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A Mother! A Myth: Portrayal Of A Mother In Mahasweta Devi's "Breast Giver"

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Maathru Devo Bhava! Pithru Devo Bhava!Acharya Devo Bhava! Athidhi Devo Bhava!
-TaittiriyaUpanishad

Abstract
In Indian culture, Vedas and Upanishads take a prominent place and are considered as ancient. These ancient scriptures teach us that "Maathru Devo Bhava" (Web) which means a mother is thefirst god and ought to be given utmost respects. This verse proves to be absurd inMahasweta Devi's short story "Breast Giver". Mahasweta Devi was a Bengali Fiction writer. In her writings, subaltern predicaments occupy a central position in general and the woman in particular. Her most accolade works are Hajar Churashir Maa, Rudali, and Aranyer Adhikar. "Breast Giver" is originally written in Bengali and translated into English by a feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In the present story, Mahasweta Devi brings in the predicaments of a woman who sacrifices her life for bringing up the family as a bread winner and breathed her last as an orphan.The title of the story is used as a synonym for wet nurse. The present paper interprets "Breast Giver" from the point of view of power relations suggested by Michel Foucault (1926-1984) a Psychologist, a Philosopher, and a Historian.

Key Words*: Subaltern, Predicaments, Bread winner, Wet nurse, Mother*

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi wrote originally in Bengali language. Her concern was always with tribal people and untouchables which occupied a predominant position in her writings. She gave equal importance to bring into limelight the brutal oppression on the woman in the tribal regions of West Bengal that reflected in her writings. She depicted the contemporary subaltern predicaments mirroring the day to day life incidents of the oppressed communities in such a way that it attracted many writers to translate into English language. "Breast Giver" is one of the stories in Breast stories, an anthology of short stories which are written in Bengali. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a feminist critic and she is popularly known for writing an essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?".She translated Mahasweta Devi's works such as Imaginary Maps and Breast Stories into English language without influencing Mahasweta Devi's writing style.Antonio Gramsci coined the word Subaltern that refers"to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers, women and other groups denied access to 'hegemonic' power" (Gaganpreet 347).

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A man quotes from his "patriarchal perspective" (bell hooks 2)that "no one can fathom the depth of a woman's heart" (Web), certainly, it is true to a man. How can a man fathom the compromisesand the sacrificesshe makes, the predicaments she overcomes, the emotional disturbances she ignoresunconsciously in her life with a man?She does so as she makes her mind to accept and lead a committed relationship with the man she gets married.

Marriage is a predefined norm and a stipulation of the society that remarkably influences women's lives.However, a woman comfortablygraces the norm dedicatedly by accepting the man who she is married to, cares the children, and as a supreme altruist leads the familyto prove that she is createdfor man.It is believed that, Women were created from the rib of man to be beside him, not from his head to top him, norfrom his feet to be trampled by him, but from under his arm to be protected by him, near to his heart to beloved by him. (Web)

On the other hand, man quite often fails to shower unconditional affection on woman.It is obvious that it's not man who intentionally fails, the society "indoctrinates man into the rules of patriarchy…it was his role to be served; to provide; to be strong; to think, strategize, and plan; and to refuse to care take or nurture others…. should not express feelings" (bell hooks 2). During the entire process of understanding and fitting into the norms of patriarchy, a man explores and experiences a new relationship utterly for his well-being which works on the leverage of power relations.

Mahasweta Devi skillfully traces the journey of a man'sfailure in taking care and protecting his wife and a woman'smotherhood exploitation which results in death in the present story "Breast Giver". This is a story of a woman, Jashoda who is forced to choose motherhood as profession"Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings" (Devi 1069). Jashoda is the protagonist around who the story moves. Kangalicharan and Jashoda are Brahmin couple. Kangalicharan works for Mr. Haldar's sweet shop as "food cooked by a good Brahmin...to the pilgrims who came to visit the Lionseated's temple" (1070) carries a good reputation.

