

Mahasweta Devi's Short Story, *The Breast Giver* as a Female Metaphor of Silenced Subaltern Voice of Wet-Nurse: Questioning Female Body, Health, Identity, Workforce, Post-Retirement Health & Life Benefits

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Introduction

Mahasweta Devi, the communist commentator, born into the clan of patrons of art, literatures and culture and constructed by the fibers of communism, unfailingly articulates the subjugated voice and images of the marginalized subaltern sections of society like tribal, laborers, women and lower caste., Her stories dances the tunes of the folk puppets, sings the political–economic ballads, paints the hues of feminist imaginations, weaves the threads of socio-political commentaries, eats the traditional delicacies of real-life experience, murmurs the forest music of the environments, blots the ink of progressive ideologies of literacy and floats with the leaves of raw humane emotions. She challenges and colonizes spaces of caste, class, gender, sex, race, ethnicity, culture, society, humanity, identity, body, heritage, agency, power and autonomy. Her writing style fishes out the readers, hooking their psyche by making the invisible visible, ignored recognized, exploited empowered, imprisoned liberated and voiceless voiced – the pristine author who spearheaded the liberal revolution of the subaltern and gender politics.

'Breast-giver' is the second in the triple circular series of stories that constitute Mahasweta Devi's book 'Breast stories' translated by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, with other sister stories namely, 'Draupadi' and 'Behind the Bodice'. 'Breast Giver' is an alive cyclic reality of pre-partition, partition, post-partition, and pseudo-modern India reciting the life documentary of "silent subaltern" and "professional mother", Jashoda, the passive voluptuous Brahmin wife interpellated by the ideology of self-abnegating motherhood. The life tale of Jashoda, the milk-mother martyr who is circumstantially compelled to serve as a wet-nurse, angled by the tragic shift due to

economic survival intensified by poverty as a result of her husband Kangali marred and handicapped by the rich elder Mr. Haldar's youngest son's whims of joy riding a Studebaker car.

Mr. Haldar mortified by impending of Brahmin curse, Kangali was rushed to the hospital and double assured with clutches due to his crippled legs and promised to set a new dry fruit sweet shop for Kangali's livelihood. Due to the untimely demise of Mr. Haldar not only endangered the survival of Kangali- Jashoda's family but also inaugurated the protracted saga of exploitation by the new proprietor of Haldar properties, his wife, Mrs. Haldar, a.k.a., Mistress and the succeeding Haldar generations. It articulates the struggle of adaptation, deification, and renunciation of the breast cancer- affected "Mother of All", Jashoda who is cremated by an untouchable funeral ghat cremator, simile of Shiva, also a "Holy child" of the "Divine Mother". This "Mother of the World's" corpse was unaccompanied by none to the ghat – not even her husband, own children, milk-sons or even the other Haldar family members. No funeral rites, no commemoration, no tears – the price she received for fifty-five and additional years of service as a wet-nurse to the whole clan of her own womb and Haldar women's wombs.

Marxism illustrates how history and society are remodeled by the class struggle for power, based on the means of production, the power-source possessed by the bourgeois who purchase the labour in terms of wages from the proletariats or the working class, thus, power politics depends on material production. The dominant class formulates and circulates their ideologies as universal through self- evident, given, and persuasive cultural representation which the proletariat adopts and gives consent, naturalizing the cycle of exploitation and economic inequality. Thus, hegemony, "the war of maneuver" (Gramsci) is maintained by the exercises of civil and political societies. Hegemony, class division, and capitalism are strengthened by "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects. It hails and interpellates them all: There is no escaping ideological subjection." (Althusser). The laborer is reified into a commodity calculated in terms of profit and loss, dehumanizing the human being, and thus cease to be human. In any means of production, the four- tiers of alienation manifests where the laborer is alienated from the object he produced; from the process of production; from himself; and from the community. Commodity gains more importance than the worker' labour power and skill, directing towards commodity fetishism.

"Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry list with woman as a pious. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (Spivak, 308). The "silent subaltern" or "other" is "the history told from below", that had been strangled by, centuries-old "epistemic violence" and "hegemonic discourse", constituted with the marginalized subaltern group like women, lower castes and class, ethnic minorities, queer communities, and laborers.

