



Woman between Tradition and Modernity In Mahashwetadevi's *Breast-Giver*

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Abstract

Women are appreciated in society if they act according to the will and wish of their social system and they have to accept their identity as is it defined by their traditions. In Jardine's central neologism, gynesis, there is an interesting contradiction between her rejection of labels and definitions by naming her own textual discovery. Gynesis is the name for textual process, which she describes in the following:

The putting into discourse of "woman" as that process diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed, the valorization of the feminine, woman, and her obligatory, that is historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking.(25) Consequently a polarization of roles occurs, with woman's role as wife/mother defined as inferior. The pattern, once set up, is promoted through the socialization process. With such an image and conflict in Mahashwetadevi's short story Breast Giver researcher is trying to analyze condition and nuances of Jashoda who is the central character of the story. Here Jashoda has to accept her stereotypic image of woman made under the impression that woman should act as a Holy Cow as it is depicted by patriarchal system and Jashoda is Mother Cow. We can also find a nearer relation of Jashoda from the mythical image as the suckler, milk-mother.

Keywords: *Motherhood, wet nurse, female body.*

Breast-giver (Stanadayini) was first published in the collection of stories entitled Stanadayini in 1980 and has been one of the Mahashweta Devi's most widely discussed stories. This tale is set in postindependence, post-partition West Bengal, in a bustling crowded pilgrim village. The central character Jashoda and her crippled husband Kanganalichandran Patitundo eke out a living through her job in the prosperous Haldar household as a wet nurse or a professional mother. Initially, Kangali was employed at a sweetshop as a cook and fed food cooked by a good Brahmin To the pilgrims who came to visit the Lionseated's temple (p.223). The disastrous turn in their lives occurred when Kangali, returning home one afternoon pleasurably fantasizing over Jashoda's magnificent breasts, was run over by the Studebaker driven by the landlord Haldar's youngest son, and crippled for life. Haldar babu flab protected



heart located under a forty-two inch Gopal brand vest, does not itch with harsh of kindness". (p. 224) in best times distressed at the thought that his son has ruined a Brahmin's life. He gets Kangali a pair of crutches but dies of a heart attack before fulfilling his promise to open a sweetshop for him in the porch of his house. So Jashoda goes to Haldar landlady with her youngest daughter Radharani " clasped to her bosom", and asks for " the cook's job in the vegetarian kitchen".(p.226) the landlady, glad to see Jashodh's lactating breasts, asks her to suckle one of her grandsons whose mother is ill since there is an endless proliferation of infants at the Haldar household, this soon becomes Jashoda's full-time job and the only means of livelihood for her family. It is also a permanent way out for those who "haven't a quarter of this milk in their nipples". (p.227)- the daughter-in- law of the Haldar household, who could now keep their figures for their husbands, " wear blouses and bras of European cut", (p.229) watch all- night pictures shows and try to retain (despite regular, almanac-blessed impregnation) the appeal required to quench their husbands' desires. Jashoda, in whom the landlady, " looking in charmed envy at [her] *mammary projections*." (p.227) sees "the legendary cow of fulfillment." (p.227 is employed as the wet nurse for the Haldar scion; and to keep her in prime condition for optimum lactation, the landlady orders a reversal of the sexual division of labour on Jashoda and Kangali. Kangali is told to cook at home, for Jashoda has the babies to care for : " two of her own, three here, how can she cook at the day's end after suckling five?".(p.228) Her job requires her to have good food and constant sexual servicing so that she can keep producing milk. In return for the "surplus" milk that she gives to the Haldars, Jashoda gets her daily meals, clothes on feast days and some monthly pay. Thus due to constant pregnancies, giving birth, giving milk like a cow,"(p.229) Jashoda becomes "the Mother of the World". Even Nabin, the pilgrim-guide who once used to lust after her " heavy breasted, languid-hipped body," (p.225) starts calling her "Mother! Mother! Dear Mother!" She is accorded the revered position of "the chief fruitful woman" and invited to all weddings, naming ceremonies, and sacred threading. Despite her actual role of a servant, her status or ideological positioning as a milk mother soon gives Jashoda the courage even to berate the women whose children she feeds for a living:

" showoffs! Look at me! I have been a year breeder! So is my body failing; or is my milk dying? Makes your skin crawl? I hear they are drying their milk with *injishuns*[injections]. Never heard of such things!"(p.229)

