide dynamic figurative especially the breasts as a part of body that completely engulf the identity of women bearing it. The breast acts both as an object of strength and of attack in the above fables. The argument shall endure to critique the notion of body parts as erotic objects that transmogrify into objects of torment. Further dissecting the 'wholes and parts' of the female body, this paper also aspire to reflect on the final condition of the 'breast' portrayed in every story of each female protagonist of Devi's collection as it provides an image that help to unravel the harsh verity of the lives of a subaltern in a phallogocentric social order.

Key Terms: - Myth, Subaltern, Normative sign system, sexual assault, social system

Temporary Indian feminists are grappling for issues like individual rights, patriarchy, sexual autonomy and biological control over female body, divorce, sexism, prostitution, education and all other prerogatives which were long neglected to women. With a new wave of feminism a new generation of Indian feminists has emerged and Mahasweta Devi is one among this new contemporary generation who being a prolific and best-selling author of novels and short stories in Bengali, is equally well known for her pioneering work for the most down-trodden in the Indian society - the dispossessed tribes and the marginalized segments such as landless laborers of eastern India. Devi writes about the lives of ordinary men, women, particularly Adivasis (tribal) like the Santhals, Lodhas, Shabars, and Mundas, and other topics of social and political relevance and she also has spent many years crusading for the rights of the tribal's. The quarterly *Bortika* that she had been editing since 1980 has been a mouthpiece for these peoples. Her tireless endeavor has won her recognition and several literary honors. However, her voice would have been limited within a certain territory as people from Bengal understood Bengali also

people known to tribal, indigenous and marginal life of women were mostly her readers. This territory expanded through the translations and criticisms of Gayatri Charavarty Spivak and the international public eye set by Spivak held quite different standards of aesthetics –standards that are counter-canonical, deconstructive and almost anti-literary. The translator’s comments are couched in the jargons of postcolonial arena which are impenetrable for anyone outside the field and stand in stark contrast with Devi’s use of vernacular. Spivak theorizes the characters of the tribal women in Mahasweta’s texts as “subaltern”. Though Devi often refuses to have connection with any school of thought, yet her unconventional but sympathetic portrayal of subjugation of women and their consequent revolt inevitably adds a feminist angle to her works. The women characters appear to be stronger to men who merely appear to be passive spectators. Paralleling the postcolonial, post-feminist agenda of decolonizing the tradition, religion, ethics and every other hierarchical institution, Mahasweta inscribes a new sexual praxis in her narratives of the women who undergoes double colonization due to her ethnicity or caste or class identity and inexorably her gender. Women’s positions in society, particularly those of marginalized/ peripheral ones are very preoccupied with the sense of docility and negligence. Mahasweta Devi’s stories speak of this unspeakable truth of women’s misery and their power of resistance. In her stories, we can get the linearity which is derelict in mainstream literature and her fiction offers an array of female’s figurative situation in society as well as the materialistic use of their body for the social and economic purpose. By analyzing Devi’s short fiction namely, ‘Draupadi’, ‘Breast Giver’ and ‘Behind the bodice’, this paper would explore the fragmented and paradoxical voices of the female protagonists, their defiance, endurance and resistance. Her stories exhibit the subverted gender role and consequences of this subversion. As Anup Beniwal Vandana explains in her thesis:

Mahasweta’s fiction aims at inverting such hegemonic, over-privileged, ever-signifying system of relationships and attempts to bring low what was high through the strategies of subversion and reversal. Her stories come across as the post-colonial, subaltern, gendered responses that serve to topsy-turvy such hierarchical structures, generating aesthetics of opposition in the process (2007).

