

ARE WOMEN COMMODITIES? : A STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S *BREAST STORIE*

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Abstract

Gender inequality is highly noticeable in the postcolonial India. Even after independence, there is no recognizable upliftment in the condition of women. Majority of the women occupy a subordinate position in the society when compared to that of men. Men by using their status in society attempt to oppress women and due to it women are incapable to battle for their rights. In societal context men marginalize women in several ways based on power, class, economy, etc. This hegemony or dominance expands when women from subaltern groups are read by society only as objects/commodities and not as living beings. The significance of the paper is to focus this on the act of marginalization, the nature of victimization, the helplessness of women and the shutting down of ways of resistance in such positions. For the purpose of such forms of depiction and discussion, the paper utilizes Mahasweta Devi's Breast Stories to as a tool to display the postcolonial India.

Key Words: Subaltern, Marginality, Inequality, Object, Subject.

The term subaltern originates from the Italian term 'subalterno' which means "subordinate" or "dependent". This term refers to the individuals who belong to the lower order of society such as peasants, tribals and others who in the normal routine are denied access to any sociological power. Ranjith Guha in his *subaltern studies* used the term subaltern, "as a name for general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way". (vii) Gender difference, political and economical inequality enabled men to suppress women in the postcolonial India. The objective of the paper is to look at the various ways through which women are used as commodities and thus focuses on how resistance becomes a usual activity for them.

Since time immemorial, women remained dependent on men for subsistence and security and even the social practices based on religion and customs reinforce their inferiority and subordination to men. The constructions of the patriarchal norms deprive women from their basic rights and are made to depend upon men throughout their life. Having certain rigid ideas about women, the patriarchal society moulds women to accept their suppression and

makes them to follow the norms by its power. In the Manus codes, the condition of women was described thus,

A young girl, a young woman, or matron must do nothing according to her own pleasure even in her dwelling place. In childhood she is dependent on her father; in youth on her husband; in widowhood on her sons... A woman must never seek to be independent. She must never wish to separate from her father, or husband or her son. (Jain: 11)

These ideologies of the patriarchal society make women to believe themselves as incapable of doing any work without a support and which leads to the condition of powerlessness for women in the society. Hooks describes the powerlessness of women as “victimized by sexist oppression” rendering them unable “to change their condition in life”. (1) In the male point of view, women are just an object for their needs and are merely a commodity to use for their own desires.

In India, gender inequality is highly noticeable. Even after independence, recognizable upliftment is not seen in the condition of women. Majority of the women occupy a subordinate position in the society when compared to that of men. It is because, men use their status in society in order to oppress women and it results in women’s incapability to battle for their rights. In societal context men marginalize women in several ways based on power, class, economy, etc. As mentioned earlier, the paper focuses on the act of marginalization, the nature of victimization and the helplessness of women through a critical analysis of Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast Stories* in the postcolonial India.

Mahasweta Devi was born in 1926 in Dhaka and grew up in West Bengal. She was born in a family where all were both educated and civic minded. During her adulthood she came across several movements during the freedom struggle. After her completion of Master’s Degree, she worked as a journalist. In 1965, she visited Palamu in Bihar and witnessed the dismal conditions under which many of Indians live. Slowly her concern turned towards the peasants and she viewed them as emblematic of social oppression in India and she mirrored their lives through her texts. Most of her stories are centered upon the problems women faces in the Indian society. Even then she has never addressed herself as a feminist. The reason for this is, “in her perception sexual exploitation always forms part of a much larger pattern of exploitation”. (Bhattacharaya: 1004), her stories are centers, “with the gender issue offering an exemplum of other issues”. (Bhattacharaya: 1004) As a journalist, she voiced for the oppression of peasants and women. Jean Pichering observes that, “The context of her story is the conflict between two master-narratives, one the official story of the decolonization of India, of freedom and the abolishment of the caste system; the second, of utmost importance in Devi’s work, ... of Masters, of caste, of money, of bonded labor whose debts are passed from father to children”. (350) Devi’s *Breast Stories* is a collection of three stories namely, ‘Draupadi’, ‘Stanadayini’ and ‘Choli Ke Pichhe’ written separately in Bengali. These stories are collected and translated into English by Gayathri Spivak and are published under the title *Breast Stories* in 1997. The breast is a common feature used in the three stories. These stories project how women and their physical part are gazed by men as object.

