



Reinterpreting Mahasweta: A Critical Study of *Breast Stories*



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Research Paper :

Mahasweta Devi has been one of the foremost and prolific literary figures of India. It is widely known that she has many a great texts to her name. Most of her stories are located in the regions of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Orissa. In a nutshell, the tribal area forms the locale of her literature as do Wessex and Malgudi for Hardy and Narayan respectively. Mahasweta has been translated into as many as fourteen languages with English, Italian, Japanese and French being the transnational ones. Although Mahasweta Devi is appreciated by many, Maitreya Ghatak, one of her translators and an editor, says,

‘Mahasweta has been criticized by literary purists who feel that she is merely a chronicler of social reality’.

When it comes to artistic presentation, Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav claim:

However, in the longer narratives like *Operation? - Bashai Tudu, Chhoti Munda and His Arrow or Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pritha* that we find Devi grapple with issues of narrative presentation.

The writer of the present paper has also come to discover that Mahasweta is not able to form a connectivity of the tenses, past and present. For example, when she scripts some event, she makes a mix of the simple or perfect past and simple present. It somehow turns unintelligible to grasp why such a case takes place in Mahasweta Devi. One wonders if she does it on purpose.

So far as the themes are concerned, Mahasweta deserves a lot of appreciation for her adoption of them: exploitation, tribal and untouchable life, political contradictions and certain other issues of extreme concern peep through her works. Moreover, she seems to be failing her readers since the grounds of presentation of the above issues, the ones in particular of the untouchables and tribes, are vulnerable. For instance, the characters like *Lachhima, Karan Mohor, Shanichari, Gangor, Draupadi*, etc. could not meet expectations of the reader and take up a distorted form each. It is also especially notable that when she explores a discussion of the untouchables, Mahasweta does not offer a single mention or allusion to the names like Mahatma Phule, Dr Ambedkar or Rajarshi Shahu, the people whose commitment to champion the cause of the downtrodden and depressed undoubtedly comes prior to any other’s across the country. Mostly she tries to cover the above-like subjects of her writing under the faction of Gandhism which brings the attitude in question¹. Mahasweta uses the term, *Harijan* to refer to the untouchables virtually every now and then. Here it is worth its while to mention what **Achebe** (14.10.2010) talks of Conrad in respect of the latter’s *Heart of Darkness*. He says that Conrad’s inordinate love for the word *Negro* suggests itself how much attached to the case of the Africans he is. One could understand even the word, Harijan, if one so desires, in the similar light.

Breast Stories is a collection of three stories by Mahasweta Devi inclusive of the titles, **Draupadi, Breast-giver** and **Behind the Bodice** respectively. The first one is a story about a tribal naxalite, the second about a Brahmin wet-nurse and the last about an untouchable woman. The stories have been rendered by Gayatri Spivak in English. The translator has written an introduction as well as her foreword to the collection along with a full-length critique on *Breast-*

giver. The foreword is ambivalent an experience for the reader. Referring to the opening story, the translator has a cultural connotation to make:

Draupadi is the name of the central character. She is introduced to the reader between two uniforms and between two versions of her name. Dopdi and Draupadi. It is either that as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name Draupadi, or the tribalized form Dopdi, is the proper name of the ancient Draupadi.... The Mahabharata and Ramayana are the cultural credentials of the so-called Aryan civilization of India. The tribes pre-date the Aryan invasion. They have no right to heroic Sanskrit names. (10)