Devi’s fiction offers a female situation and the materialistic use of their body which acts symbolically for social and economic purpose. A homogeneous case-study can be found in her short fiction ‘Breast Giver’ where Jashoda, the principle character or as the narrator puts it a ‘professional mother’ becomes a wet nurse for the Haldar family, who retain her services until she becomes useless to them. As Devi describes her:

Jashoda is fully an Indian woman, whose unreasonable, unreasoning, and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati-Savitri-Sita through Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani(Breast Giver)

Reinterpreting this idealized version of a woman, Devi aimed at exposing the relentless collusion of patriarchal and capitalist ideologies in the exploitation of the disadvantaged which becomes worse in case of a woman. The story offers new avenues for examining the points at which gender and class oppression intersects. Quite ironically Devi satirically derives character of Jashoda the breast-giver,

named after Yashoda, the mother of the beloved child-god Krishna who unlike her mythical counterpart meets her ruinous end as her profession leads to an uncured Breast cancer. In the story, the female body figuratively lays utmost importance because of different roles and aspirations it plays, whether of Jashoda or other women of Haldar household, the female physique and framework can be read through a feminist lens in the story. In order to maintain the figure of Haldar daughter-in-laws (so that her sons do not harass the maids) the matriarch of the family decides to make Jashoda a 'suckling-mother' for new born infants of the family. In this story not only did men pose threat to victimization female body but also the women who readily accept their objectification contributing to materialization of Jashoda's body as well. Forced by her husband and the circumstances to give birth over and over again just to keep the milk flowing Jashoda is victimized through different angles of class and gender. The body of a woman here falls as a biological downside when the narrator deliberately names her as the "cow of fulfillment" whose body is nothing but a medium of deriving benefits for others. The money she earns by continuously suckling babies at her milk rich breasts keep her family well fed till the breasts give way to cancer and income dries along with the milk. Laying in the hospital alone thrown away by her husband and those innumerable disloyal suckling sons she asks herself that if she suckled the world how can she die alone? And the narrator ends with:

Jashoda Devi, Hindu female, lay in the hospital morgue in the usual way, went to the burning ghat in a van, and was burnt. She was cremated by an untouchable. Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone. (Breast Giver) Her disease can be referred as hatred towards the manipulation of her reproductive body. Her hatred magnifies through her bearing the deadly disease which is the result of a continues domination of her reproductive body, probably this is why devi writes: "The sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes (Breast Giver)." Mahasweta Devi's writing stands out as a powerful tool that subverts the authority and questions the society on the mutilation of female body for benefits of others. In Jashoda's story not only her breasts but also her womb is used for materialistic derision of economic purposes. To quote to Vandana again, "Devi's journalistic reports on exploitation and expropriation, deprivation and degradation, edits journals carrying subaltern voices and translates the issues and the people she is concerned about into the narratives and characters of her fiction" (27)

In "Behind the Bodice," Mahasweta Devi conceptualizes the mangled breasts of Gangor as a metaphor of the violence, especially the custodial torture that has become ordinary. This story recalls the life of an ace-photographer Upin Puri who represents violence undergone by the Third World through his pictures and sells them abroad and which are readily received and appreciated by the West. The tragedy unfolds when he captures albeit thoughtlessly the breasts of a migrant laborer named Gangor while she is nursing her child. He clicks several photographs of Gangor's breasts and sends them for publication to a popular newspaper. The message underlining a picture of Gangor's breasts is 'The half naked ample breasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped. *Save them! Save the breast!*' (Behind the Bodice). The female body can be seen getting prejudiced further when Gangor's 'statuesque' and natural breasts are compared with Shital's (Upin's wife) silicone enhanced artificial breasts. Further the pictures of Gangor somehow make way to Jharoa and come to the attention of the local police. The police nabs Gangor, puts her in lock-up and gang-rapes her. Even the legal order too is infested with

