

Exploring the Female Psyche in Mahasweta Devi's Stories

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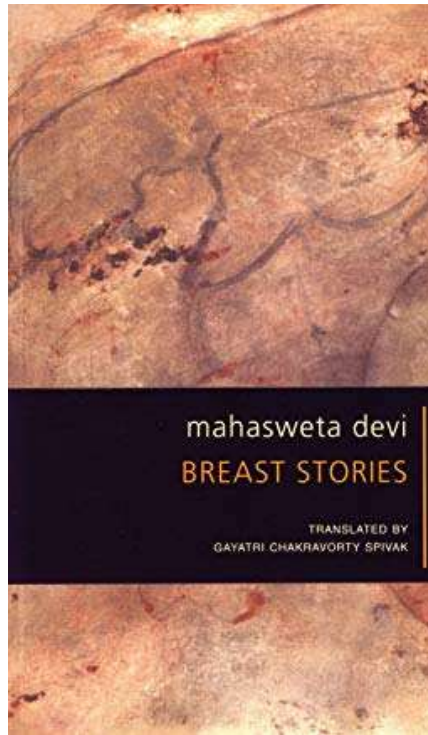
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Abstract

Less of a feminist and more of a humanist, Mahasweta claims that a woman should be judged as a human and not from the point of view of gender, race, caste and class. Devi portrays the true face of feminist assertion, whereas Draupadi uses her wholeness of mind and body to fight against her marginalized identity. Mahasweta Devi's stories speak of this unspeakable truth of women's misery and their power for enduring and resistance. Mahasweta gives voice to the

characters. She speaks the ‘unspeakable’ truth of these characters. In this paper I am going to discuss some of her short stories, namely, *Breast-Giver*, *Draupadi*, *The Hunt*, “Behind the Bodice” to explain that her women are strong and that they have a tremendous sense of self-respect and are prepared to fight all their battles to the end, even if the end is death.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, *The Hunt*, *Breast Giver*, *Draupadi*, Feminism, psychological affliction, women’s suppression.

Introduction

“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

Feminism is a social movement required for the reparation of the imbalance in society by providing women with the same rights and opportunities as men in order to be able to take their rightful place in the world. Feminism is not only the movement, which is run by women for women, but it is a kind of a Human Liberation movement, which encourages society to think that women are also human beings. Feminism requires the world to look at women as human beings and to think about their problems, dreams and needs.

Women are born free, but everywhere they are found in chains in our society. They are considered as inferior human beings and are always looked down upon. For ages, they have been crushed under the grinding stone of a male-dominated society. A woman is not as free and secure as a man. She has been a victim of both physical and psychological affliction. She is considered frail and fragile. Since ancient times, man has acquired and occupied the superior status, leaving the woman as the inferior in the society.

Feminism has always been considered as one of the movements like any other movement either socially or literally. Sometimes it gets a place in literature with all other theories which have less of a sentimental approach. Feminism has come down to us or has evolved gradually as a theory, but most of the females, the marginalized section of the society, has changed very slowly over the years. We are still fighting the same age old battle of repression and suppression; the same mental and physical humiliation; the same suffering of being born a woman. The woes and the disgrace of a female humiliated - remains the same. There seems to be no end to the mental and physical violence faced by women in the society.

Mahasweta Devi explicates the problems of women and the misery they undergo in a male-dominated society and presents them in her works. In her works she has dealt with the plight of women and their subordination. Her writing has little to do with the insignificant everyday eccentricities of the privileged; she avoids the needless or the unnecessary. In her

matter-of-fact no-rhetoric writing one sees no romanticism in the plight of women who are most directly and drastically affected by the patriarchy. Her characters are from the bottom of the socio-economic class; they are real, multi-dimensional, and well-formed. To Mahasweta Devi, they are the needful.

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 double-standard of society not only ruined their lives, but also set an example of dictatorship where women and their physical attributions are only considered as a product to 'consume' and 'mutilate'. Besides, their appearance is suppressed, and their physical body is regarded as an object of reproduction, sometimes even without their proper consent. Devy Ganesh remarks about Mahasweta Devi:

she has a strange ability to communicate with the silenced, her best speech reserved for those to whom no one has spoken". She is taken as a rare creative writer in bringing the challenging stories from the unheard groups. Mahasweta's story represents a feminist literary appropriation. With her book, *Breast Stories*, Mahasweta Devi, as an Indian intellectual, came to be known for her feminist position. The stories, written by Mahasweta Devi, represent the real context of female existence. The voiceless figure of the female has her own consciousness that grows along with her stories.