The history of wet-nursing pre-dates back to ancient civilizations of Egypt, Indus, Maya, Celtic cultures. Imprinting archaeological and mythological evidence in Roman, Hinduism, Christianity, Greek, 17th c. France, 17th c. & 18th c. Britains, 19th c. Spain, and universally. Wet-nursing shares ulterior roots with slavery and slave trade yet history romanticize the arcane exercise of slavery as 'the white man's burden' (Kipling). A common, practice of childcare tracing back to monarchies, nobility, aristocracy, middle class, and lower sectors, as for the elite women breastfeeding was time-consuming, unfashionable, beauty eroding and confining task. "In effect, wealthy parents frequently 'bought', the life of their infant for the life of another" (Valerie Fildes). Acquisition of wet-nurse is justified by reasons like adoption, poor-health of biological mother, maternal mortality, lack of breast milk, miscarriage, surrogacy, twins or quadruplets or more, beauty, illegitimacy and infant abuse, malnutrition, teenage pregnancies, abusive child care, breast implant, military or working mothers, same-sex parents, etc. The idiosyncratic relationship between wet-nurse, baby and families vary according to variegated conditions of formalities, boundaries, salaries,

healthy balance, necessities and time balance. The social, psychological, and cultural attitudes and acceptance defines the dignity procured by the wet-nurse's service, sometimes they are subjected to antipathy, discretion abuse, sexual misbehaviors, and low wages culminating into tales of archival silence, health poverty, and legally vulnerability.

Proletarian – Bourgeoisie Hegemonic Relationship – Subaltern Struggle with Men and Other Women

According to Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, a women's work is never done when entrapped in the isolation of "angel in the house" (Patmore), complemented by the "unpaid domestic work" force resulting in lack of social experience and knowledge; powerless degradation as "personal servants" without social power; and unequal labour division in spite of being the vital producers of capitalism. Hidden capitalist exploitation is observed in nullifying saleable commodity like "ability to work" and "unpaid surplus labour power". Professional women find agency and empowerment but soon disempowered by unequal wage relations where the "class society" orbits around power point, man, creating "the myth of female incapacity". The bourgeois "buys with wages the right to use" the only thing "the worker has to sell, his or her ability to work", transforming "community as a productive center and thus a center of subversion" where women "carry out domestic labour without a wage", strike, and pension, "but also because they always receive back into the home all those who are periodically expelled from their jobs by economic crisis. The family, this maternal cradle always ready to help and protect in time of need", creating inflation, subordination, and exploitation of women in working-class struggle. Heidi Hartmann, equates women as the less-paid proletariat in the public space and wage less domestic slave in the private space, double marginalized as a subaltern by both capitalism and patriarchy, and men and women intensified further by gender, race, ethnicity, caste, class etc. And Engels observes marriage as a proletarian (women) – bourgeoisie (men) exploitive relationship. Kangali, Nabin, and Halder men agree to the proletarian-Bourgeoisie terms consuming the wives, especially Jashoda as domestic commodities exploited at will denying their identity, and autonomy. Kangali's infidelity, family abandonment, and abuse of children question the alternative and exploited benefits of Jashoda's labour power. Verbal abuse, medical negligence; inhuman maltreatment; commercialised over-exploited profits derived from Jashoda's sole work tool, breast, and sexist job; taunts on Jashoda's family; exchange of employer's responsibilities; aversive neglect of undivided service and self-abnegation of Jashoda; disregard to one's employee's workplace health and safety; insecurity of job under succession of employers; devaluation of the wet-nurse to lowest range of servant; sexual harassment on maidservants; no post-retirement insurance and benefits; contempt of employment rights, policies, terms, and payment of workforce in cash; and denial of obligation to attend the funeral rites of milk-mothers – all demonstrates the exploitation of economic struggle of the subaltern proletariat. Halder family did not maintain strict guidelines against sexual harassment, workforce, bullying and equal wages for labour. "There was a mingling of male and female spaces and practices. The sharing opened up possibilities for the reordering of gender relations." (Tanika Sarkar). On Mistress recommendation Kangali "took charge of the cooking of the homemade the children his assistants" considering the double labour Jashoda would have to toil by breastfeeding a line of babies and then do household works. The neorealist change of gender role did not find an excuse to his habitual sex but the pre-ancient century notions of gender role laid by Halder men were unbendable even by the Mistress. Kangali lazied in his new comfort zone without any voluntary toll to be employed by utilizing Jashoda as an ATM machine, thus alienating and substituting his wife and her labour. The subaltern milk-mother undividedly coaxed death in the funeral pyre fanned by "the untouchable", the synonymous milk-son, neither did the subaltern wet-nurse oppressed or spoke anymore.