patriarchy. The violence of the police exposes the domination of a subaltern in the phallogocentric society. When the policemen gang-raped her, Gangor chooses to file a police complaint against the offenders. Now, Gangor's entire clan stays away from her lest she unleash her evil upon them, even her own family abandon her. The representation of Gangor's naked breasts by Upin thus becomes the cause of her victimization. The exposure of her breasts makes her the object of disgust in her own community as well as a sexual object in the eyes of the police. This leads her to earn her living through prostitution. Gangor's half-covered breasts completely overtake her identity and her "mammal projections" highlight the reality of the mystery that is behind the bodice. According to the contractor who hires Gangor's clan, behind the bodice lays pure evil in the form of the Gangor's breasts. He says that Gangor has made "everyone sin against God" (Behind the Bodice). In Gangor's view, Upin too took advantage of her by clicking photographs of her half-bare chest to earn money, for her he is as good as the contractor who sells her to other men for money. When Upin meets Gangor, she takes off her bodice to reveal the violation of her body. Behind the small piece of cloth lie the bitten, torn and shriveled remains of her once "statuesque breasts." The two wounds that have taken the place of Gangor's breasts are hallmark of the violence wrought upon her. He realizes that his plea to people to 'save the breasts' was utterly futile or indeed ironical. Gangor's body signifies the rape, torture, humiliation, manipulation and exploitation carried out by the institutions and protectors of law. Yet her victimization was a 'non-issue' to the more grievous subject of the song "choli ke piche" for the people and society.

The force of Mahasweta Devi's text resides in grounding the gendered subaltern's body and the Subaltern in feminist histories help to deconstruct the mainstream, to dissenter it. This deconstructionist practice is clearly applied by Devi in her fiction 'Draupadi', where the protagonist embodies hegemonic masculinity leading to her exhilaration. 'Draupadi' depicts how a marginalized tribal woman derives strength from her body when at the same time it is used to cripple her who is ironical, counter-canonical and contradictory. In the story Draupadi or Dopdi Mehjan and her husband Dulna Mehjan are the part of *Operation Bakuli* in 1971 (revolutionary Naxalite Movement). They are wanted by the government as they hide underground. Dulna is found dead during a search and later Dopdi too is unfortunately caught by them. After her apprehension when she refuses to speak out other hideouts of revolutionaries she gets victimized to a series of brutal sexual assault when the *Senanayak* says: "Make her. Do the needful," (Draupadi). Devi's description of this scene is provocatively potent: "Then a billion moons pass. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nail heads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts."

How many came to make her? Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she's been made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven-then Draupadi had passed out. She turns her eyes and sees something white. Her own cloth. Nothing else. Suddenly she hopes against hope. (Draupadi)

In the morning she is again taken to *Senanayak* where she unpredictably portrays unconceivable audacity:

Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth...*Senanayak* walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked, walking to-ward him in the

bright sunlight with her head high... Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid (Draupadi).”

Here the rape was not carried out of lust but was a conscious effort to intimidate and to exercise power of violence. Unlike her mythical namesake, Dord's defiance is absolute and is unaided by any divine male agency. Devi craft fully deconstructs the notion of shame associated with rape. The body here transmogrifies from an object of attack to an object of strength and the normative sign system of nakedness being associated to shame/fear is dismantled. Her naked-mutilated, anti-intimidated appearance draws a picture of bold protest and by objecting to cover up her body, her abject shame, docility and the state of being a tribal or poor or a woman. Her consumed body becomes an instrumental strike back against her subalternity.

The bodies of above female protagonists provide dynamic figurative constructions. The final conditions of their bodies spill out their collective state of being under phallogocentric power dynamics. Devi's 'Breast Stories' documents women's reprisals against such subjugation, which become the means to their potential emancipation. These women make a form of resistance that is subversion of repressive sex and sexual attribution. In Mahasweta Devi's stories we observe a wide range of women from tribal to upper caste women, from rich to poor who are dealing with the hypocritical behavior of the family and society. The dualism or multi-behavior of society just not only ruined their lives, but also set an example of despotism where women and their physical attribution are only considered as a product to consume, repress or mutilate. Besides, their appearance is submerged and their bodily body is regarded as a subject of resolving purposes of domination, power, and lust or even to derive economic utility. Mahasweta Devi collects all these issues and presents them in a subverted manner and provides a strong dossier against gendered subalternity.

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