Breast Stories is a refreshing book for those who want to dive into Indian feminist fiction. Although it was originally written in Bengali, *Breast Stories* was translated into English by the feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1997. The three stories are titled: *Draupadi*, *Behind the Bodice*, and *Breast Giver*. They have one connecting thread – the breast, a metaphor for the exploitation of women from the marginalized communities. These powerful stories draw attention to the systemic oppression that women face each day. Rape has been used as a weapon of war in Columbia, Iraq, Sudan, Nepal, and Afghanistan. Women are constantly harassed on the streets, be it in the city of Delhi or Kerala. Our bodies are controlled and objectified not only by monsters but also by well-intentioned men.

Mahasweta Devi attacks the silence that surrounds the social-political-cultural issues, and through her narrative on "Jashoda", focusses on the experience of motherhood and on the exploitation of women.

Overcoming the oppression of men and society to gain equality is a major theme in *Breast-Giver*. The protagonist, Jashoda, is a marginalized Brahmin woman. After her husband is crippled in an accident, she is forced to work as a wet-nurse for the wealthy Haldar family. She adopts the profession of wet nurse to support her family when her husband Kanganalicharan gets

crippled in an accident. To support her family she feeds twenty children. Though this new employment forces her to be repeatedly pregnant, yet it gives her social and political significance in the form of a Mother of the world. In the present story breast is the source of food and livelihood for Jashoda's family. Haldar household was using Jashoda's body. Jashoda is paid to breastfeed the many children of her master and mistress. Her abundant milk becomes a vehicle of income for her husband and family. Jashoda is not exploited because she is a woman, but because of the class structure, the change of time and situation. Though she is the provider for the family, Jashoda is not free from her responsibilities as a wife and mother to her own children. She has to do both jobs simultaneously, which speaks to the complexities of many women's lives. In the very opening of the story Jashoda is introduced as:

Kangalicharan's wife from birth, the mother of twenty children, living or dead, counted on her fingers – Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings. Jashoda was a mother by profession, professional mother.

Just because a woman works outside the home to earn a living doesn't mean that she cares any less about the goings on in her household and family. A working woman needs to continue to be strong for her family even though she may not be present some of the time and it is known that women can be both nurturing and powerful at the same time. Jashoda also has to overcome the oppression of a predominately patriarchal society, which is an important ideal in feminist theory. Jashoda overcomes being 'other' in many ways. The society in which Jashoda lives holds men in a higher regard than women. The men are the providers for the family, as well as the heads of the household. Jashoda reverses these traditional patriarchal norms. She becomes a leader, and she goes to work outside the home to provide food for her family. In this way, she becomes equal to or greater than her husband and the other men of society. She takes on responsibilities that are usually left for the man of the house to fulfill. Jashoda and Kangalicharan switch stereotypical 'roles' of men and women. Kangalicharan takes charge of the house while Jashoda goes to work. This reversal of traditional roles speaks to Jashoda's enterprise as well as her power within the family and society. She and her husband become equals when you consider the work done at home which is traditionally the work of the woman.

Jashoda becomes a "Milk mother" for the Haldar family and dies suffering alone in silence due to breast cancer. In spite of so many children, she receives a lonely cremation by the hospital staff. As long as she remained fertile, the exploiters became happy with her produce and the moment she gets cancer, they keep away from her. Thus Mahasweta Devi shows how the "Milk mother" pays a heavy price for her ignorance and dies of severe pain. She exposes the hidden exploitation of a poor woman, a faithful wife and a great mother, Jashoda.

Mahasweta Devi, is horrified by the game of politics that tries to break the spirit of men and women who fight for emancipation from slavery on behalf of their caste and clan. Hence, she embarks on a project of presenting the shocking realities that happen behind the socioeconomic and political iron curtains, through her most powerful work *Draupadi*.

Dopdi is a twenty-seven year old tribal woman. She is named by her mistress. She is on the list of wanted persons who had killed the mistress' husband, Surja Sahu a land-owning money lender, because he refuses to share water with the untouchables. They are wanted by the government and so they are hiding in underground. Dopdi, the protagonist of the story is running away from the police, but unfortunately caught by the armed forces and tortured to get information, and when she tolerates all tortures and does not reveal whatever information the policemen wanted, the worst torture is used on her, that of being brutally gang raped whole night and day, which leaves her bleeding and wounded and bruised. Rape is a weapon used on a woman on any pretext. If there is an enmity between two men or between two communities, between two nations it is brought down upon the women. Women in a society, specially Indian society, is considered to have certain values and honour and if one wants to take revenge upon that community and that particular society it is the women folk that need to be attacked and destroyed physically and mentally so that the society is shamed.

