

Motherhood: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast-Giver'

Ram Mehar*

PGT English, GSSS Koth, Kalan, Hisar

Abstract – Right from the beginning of human life on this planet, women have suffered innumerable ignominies and even have undergone indignities both at the hands of man and society. Even in advanced and developed countries like the U.S.A and England, the women have remained a neglected, exploited and suppressed human being to the extent that women were considered as a booty or even prized possession of victorious kings and princes. When Napoleon Bonaparte in the early 19th century conquered a state or a country, he got married with the daughter or queen of the defeated king. The story of the trojan women in the distant past is both revealing and illustrative of the plight of women in the ancient times. Similar is the fate of women in India where there are treated as second rate citizens and even the property of man, as their identity is defined in terms of loyalty, purity and even 'Izzat' of the family.

-----X-----

Before analyzing the story under consideration, we should know the vision and philosophy of Mahasweta Devi. She is known as one of those powerful writers whose writings are embodiments of social change and represent the voice of those women who cannot speak for themselves. The fictional world of the writer centres on the simple joys and sorrows of the women; their exploitation and sufferings and conditions of abject poverty in which they are forced to live. The notion of motherhood is very complex in the Indian context. It is the determining factor of the position of a woman in society. The mother enjoys a prerogative social position when she is a mother of sons and therefore motherhood becomes aspirational and meaningful. Indian culture reveres women primarily as mothers and those rejecting motherhood are seen as rejecting femininity and are considered abnormal. Motherhood has always been a coveted and privileged state for a woman, especially in the Indian context. Such as been the grip of the motherhood ideology that sometimes women themselves justify their existence only as mothers, that too only of sons. Thus, it is a women's 'motherliness' that becomes the most important element of her identity formation (Kakar 67). This social and cultural condition creates an over-arching 'discourse of motherhood' which, feminists argue, has been used to exploit women in various patriarchal agendas. However, what is important to note is that this glorification of motherhood remains in ideological domain only, and may not be necessarily seen as 'empowering' by many women. Motherhood is seen as instrument for subordination of women for restricting them to the four walls of the house and keeping them away from the positions of power and even education and employment. It is

interesting to note that women themselves become hegemonized under the spell of motherhood ideology. In the beginning of the story, the writer has shown Jashoda as a woman who firmly believes in this idea. She says, "Where after all is the pain ? Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit?". Jashoda revels in the almost goddess-like feelings of having sustained too many births and of having nursed excessively. She thinks that the grand daughter-in-law is responsible for the mistress's death by refusing to bear children.

With such a discourse at the background, we can analyze the story 'Breast-Giver' and see how Jashoda becomes a victim of the discourse of motherhood. The story is set in West Bengal where, as discussed, the cult of mother-goddess' worship has an enormous significance. Harisal, the place where the story is set, is a pilgrimage center. There are ample references in the story to the goddess and also to how religious beliefs relating to the goddess are significant in the popular imagination. Everything that happens is attributed to "the Lionseated's Will" (224, 225, 230). Even Jashoda's new profession is linked with the goddess's appearing in her dream as a midwife. Jashoda's husband is a Brahmin and works in a temple. The goings-on in the temple are reported side by side creating an atmosphere heavy with religious beliefs and practice specially those concerning the mother goddess cult.

All this is translated into real life by looking upon every mother as an incarnation of the goddess-mother. There are references which suggest that the mothering was the main activity which occupied

women (226). The story covers roughly the period between the nineteen fifties and the nineteen eighties. There is no practice of birth control methods and all women who can breed, they produce children every year. The opening paragraph of the story sets the scene when it describes Jashoda as:

...the mother of twenty children, living or dead, counted on her fingers. Jashoda doesn't remember at all when there was no child in her womb, when she didn't feel faint in the morning, when Kangli's body didn't drill her body like a geologist in the darkness lit only by one oil lamp. She never had the time to calculate she could or should not bear motherhood. Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings. Jashoda was a mother by profession (222).

In the Halder household where there are numerous daughters-in-law, we are told that all the birth rooms are always filled (226). When Jashoda is offered the role of a wet nurse at the Halder household she is exulted. As time passes, she realizes that this vocation not only brings money but also respect from both men and women when she is called "the portion of the mother", "the mother of the world" (228). Mahasweta describes her situation in the following words: "Everyone's devotion to Jashoda becomes so strong that at weddings, showers, namings and sacred-threadings, they invited her and gave her the position of chief-fruitful woman" (229). Even Nabin, the pilgrim guide who used to look at Jashoda with lascivious eyes is said to have 'lost his bad thoughts' and refers to her as 'Mother! Mother! Dear Mother!' (229). She is called the 'Milk Mother' by all and enjoys a privileged status in the household.

It is important to note that the figure of Jashoda, at least in the beginning of the narrative, is represented as one constituted by patriarchal ideology. She is highly critical of the daughters-in-law who wish to practice birth control methods. She also accepts the traditional sexual division of labour: "The man brings the woman cooks and serves. My lot is inside out [.....] Living off a wife's carcass, you call that a man?" (232). Jashoda herself does not participate in any questioning (265), "you are husband, you are guru. If I forget and say no, correct me" (228). She is completely conditioned to accept the patriarchal ideology and firmly believes in his superior status.

Her pain of being ignored and left alone is aggravated because she has enjoyed such privileged status as the Milk-Mother. When she is made to live with other servants, she protests by saying "Do you know who I am?" (234). Had she not been intoxicated with all the mother glorification and been treated like any other servant, at least her emotional suffering would have been lesser. When she is in the hospital suffering with breast cancer none of her 'sons', the ones she gave birth to or the ones she sucked come to comfort her.

The end proves all too clearly that the celebration and glorification of the mother figure is hollow and momentary. Even Jashoda realizes the bitter truth in the end and says, "If you suckle you're a mother, all lies!" (236).

Though Jashoda is Brahmin and thus superior in caste to the Halder women, yet her class is enough to marginalize her. However, it is interesting to note that by virtue of her caste and her profession she is able to dominate other servants in the household like Basini. Conversely, when her role as the milk mother is over and she is made to stay with the other servants, they no longer accord her the same respect as before. Devi writes: "Basini's crowd used to wash her feet and drink the water". Now Basini said easily, "You'll, wash your own dishes. Are you my master, that I'll wash your dishes. You are the master's servant as much as I am" (234). Mahasweta Devi considers this story a parable of India. India is a hired mother misused and exploited by many strong and powerful people of the new state growing and expanding on the culture of silence and unresisting voices of the people at large.

Thus, there have been voices of protest here and there in the past but now this protest has become louder and louder to the comfort or discomfort of everyman. While writers like D.H Lawrence and Virginia Woolf in the west and Raja Rao and R.K Narayan in the east have paid some service to the cause of women's dignified motherhood but writers like Mahasweta Devi have taken the cause of women to the other extreme of the society.

REFERENCES

- Devi, Mahasweta (1987). "Breast-Giver". In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. Trans Gayatri Spivak. London, Routledge, 1987.Pp.222-240
- Kakar, Sudhir. "Feminine Identity in India". Ghadially, pp. 44-68.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (2002). *Translator's Foreword. Breast Stories*, Calcutta: Seagull,2002.
- . Afterword. *Imaginary Maps: Three stories by Mahasweta Devi*. New York: Routledge, 1995. pp. 197-205.
- 'Mahasweta Devi'http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahasweta_Devi.

Corresponding Author

Ram Mehar*

PGT English, GSSS Koth, Kalan, Hisar