The three stories are about three women protagonists, who belong to different class and caste and it indicates how women are looked at as commodities in spite of their differences in class and position. The first story 'Draupadi' is named after the protagonist Draupadi who is also called as Dopti. As Spivak points out, "It is either that as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name Draupadi, or the tribalised form, Dopti, is the proper name of the ancient Draupadi". (9) The story is set in the West Bengal in 1970s. In 1967, there was a peasant rebellion at Naxalbari area in West Bengal. This movement was led by the lower class people including the tribes. The aim of the movements was against, "the long- established oppression of the landless peasantry and itinerant farm worker, sustained through an unofficial government-landlord collusion that too easily circumvented the law". (6—7) The protagonist of the story 'Draupadi' belongs to the tribal people and she is one of the members of the movement. The story elucidates how the poor are discriminated by the people with political and economical power, also narrates capturing of Dopti by the army and the torments faced by her in the army camp.

The second story, 'Stanandayini' titled as 'Breast-Giver' in English is about Jashoda, who works as a breast feeder. She supports her family by feeding her mistress' grand children and in order to sustain her feeding she gives birth to 21 children. Her excess feeding to many children results in breast cancer. Her useless condition resulted in her abandonment by her family members and dies in a hospital bed as an orphan. The story focuses on how women are used just as objects for the needs of the family. This story draws, "attention to the working-class woman's struggle against the joint forces of indigenous patriarchal institutions and (neo) colonial capitalist formations...reading of the text shows that both gender and class-together-determine the subject-position of women ..." (Mitra: 56).

The third story 'Choli Ke Pichhe' is titled 'Behind the Bodice' in English. The story is narrated in the past where Upin and Ujan are friends and Upin happens to be a photographer. They come to Jharoa for taking photographs, wherein Upin is attracted to Gangor, a downtrodden woman who migrated there with her people in search of a job. When Upin takes her photographs she thinks that he can help her to come out of her poverty-driven state. After their departure from that place Upin is haunted by memories of Gangor. He then goes to meet her only to learn that she has become a whore and is exploited by the police as well as her own kith and kin. Upin, disturbed by this scene, leaves that town.

In postcolonial India, subaltern people encounter discrimination in myriad ways. Even though India is a democratic country, many communities face discrimination by the upper caste/class people. Due to the political and the economical power, the word "'democracy' becomes highly interpretable in the context of a largely illiterate, multilingual, heterogeneous, and unpoliticized electorate". (6) In the story 'Draupadi' Dulna, Dopti's husband does not want to have children due to their poor living (not only economically). He decides to have a family when "Landowners and moneylender and policemen" (30) are wiped out. The story also talks about the slavery system followed by the landowners. The custom of the slavery system followed by the landowners is portrayed through Dulna's observation about life of his grandfather. He mentions the sufferable slavery system thus:

“My great-grandfather took a bit of paddy from him, and I still give him free labour to repay the debt”. (30) In ‘Breast-Giver’, when Kangalicharan was hit by his master’s son-in-law, the person who hit him was first bothered about his vehicle than about Kangali’s life. As Kangali happens to be poor, less importance is given to the accident by the crowd.

In the patriarchal society, due to the continuous discrimination, adopting the suppression becomes habitual for women. Jashoda in ‘Breast-Giver’ is one such a character who believes that taking care of her family members is the primary duty for women.

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. (47)

The power structure of the patriarchal society utilizes women as commodities. Gender discrimination and societal practices enable men to dominate women. In ‘Draupadi’, men, who have power as army people and as landlords, look at women as a sexual object for their needs. Dopti tells that the landlord’s mouth watered when he looked at her. In ‘Breast-Giver’, economical power and patriarchal power use Jashoda’s body as a commodity. When Kangali lost his leg in an accident the burden of the family fell upon Jashoda’s shoulders. In order to save her family members from starvation and poverty she seeks for a cook job in her master’s home and at any cost, “she wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest”. (47) Jashoda’s one of the physical parts, breast is used as an object to serve her family members. The mistress asks Jashoda to feed her grandchild with the intention of not to spoil her daughter-in-law’s physical beauty.

Daughters-in-law *will* be mothers. When they are mothers, they will suckle their children. Since they will be mothers as long as it’s possible-progressive suckling will ruin their shape. Then if the sons look outside, or harass the maidservants, she won’t have a voice to object. Going out because they can’t get it at home- this is just. If Jashoda becomes the infants’ suckling-mother, her daily meals, clothes on feast days, and some monthly pay will be enough. (51)

Slowly Jashoda was made to feed almost all grandchildren of her mistress house. Indirani Mitra and Madhu Mitra comments that, “‘Stanadayani,’ then, reminds us of those ‘other’ bodies on which the narrative of our freedom has been written: Women like Jashoda, whose proletarianization allows the first generation of Haldar daughters-in-law their first moments of leisure and engenders the preliminary stages of a feminist consciousness. Her decline, the literal consumption of her body by cancer, thus parallels the progress of the women of the privileged class”. (61) Her economical position paves way for the mistress to use Jashoda as a breast feeder.