Then into the Haldar house blew a "new wind", presumably from the city, and the younger granddaughters-in-law decide not to bear children endlessly, they called "a halt at twelve-thirteen-fourteen" (p.230) and were able to "explain to their husbands and to make arrangements at the hospital"(p.230) some of them even defiantly "took off to their husbands' places of work" (p.230) the eldest daughter-in-law finally calls Jashoda and announces that her services as a "professional mother" are no longer required. She would henceforth have to work as cook and stay alongside the other servants or leave. Her husband Kangali had got a job in the temple with Nabin's help and taken Nabin's young niece as his



mistress; he therefore does not approve of her idea of doing some work at the temple itself. Thus Jashoda has no choice but to accept the degraded menial work at the Haldar household, where until recently she had been respectfully employed as a milk mother. During this period of degradation Jashoda also starts keeping physically ill due to a growing tumour in her left breast. She initially refuses to let the doctor examine her, and then it is too late. For the current Haldar chief and his wife, the idea of a Brahmin woman dying in their house was terrifying. They order Kangali and his sons to take Jashoda away. The breast which she had so carefully scrubbed “with soap and oil, for the master’s sons had put the nipples in their mouth”, were now like an open putrefying wound. She lies in her room at the landlord’s house with a sense of complete betrayal.

With her eyes shut, with the idea that Kangali was still in the room, she said spiritlessly, “If you suckle your mother, all lies! Nepal and Gopal don’t look at me, and the Master’s boys don’t spare a peek to ask how I’m doing.” The sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes (p.236)

One day, to see her critical condition, Nabin makes a lot of fuss due to which she is admitted to a hospital. Kangali and other visitors soon stop coming even to see her. Her husband could put her out of his mind with the precision of a surgeon, “almost painlessly”. Her own sons too fell alienated and revolted at the sight of her ravaged decaying body.

Consequently, Jashoda is dominated by the society, by her husband and right now she is being dominated by her own body. This point is different from the outlook of western feminism and as Spivak outlined this as ‘Third Worlds’ Women Feminism’. Once her body glorifies her position in the society and later, this body snatches her down. Her position becomes subverted and changed. Moreover, Spivak also focuses on the last phase of Jashoda’s dying.

Her female body symbolizes the exploitation of labor that constantly, Spivak wants to say. It seems to me that subaltern sacrifice is never been told. Their story is hidden and can never be the part of history. Her experiences cannot tell everything about subaltern women, but can demonstrate brief scenery of their life. Besides, Devi presents, “Jashoda as constituted by patriarchal ideology” (Spivak, 265) who barely speaks and even she speaks her story comes out from this ideology. She does not reject to intercourse with her husband and bear children, even if it is a burden for her because it is her husband, who is like god to him, wants to do. Her image is made up through this ideological feature as the *Divine Mother* (Spivak, 264) who bears anything. The generalize feature of woman has come out from the thought of ‘patriarchal domination’ and that actually construct the ‘self’ of the woman.

Their mother had become a distant person for a long time. Mother meant hair in a topknot, blindingly white clothes, and a strong personality. The person laying in the hospital is someone else, not Mother (p.239)



But Jashoda herself sees the whole world as her milk sons: three hardly seemed to be anyone in her world whom she had not borne or suckled. Delirious racked with pain, Jashoda died alone. There was no one to be informed, for the “Haldars *disconnected* their phone at night”(p. 240). At the end of a life spent suckling the world, Jashoda the World-Mother became a mere Hindu Female at the mortuary, before an untouchable cremated her. Every woman does not belong to the upper class or face the fate of misery or not, every single woman has the same tragedy to bear but many of them have resemblances. They have related stories indifferent accent and different conditions. Women do not have any right to say in regard of their right on their own body and everyday life of living. This body authority is controlled by her superior male partner. Even, the act of mutilation of the female of body is considered as the part of the normal act in case of marginalized women.

In Anup Baniwal Vandana’s word: The colonial and patriarchal discourses that are largely premised upon a series of binary oppositions, such as colonizer/colonized, imperialism/nationalism, man/woman, public/private, centre/periphery produce a violent hierarchy. In this hierarchy, the colonized, the marginalized culture, the women are branded as a deviant/disruptive group both socially and culturally. In such binarism, one term forcefully governs the other (2007, 6).

So, the positions of women are basically twofold based and more seemingly the positions of marginalized women are more, and are living on the edge of domination and suffering. Moreover, these women are also dominated as indigenous women. They are neglected in all terms of living in a society. In a word, they are dominated not only in one layer, but also in multiple shades of coercion, control and compulsion. Researcher made observation-through analyzing- *Breast Giver* on the one hand researcher focuses on the mapping of the terrain-home of the rural elite and ‘pre-capitalist’ underclass – over which nationalist modernity in India has to be made. On the other hand, researcher would wish to discuss how Mahasweta uncovers the surrogate role of woman in difference in mothering this modernity born of India’s passive revolution.

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