Although Spivak says later that neither the interdiction nor the significance of the name must be taken too seriously, one factor comes as prominent that Spivak openly admits that the Sanskrit phenomenon is not an indigenous entity as far as one sees the Indian context. Moreover, Spivak fails to attend to politics behind use of the word, *Harijan*. She, like so many others, the so-called Gandhian scholars and followers, takes it appropriate to call the untouchables so since the address is a respectable one, *children of God*, a product of Gandhi's mind, so tells political history of India. Either Spivak is Eurocentric-like or pretends to be ignorant to the fact that the term was vehemently rejected and spurned by Dr Ambedkar and his followers forthwith since it causes a great insult and abuse. Spivak should have taken a note of what **Keer** (333-5) has expressed in the biography of Dr Ambedkar, by Keer himself, a text partially appreciable. One should also take into account the retort vigourously expressed by Dadasaheb **Gaikwad**: If we are the children of God, are you that of the devil? And Keer also adds that the slaves of Gujarat are called by the name of harijan. It adds to the argument that Omprakash Walmiki has stated in his introduction to *Joothan*, that he was initially so satisfied with the term and later on completely disillusioned with, hence staunchly opposed to it, to be called so. Mahasweta in no uncertain terms wants to often say that Gandhi has done a great service to the untouchables, a claim which has ever been refuted by Ambedkar himself offering many a practical proofs.

Breast Stories is the title unusual to sight. The leitmotif of the title does not seem to be clear as, one tends to think, why the writer has chosen such a caption. One easily comes across a question as to whether it was essential for the author to go for that. *Draupadi* is a story of a naxalite woman. It comes imperative to go through the oeuvre of Mahasweta Devi, at least through her *Dust on the Road*, to get as why the tribals become the revolutionaries and naxalites. Mahasweta

has written many activist essays that offer one vision into realizing the nature of exploitation inflicted upon the tribals and untouchables by the money-lenders, feudalists, local politicians and the police. Mahasweta has quite lucidly presented the case of economic, social, cultural, physical and political exploitation of the tribals and untouchables. Once they enter the bonded situation, there is none in the world that can come to their rescue. Draupadi seems to be an outcome of such a circumstance. She is 27, the wife of Dulna Majhi, both being the main culprits in the 1971 Operation Bakuli. The couple escapes feigning dead. The police are after them consistently. Draupadi is taken for 'the most notorious female'. Rs 100/- is the award declared for her capture alive or dead. She and her husband are sought after most for the crime of killing Surja Sahu and his son. They go underground for a long time and are named on the barrel of the police gun for killing the grain brokers, landlords, moneylenders, law officers, and bureaucrats. This indicates that there is a severe problem of the most fundamental needs of human life.

Senanayak, a Punjabi Sikh, the inspector, is recalled to the police station around Jharkhani. While the Santhal couple is on the run, the soldiers go camouflage with an army informant, Dukhiram Gharari who sees Dulna about the place of water and has him killed. Dulna cries 'Ma-ho' which is understood as a code of tribal communication and the experts are invited to decipher the code and it is interpreted as 'a cry of battle'. Mahasweta unnaturally tries to connect the tribals with King, so she calls, Gandhi through many of her works². The cry is also associated by her with Gandhi's movement. Before Dukhiram goes to collect his reward, he gets a knife in his neck, is killed. As Dulna is shot dead, all the onus of carrying the revolution forward falls on the shoulders of Dopdi. She collects some rice and knots it into her waistcloth and walks slowly. As she walks, 'she picks out and kills the lice in her hair (27)³'. She is quite sure that once caught, she would be encountered. Dopdi assumes an alias Upi Mejhen. She is proud of her forefathers that stood guard over their women's blood in black armour. Now her mission has been to wipe out the exploiters. Senanayak is a man seasoned with experience who simply knows the principle of finishing the criminals with no excuse, his motto being *if you want to destroy the enemy, become one*.

Finally Dopdi is apprehended at 6.53pm. When the dinner hour of Senanayak approaches, he asks his men to 'make her'...and 'Do the needful (35)'. The convict is tied to four posts and is gang-raped for a very long time:

Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says ‘water’ she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her? (35)

About seven people rape Draupadi all through the night and ‘her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn (35)’. Mahasweta Devi, of course, seems to present the dark reality that takes place with the untended sections of society at the police station. This move of hers deserves all the gravity of attention yet the kind of presentation using a language that writes body rather than writing on the body also seems gratuitous. The above description by her certainly insinuates, one may think, sadism or one is unable at least to feel if this is the only way of presenting reality. When offered a white piece of cloth, Draupadi declines it and stands naked before Senanayak with her ‘Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood (36)’. The people, on the various academic lecterns, intensely criticize and mock at the language used by Dalit writers. Could the very ones take such a move against Mahasweta? It would be a wonder should the question appear irrelevant. Finally, Mahasweta concludes: ‘Draupadi pushes *Senanayak with her two mangled breasts*, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid (37)’. Why does Mahasweta use the body organs to put forth action? There seems to be no clue. In fact, the words of the writer seem to make her personae more undignified and schizophrenic.