In a patriarchal culture, it is undeniable fact that society indoctrinates man and woman in gender norms to quote, husband should earn money and the wife must take care of household.If a husband fails to earn, the responsibility of earning, leading family is to be shouldered by the wife.In the present story, everything was normal till a day when Kangalicharan meets with an accident in which he loses his two feet.While Kangalicharan was in the hospital Mr. Haldar's family sends food to Jashoda to survive.The turning point in the life of Jashoda takes place when the helping hand was stopped and Kangalicharan inability to earn comes forth. This results Jashoda's family to starve.Kangalicharan who longs for food asks Jashoda to feed him "the power of the Indiansoil that all women turn into mothers here and all men remain immersed inthe spirit of holy childhood. Each man the Holy Child and each woman theDivineMother"(1074). Jashoda is "fully an Indian woman whose unreasonable, unreasoning, and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her

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children (1073) takes up the job of proprietorship of rice warehouse in the house of Mr. Haldar.

It is evident from the behaviour of Kangalicharanthat he usespower relations disguised in sympathy to convince Jashoda to take up the job for earning. The merciful plead works on Jashoda and agrees to work. It's not Jashoda to get convinced but "love is merely an occupation in the life of the man, while it is life itself for the woman" (Beauvoir 723).
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In the article, M. Foucault's view on power relations, Sergiu Bălan aptly defines power as"the capacity of an agent to impose his will over the will of the powerless, or the ability to force them to do things they do not wish to do" (2). Jashoda was twice influenced by the power relations in the story. Firstly, Kangalicharan uses merciful power and secondly, Mr. Haldar family's Mistress who appoints her uses power by the name of noble cause and virtue, "a Divine Mother". The Mistress unable to handle her grandson, a newly born baby pleads Jashoda to feed milk as baby's mother is sick. A typical Indian woman, Jashoda who has motherly affection in abundance readily accepts and feeds the baby again and again.

Jashoda continuously feeding the baby enables new deliberations in the minds of the Haldar's. The Mistress second son is of the opinion that feeding the baby results in fading the beauty of his wife, hence "a way found" (Devi 1075) that "Jashoda's surplus milk" (1075) has to be substituted in place of his wife's milk.There is always a battle between the desire of a woman towards committed relationship in which she gives importance to family and children and a man's momentarily physical relationshipwho desires for the beauty of a woman.These new deliberations change the life of Jashoda desperately.

Nevertheless, Kangalicharan, listening to the proposal sees only "the amount of grains-oil-vegetables coming from the big house" (1076).Kangalicharan's power relations play a significant role for the second time. He uses the weapon of noble task of womanhood. His convincing dimensionality reaches to the pinnacle of Jashoda's exploitation when he says to her", "You'll have milk …if you have a child in your belly" (1076).If Jashoda had to feed milk to the grandchildren of the Mistress, she herself would have to give birth to children. The new inspiration endowed Jashoda to give birth to seventeen more children and feed "about fifty for sure" (1085). Jashoda becomes "a professional mother" (1076) andKangalicharan a professional father. What man proposes is different from that of what god grants! This statement proves to be true in the case of Kangalicharan and Jashoda.

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Jashoda has become truly "Yashoda", amilk mother of Lord Sri Krishna for the grandchildren of the Mistress singing wholeheartedly,

Is a Mother so cheaply made? Not just by dropping a babe! (1076)

This song gives the description of Indian woman's significance in terms of motherhood.Indeed, from childhood woman is repeatedly told she is made tobear children, and the praises of motherhood are sung (Beauvoir 605). It is the greatest joy for the woman to possess motherhood. How much ever joyful but it is painful too. Jashoda fed Haldar's children, reared them like her own but still she is considered as a wet nurse not Yashoda. She did not even remain the same Jashoda who had accepted Kangalicharan's pleads by saying "You are husband, you are guru. If I forget and say no, correct me (Devi1076). The twin reasons for the transformation ofJashoda's status; the foremost is that Haldar's family does not need any more a wet nurse and the other Jashoda reaches the age "about fifty-five" (1083).