Kangalicharan, on the other hand dominates Jashoda, as a member of a male community. In order to satisfy his sexual urge he convinces Jashoda that, You’ll have milk in your breasts only if you have a child in your belly. Now you’ll have to think of that and suffer. You are a faithful wife, a goddess. You will yourself be pregnant, be filled with child, rear it at your breast, isn’t this why Mother came to you as a midwife? (51)

His sexual urge towards Jashoda blinds him about her health condition and he makes her as a mother of twenty one children in thirty years. "Her body, now a commodity, is no longer for her husband's pleasure alone; she begins to see her breast as 'precious objects'". (Mitra: 61) Her feeding becomes a sole reason for every member of her family and mistress' house to take intense care of her. Her continuous pregnancy and feeding brings respect or her from the village people and due to it she was honored by everyone. "Everyone's devotion to Jashoda became so strong that at weddings, showers, naming, and sacred-threadings they invite her and gave her the position of chief fruitful woman". (53) In spite of her diligent work, later when she could not feed more children, she was looked as useless by others. "Jashoda understood that her usefulness has ended not only in the Halder house but also for Kangali". (59) Being an unwanted woman in the society, leaves her to be melancholic and it results with some pain in her breast. Doctors find that she is affected with cancer and her condition is critical. In such a condition, none of her family members bother about her health conditions and even her husband Kangali slowly forgets her.

His mind already rejected Jashoda. When he saw Jashoda in the Haldar house he was truly affected and even after her admission into hospital he was passionately anxious. But now that feeling is growing cold. The moment the doctor said Jashoda wouldn't last, he put her out of mind almost painlessly. His sons are his sons. Their mother had become a distant person for a long time. (73)

Jashoda's marginalization occurs due to the economical and patriarchal power and her physical labour (breast feeding) was taken by these two dominating power. As a conventional mother she sacrifices herself for the welfare of her family and as a token of it she feeds fifty children. "Knowing these breasts to be the rice-winner, she had constantly conceived to keep them filled with milk. The breast's job is to hold milk". (73)

In 'Behind the Bodice', Gangor was the victim of the patriarchal society due to her poor economical condition. First and foremost she was dominated by her husband and by the contractors due to her economical problems. Later, in search of job, she migrates along with her people from her place, where she meets Upin. Her poverty driven condition forces her to plead for money from Upin when he takes a snap of her instead of attaching him and later she begs Ujan for a job in order to save her child.

Tell the camera-sir, why not take me away? A cloth to wear...a bite to eat...a place to sleep for mother and child... no fields, no land, living is very hard...pots and pans...stove and knife...cleaning rooms...laundry...I'll do anything sir. (146)

Driven by poverty, she ended up as a whore and becomes a non-entry in the society.

The patriarchal society instead of looking at women as human beings looks at them as a sexual objects. Especially breast which is one of the physical features of women appears to be a curious thing for men. In 'Breast-Giver', Kangali always thinks of his wife's breast. Jashoda's breast becomes an attractive part which makes everyone to look curiously at it. Even her mistress, "looks in charmed envy at Jashoda's mammal projections". (49) The 'Behind the Bodice' was written in 1990's. During that decade, India faced several national crises. Mahasweta Devi in this short story mentions that the nation instead of bothering about

the crises it was facing, started to celebrate a Hindi song, “Choli Ke picche” from the movie Kalnayak. In order to satires the society Devi used the first line of the song as the title of her story. In the beginning of the story Devi mentions that the whole nation is bothered about what is behind the bodice than about important national crises such as,

...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 Pathak and others around the Narmada dam, hundreds of rape-murder-*lockup* torture et cetera. (138)

Upin is fascinated towards Gangor’s breast and he thinks that Ganger is ‘fantastic!’ (147). He takes a photo of Gangor’s breast and it disturbs his mind. He thinks, “Will Gangor unwind her cloth or just lift it”. (156) Breast, which was looked as a fantastic feature in beginning of the stories, is slowly demolished by the patriarchal society. In ‘Draupadi’ due to the army people’s atrocity Dopti’s “breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn” (35) and in ‘Breast-Giver’ Jashoda suffers with breast cancer. The condition of the breast is described by the writer thus: “the sores on her breast gaped more and more and the breast now looks like an open wound. It is covered by a piece of thin gauze soaks in antiseptic lotion, but the sharp smell of putrefying flesh is circulating silently in the room’s air like incense-smoke”. (71) In the case of Gangor in ‘Behind the Bodice’, due to the police’s violent behavior her breasts turns as “Two dry scars, Wrinkles Skin, quite flat”. (157)