Breast-giver is the second story of the collection in which Jashoda acts the central protagonist. The protagonist is a Brahmin who bears many children and suckles even more than the human capacity can do. Gayatri Spivak has analysed the story in four ways: for *Author*, *Teacher*, *Subaltern*, and *Historian*. Besides, she has added some elite approaches to her scholarly discussions on the story. Moreover, some of her approaches come out, apparently at least, as purely Euro-centric, an outsider’s view. For instance, the way Spivak interprets the protagonist from the vantage point of Marxism exactly leads to baffle the Indian reader. The story is basically an account of the pathos a mother suffers against the challenge of survival. Therefore, it is more related to the affects and less to the values like *surplus*.

There is a Brahmin couple having had about five offspring. The two of the offspring are still sucklings. Jashoda’s husband finds a lasting solace in her breasts. Every night he massages them and goes to bed. He works at a sweetmeat shop where he stirs vat and after finishing his work every day he steals some samosas and feeds his children on them. There is a Haldar family, a

prestigious one, a well-to-do of course. In the family, the youngest son behaves whimsically. Mahasweta calls him an incubus of Baghdad. Once the boy is filled with lust, therefore, attacks the lady cook. The cook, having stolen rice, fish and turnip greens listlessly responds to him and the boy is repentant. The figure of the cook does not receive any sense of respect: 'She was sufficiently proud that her body had attracted the boy (39)'. Fearing punishment, the boy implicates the cook under the charge of thieving his mother's ring and gets the cook dismissed ever. On an afternoon, Kandalicharan returns home and on the way is run over on feet and shins by a car driven by the very spoilt son of Mr Haldar. Mr Haldar is so angry for the reason that his son has attempted to kill a *Brahmin*. He respects the Brahmins so much so that he touches the feet of Kangali, the person of his son's age, and puts a pinch of dust of his feet on his own tongue. What he says about the Brahmin is interesting:

There is no East or West for a brahman. If there's a sacred thread around his neck you have to give him respect even when he's taking a shit (44).

Mahasweta has incorporated some superstitious elements in the story. She always refers to the Lionseated, the Goddess. Haldar-babu promises Kangali that he would give him a shop set up in his own yard, a matter of reparation for the sin his son has committed but all of a sudden he has a heart failure and dies therefore. Consequently, all the responsibility of running the house naturally rests upon Jashoda. She is an Indian woman who does not blame her husband for the misfortune incurred. She is determined to function as a professional mother. Since the control of Haldar-babu's house comes into the hands of his wife, she thinks that she should plan a breast-giver in the form of Jashoda for her sons may produce trouble when their wives look unattractive after suckling their own babes for a long time. Jashoda is pleased with the job. She breastfeeds near about twenty children. For a while all the problems of family sustenance are overcome. Kangali looks after cooking at home and Jashoda becomes an image above the 'mother cow'. Soon she becomes an object of great reverence and devotion everywhere in the town. This shows a common acquiescence to exploitation of women. Mahasweta represents Jashoda as a pathetic character on the one hand and a cruel husband in Kangali on the other. Jashoda is so happy in the beginning to perform her duties as wet-nurse and says for that reason:

[...]A woman breeds, so here medicine, there blood-peshur, here doctor's visits. Showoffs! Look at me! I've become a year-breeder! So is my body failing? Makes

your skin crawl? I hear they are drying their milk with injishuns. Never heard of such things! (53)

Actually, what Jashoda says is just a piece of dramatic irony as one undergoes in Macbeth. After eight years of playing wet-nurse, Jashoda loses her mistress and consequently also loses her bread and access to the Haldar house. The eldest daughter-in-law of the house asks Jashoda to seek her husband who has set himself up in the Shiva temple. Even her husband rejects her. Mahasweta rightly hits at the crippling yet selfish-in-excess husband. Jashoda lies in the courtyard of the Lionseated's temple for four days but no deity arrives to help her.