The name Dopdi is actually a rural or tribal version, a mis-pronounced version of the name Draupadi. The character of Draupadi in the Mahabharata and that of Dopdi of Mahasweta devi are so different, and yet there is a meeting point where both try to fight against the injustice meted out to them in their own manner. Draupadi is a queen, royal, beautiful, and she has five husbands although married to one. Dopdi on the other hand is a poor tribal woman, wronged all through by the feudalistic power in the society. In the Mahabharata it is God himself (Lord Krishna) who comes to save Draupadi from the humiliation, but there is no God to save Dopdi. The revenge motif in both cases is very much prevalent; however, there is some kind of difference. The revenge of Draupadi is one reason behind the Mahabharata war. In Mahasweta devi's Dopdi, there is no revenge taken for her humiliation, she decides on her own method. She tries to take revenge upon those who wronged her. She emerges as a new female. After the tragic incident, Draupadi does not howl or behave like a helpless victim. In the morning, she refuses to put on her clothes, tears to pieces her clothes with her teeth, and does not wash herself. Her behaviour is incomprehensible, rather strange. In refusing to obey the command, she appears bigger than life to the all too calculating Senanayak, the army commander. She walks naked towards Senanayak in the bright sunlight, very uplifted and sure. She says:

“.....what's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush-shirt to spit the bloody

gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me come on, counter me..... Dopdi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid". (p. 196)

We have yet to come to terms with the fact that men and women are equally important in the house, or outside, to talk of larger issues and to find a solution to extreme cases like rape; and to fight for justice for rape victims remains a very distant dream. Hence when in Literature one comes across a character like Dopdi who decides to take her revenge in her own way. She does not wait for any other stronger force or some man to take revenge on her behalf. She is an example of the extraordinary fact as to what extent a woman can be pushed, that it comes to her mind to raise her voice after being brutally gang raped. Dopdi is the new woman born and even if she is not able to bring outlook of woman. This new woman has challenged patriarchy without any movement and without any sound. She begins another war in her own silent manner.

The Hunt also dwells on the theme of sexual harassment. Devi focusses on violence that is often employed to subdue and control women. Here a tribal woman falls prey to a rich man's lascivious desires. But Mary – the semi-subaltern protagonist – puts a stop to his sexual advances by resorting to violence. She murders the offender with her machete. This turning point in Mary's life comes on the night of a tribal spring festival when after a period of thirteen years, gender roles are momentarily reversed as women assume the role of hunters and men that of clowns. By assuming the role of a hunter as per the ritual, Mary gains courage and eliminates the threat looming over her, thereby averting her own destruction. *The Hunt* shows Mary's revenge against "sexual patriarchy". Devi's stories thus highlight the dismal conditions in which the lower classes of women are forced to live where they continually bear degradation at personal, socio-economic and political levels. However, her work also highlights the fact that it is primarily the woman herself who can transform herself from a victim to a winner who follows the courage of her convictions and brings about a metamorphosis in her life.

The last story of the Mahasweta Devi's Breast series entitled *Behind the Bodice* is based on the song of a Bollywood movie, *Khalnayak*. The story opens with a thought-provoking statement of the writer herself:

What is there was the national problem that year. When it became a national issue, the other fuckups of that time—e.g. crop failure-earthquake, everywhere clashes between so-called terrorists and state power and therefore killings, the beheading of a young man and woman in Haryana for the crime of marrying out of caste, the unreasonable demands of Medha Patkar and others around the Narmada dam, hundreds of rape-murder-lockup torture et cetera non-issues which by natural law approached but failed to reach

highlighting in the newspapers—all this remained non-issues. Much more important than this was choli ke piche—behind the bodice.

Upin, a freelance journalist and photographer, takes a photograph of Gangor, a poor tribal migrant labourer breastfeeding her baby. 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!" These pictures somehow make their way to Jharoa and come to the attention of the local police. The police nab Gangor, puts her in lock-up and gang-rapes her. After learning about the violent fate of Gangor, Upin takes it upon himself to go and save her. He finds out that she has started to earn her living through prostitution. It is the only alternative left for Gangor as her kith and kin have abandoned her. When the two come face-to-face, Gangor names Upin as one of those who violated her. The site of Gangor's mutilated breasts is a shock for Upin. The horrific vision drives home the reality of the Nothingness that he has tried to ignore all this time. He realizes that his plea to people to 'save the breasts' is utterly futile. For those who are assigned to protect society are, in fact, the perpetrators of violence. In a state of shock, Upin steps on the railway tracks of Jharoa and is crushed under the wheels of a train.

Conclusion

Her stories are the basics for justifying localized figures where the female becomes the means of social and familial savior. She puts the female within them with their strength and modes of existence. Her stories have not only been the s part, but also the agent for bringing the change. Alter explains:

Her characters are generally drawn from the impoverished or exploited classes and their struggle for justice takes on mythological overtones. Every individual and thing is different with one another in a specific perspective in this universe. So discrimination is not unjust if it would be the basis of stratification of person and things but when it is unjust –when it discriminates people on the basis of cast, class, creed, religion, color and gender and give a vertical division of society, and distinguishes individuals' ups and downs on the ladder of hierarchy based patriarchal social system where lower is always dominated by upper. In other words, where differences lead to discrimination, discrimination provides a platform of oppression and exploitation. Here discrimination is morally wrong and socially unacceptable because it leads to social injustice.

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