In the gender biased society women are denied to have any voice in decision making. They are forbidden to have wishes of their own, to take decision and to speak freely what they think. Instead they are allowed to talk what men feel about otherwise men are permitted to speak on behalf of women. When women try to speak against the patriarchal society, they are silenced by men in several ways. One method among them is to suppress women by the physical power. Man uses rape as a threat for women in order to show his domination/power upon women. Rape is commonly viewed as a symbol of female degradation, female submission, and the stripping of honor and humanity. As Sundar Rajan points out, rape is more a social power tool to be employed rather than a sexual urge/impulse (78). In ‘Draupadi’, Dopti is presented as a powerful woman. She was wanted by the army for the murder of a landlord Surja Sahu. Before being arrested by the police, but knowing their intension, she prepares herself for the tortures which she is going to face. “Dopti knows, has learned by hearing so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture. If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue”. (28) In the army camp the captain commands his soldiers to prepare Dopti for the next day, indirectly asking them to torture her. In order to punish her, army people use physical torment as a weapon and rape her; instead it makes her more powerful. The next day she meets the army officer nakedly. When he asks about her clothes, “Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, what’s the use of clothes? You can stripe me, but how can you clothe me again”. (36) The army officer Senanayak fears due to her anger and courage. “... for the first time Senanyak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid” (37). Jean Pickering comments that, “... the eponymous protagonist of

“Draupadi,” whose tactics come together in a single moment when she confronts the man responsible for her torture and renders him unable to speak, ... making for herself a space of enunciation”. (345)

In ‘Behind the Bodice’ when police rape Gangor, she files a case against them and it makes her condition more critical. Her contractor says “When the girl doesn’t understand the police are men too, they will craze if you tease them” (152). When Gangor files case against police, and suffers due to it none of her kith and kin are ready to talk to her. Moreover she is debarred from entering the village. When Gangor is continuously raped by the police, no one attempts to help or save her, thinking that this was a suitable punishment for her. Her contractor says that instead of filing case against the police she might have died. In a patriarchal society, women are expected to be obedient to men. The contractor says that, “women have to be careful in Shiva’s world. You’re punished if you don’t understand this”. (152)

This study proves that in the three stories women are merely looked as commodities in order to sustain the economical, political and patriarchal power by the society. Breast, which is a physical part of women turns into different objects in the gaze of men.

In Draupadi’, what is represented is an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between (hetero) sexuality and gender violence begins to waver. In ‘Breast-Giver’, it is a survival object transforms into a commodity, making visible the indeterminacy between filial piety and gender violence, between house and temple, between domination and exploitation. Devi’s mature fiction never romanticizes the socio-libidinal relationship between sexes. In ‘Behind the Bodice’ she bitterly describes the supposed ‘normality’ of sexuality as male violence. (vii)

The stories indicate that even after independence women in India are still marginalized due to various factors. One such factor is women themselves are made to accept their position willingly as in ‘Breast-Giver’. Mitra comments that, “Jashoda feels privileged to be part of the eternal and divine process of procreation”. (62) When women try to fight against the injustice towards them, they are punished with iron hand by the patriarchal Indian society. In ‘Draupadi’ when Dopti fights against the atrocities of the landowner, she was brutally raped by the army. Similarly in ‘Behind the Bodice’ when Gangor files case against the police, she was raped by them. It proves that the patriarchal society expects women to acclimatize the discrimination they face.

In the stories, men are not given a chance to change their views and behaviors towards women. Even though they may wish to change their attitudes, certain circumstances make them puppets in the society’s hand. The societal pattern compels them to have iron hand upon women over generations and facilitates them to look at women in an object position. Whenever men try to understand women, it is stopped by the power structure of the patriarchal society. For example in ‘Breast-Giver’, due to the loss of Kangali’s legs, he did not have any choice rather than to send his wife to work in order to support their family. Years later, when his wife was affected by cancer, he felt so helpless and sympathetic. “Seeing Jashoda’s broken, thin, suffering form even Kangali’s selfish body instincts and

belly-centered consciousness remembered the past and suffered some empathy”. (67) In ‘Behind the Bodice’, Upin, by profession happens to be a photographer, looks at Ganger from the perspective of a photographer. When Gangor suffers a lot in various stages of her life, Upin becomes helpless to save her from the rotten society. The stories highlight that even though men at sometimes wanted to help women to come out of their object position, the society in some way or the other changes the mentality of men.

Even though women in the stories are shown as commodities in the post colonial Indian society, Devi allows them to occupy the subject position. Mahasweta Devi brings the women to the centre by projecting them as protagonists of the stories and in a way she attempts to decolonize the mentality of the people by enabling the subalterns to speak on behalf of themselves. Through this attempt, Mahasweta Devi turns women as commodities into women as subjects and tries to portray the vision of subaltern to the readers.

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