Eventually, Jashoda goes back to the Haldar house and asks the landlady to have mercy upon her. It is agreed that she would serve the house as a cook and since a Brahmin, she is a bit sympathized with. Soon it is discovered that Jashoda has caught a painful breast cancer. In the beginning, she is not ready to go to hospital but is forcefully admitted into one later. Her husband is repentant for a while but leaves the hospital ever and soon afterwards Jashoda leaves the world. She is finally cremated not by any of her kith and kin but by an untouchable.

The story paints a picture of excessive suffering of a helpless woman, merciless community, some hyperbolic elements, over-idealization of the Brahmins and a cruel husband. Considering exploitation of Jashoda, Spivak's 'discourse of jouissance (109-25)' looks ridiculous.

Behind the Bodice is the last of the stories that does not carry a sense of seriousness as do the first two. The theme of the story 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 fuck-ups 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 etc. *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 (134).

The quote above brings out the irony of the Indian media that could never realize the importance and solemnity of the real issues of concern. The useless things always make the big news in

India. Mahasweta also turns her attention to the so-called scholars communicating in the non-Indian languages on the national-level daises and become the decision makers.

Upin is an ace-photographer who, along with his friend, Ujan, and wife, Shital Mallya, goes to the places, Jharoa and Seopura in between which dwells a migrant labourer, Gangor. His pictures appear in the national press. Mahasweta talks of a woman who is:

A high-breasted rural woman [that] sits slack wither breast shoved into an infant's mouth. The breast is covered with the end of her cloth. The same girl is walking with many girls carrying water on her head. Breasts overflowing like full pitchers (140).

The photograph of the woman is caught and she demands some money from him which shocks the man. At times one sees that Mahasweta makes an excess of the descriptions such as that of the breasts. The above lines could easily prove the point. Why she makes a woman more naked is a non-descript thing. It is also especially noticeable that when she has to construct a character from the tribal or untouchable class, Mahasweta shows it as 'dirty', 'filthy', 'full of lice' 'denuded of morals', etc. This is not to take Mahasweta into a negative frame of mind but discuss what exactly lies there in her works. Sometimes the tribal characters find a respectable representation but it is a hard case with the untouchables. Gangor is such a character that looks dirty and filthy. Her husband is a dweller of jail that collects money from her at night. Gangor's photograph invites a disaster to her life.

After some days Gangor is found missing. The caretaker of the house in which Upin, Ujan and Shital live tells Upin that the women like Gangor have been shameless country girls that move from place to place to kill. Gangor is too much harassed by the police and drinks the country-brewed wine. When Upin goes seeking after Gangor, he finds many people dying of adulterated water and the rest of them playing the song, *Choli ke piche*. When Gangor is discovered at the end, she is found a prostitute. The photography of Upin has been instrumental for the spoiled life of Gangor, i. e. corollary of gang rape upon her.

The themes of prostitution, rape, immorality, etc. have been prevalent with Mahasweta Devi. The subaltern women always play the victims for her. Reading pathos of such victims one hardly finds it with Mahasweta if there are some respectable subaltern female characters on her list. When one compares Draupadi and Gangor with Jashoda, one finds that all the three women are subject to illimitable exploitation yet Jashoda enjoys a very high-level moral position, a position

of a pure woman whereas Draupadi and Gangor lose every moral. They are the subjects of all clumsiness, symbolizing moral debauchery and figures of hatred and repulsion. All the characters seem to be the products of the so-called Brahminical point of view. Jashoda is a winner in the end while Draupadi and Gangor the permanent losers, having lost everything.

Notes:

1. See *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to Untouchables*, *Essential Writings of B R Ambedkar by Rodrigues, Writings and Speeches Vol.17*, etc.
2. See, for instance, *Chhoti Munda and His Arrow*, etc.
3. It is difficult to grasp whether Mahasweta Devi wants to be realistic or to impoverish the tribal women.

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