However, "Time" never waits for none while doing so it provides many solutions equally throws many challenges in one's life. Even in the life of Jashoda, "Time" brings in a life threatening challenge and out of it a permanent solution for her long predicaments.Aging is a fundamental characteristic of the human beings. Everyday makes a man older than the yesterday. Aging is a universal experience of all living creatures. But old age is considered a pathological state and people become segregated by age because aging has its own helplessness. Old age is the phase of life that is hardly welcomed by anyone, as it brings a person to the point of decline. In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir rightly states that, "The old woman often finds serenity toward the end of her life when she has given up the fight, when death's approach frees her from anxiety about the future" (721).

The protagonist of the story, the "breast giver" never finds serenity till her last breathe.On the one hand, Jashoda's need is not felt in the Haldar's family and on the other hand Kangalicharan alienates her as she does not bring pay.Jashoda raises her voice against injustice which she met with both the ends Kangalicharan and the Haldar's family. Jashoda, at the age of "fifty five" rebels as a representative of modernity. She squabbles with her husband because he taught her the moral codes on how to behave loyally with him and she also reasons the Haldar's family why does she stay with the family the rest of her life. At this juncture, she confronts an abnormality in her left breast which has grown red and her swollen armpit starts aching. Unwillingly, Haldar's call for the doctor and the pain was identified as breast cancer. A woman who finds satisfaction in motherhood is now challenged by the abnormality which is the result of becoming a "professional mother".

The cancer wound has not been treated in time and now no one visits Jashoda as wound emits disgusting odor. She is hurt emotionally and physically. A submissive traumatic feeling starts in her, she relates "If you suckle you are a mother, all lies! …don't look at me, and the Master's boys don't spare a peek to ask how I am doing" (1087). Her philosophy towards motherhood changes. She realizes that the Divine mother's image is

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given to her only to exploit her. The image is no more a glorious thing to her she survives her last minutes with sedations. She remembers herself as a milk-mother and whenever doctor tries to give sedation to subside pain, she "mutters with hurt feelings "You grew so big on my milk, and now you're hurting me so?"" (Devi 1087). The doctor in the hospital realizes that "she sees her milk-sons all over the world" (1088).

Mahasweta Devi well exhibits man's self-centered behaviour in Kangalicharan's character. When he was asked to look after Jashoda in the hospital, he ruthlessly states that "there's no use going any more. She doesn't know us, doesn't open her eyes, and doesn't realize anything. The doctor is doing what he can." ..."If she dies?" "They have the telephone number of the old Master's eldest son, they'll call" (1087). The strangers sympathizes at Jashoda's loyal behaviour and considers as "a blessed auspicious faithful woman" (1087) but her own people betray her even on her death bed.

Mahasweta Devi ends the story with a thoughtful message "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" (1088).

Conclusion

In her article, "Feminist Study of Mahasweta Devi's Breast-Giver (Standayini)" Ramana Devika aptly states that Jashoda's "oppression can be economic, social, and psychological" (38). She has been ruthlessly exploited by all, her husband, her children, children who she has milked and the pitiable of all is that she is exploited by "the other" women. Mahasweta Devi delicately portrays the protagonist, Jashoda as a subaltern in the storybut it is palpable that very pathetically Jashoda is doubly oppressed firstly for being a woman and secondly for her motherhood.In introspection, Jashoda ask a rhetoric question why even my "breasts betrayed …in the end" (Devi 1084). Jashoda's question not only raises many queries associated with gendered norms but it also triggers the value system of human society to rethink and alter the status given to a woman considering her first human being with blood, flesh and heart then a woman.It is appreciable that spaces are allowed to women but are again conditioned. The distinctive Indian women consider home as their gendered space which influences women and men differently. Women seek alteration in the gendered norms but not complete transformation because they willingly accept the gendered norms to an optimum extent to.

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