Medical negligence- Medical poverty- Medical Gender Gap- Sexual Healthcare- Medical Inequality- Lack of Medical Awareness- Workplace Health- Women’s Sexual, Reproductive, and Maternal Health- Childcare- Adolescent Health- Nutrition- Mental and Breast Health- Hygiene- Mortality- Vaccinations- STDS- Contraceptive Awareness- Birth Control- Family Planning

The tale though set in pre-and-post independence India, still vocalizes wide medical and sexual inequality, gender gap and medical illiteracy, Mahasweta Devi wittily hints some medical reality and factors. Jashoda was married off at a tender age before even developing basic lucid memories and hints how she may have been subjected to an irresponsible child custody, lack of formal education, social experience, and awareness of healthcare. Motherhood is the sole addictive definition of her lifespan suffixed by her carnal husband’s habitual sex rituals, incessant recreation and lactation, morning sickness, stillbirths— probably have started as an adolescent mother herself. Same documentation is viewed inside the chambers of Halder family women- beautiful seductress, countless pregnancies, and lack of power to voice ‘No’, almanac’s astrology is more important than sexual equality and reproductive sexual health. Mistress’s statement of men going to brothels or other women to quench their carnal pleasures stealthily suggests the possibility of unsafe sex, sexually transmitted diseases (STD), and denial of use of contraceptives, and potential risk for own families. It also calculate the health and mental risk, these women including the raped maidservant have to tolerant with or without the hideous boundaries of marital rape and molestation.

Haldar house’s ground floor transformed as a maternity ward-cum-nursery reek with the blended odors of Johnson’s baby powder, baby food, and disinfectants to prevent “constant epidemic”, assisted by a lady doctor and a midwife. Men and women are equally illiterate of sexual health, maternal health, hygiene, family planning, mortality, STD and contraceptives. To escape the Brahmin curse, Kangali received all medical aid, care, compensations, and assistance when he met the accident while Jasoda’s lifespan of undivided motherhood is nullified, and medically ignored during her initial stage of cancer symptoms. Jashoda’s illiteracy limits her awareness of changes within her body. But foreign – educated desi Haldar babus and their women believed that only lower caste people developed disease, not Brahmin Jasoda, so they settled with an Ayurvedic ointment, paraben chemical soap, and finally the responsibility of Jashoda’s health care was shuttled to Kangali to mitigate the liability to perform Brahmin’s death penance ritual in their house. Haldar men’s colonial English education withers with their pre-amphibious ideologies renouncing vaccinations for babies, the health of women, attentive medical care in the initial stage of diagnosis of Jashoda’s cancer, and medical behavioral illiteracy strangled by guilt, disconnecting the telephone to ignorance the duty towards their “milk–mother’s” death. Kangali and Jashoda’s medical care exposes the medical gender gap and inequality. Medical poverty is the sister cause due to economic wage division, Jashoda was never paid in cash, thus the old illiterate mother drew the lines of internal and external medical inclusion because of no retirement money, no money of her own and no one to even help. Many women are also restricted from having nutritious food, especially, Mistress and Jashoda. In selecting a wet-nurse, the Mistress conditions are objectified ‘mammal projection’ of Jashoda and her weaning-coaxing skills but fail to consider medical tests and screening to detect breastmilk-transmitted diseases like HIV, Hepatitis B& C, HPV, Cholera, Herpes, Tuberculosis, syphilis, etc. One of the Haldar son noticed Jashoda’s strange fatigue, and his mother, the elder daughter–in-law notice Jashoda’s left breast swelled like “flaming red” rock and armpit swelled like a seed. A doctor came to check one of the Halder grandsons and was requested to consult Jashoda’s case too. The attitude of traditional women’s ancient knowledge and healing skills “would liberate Indians from the expensive futile and ultimately fatal trap of western cure – which kills rather than heals.”(Tanika Sarkar) Jashoda’s own prejudice towards

the hospital and the male doctor is core imprinted from Kangali's accident. He diagnosed it as breast cancer and requested the family to accompany Jashoda to hospital but they negotiated its impossibility with caste and ambiguous age-calculation of their milk mother by the numeric of her pregnancies and eldest offspring's age.

The untreated lump outgrew, felt like flame and fume until her 'skin broke in many places and sores appeared' neither can she wear sari properly nor can she bear the aching mass. She succumbed to hospital-bed, "her bare left breast, thick with running sores" gaped like "open wound" with a "sharp smell of putrefying flesh" reeked in the room "like incense smoke" and "the sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouth, a hundred eyes". All that soothed her pain were "painkiller, sedative injection, antibiotics, drip glucose, gauze drenched in "antiseptic lotion", and two more— a secondary stage malignant growth and Arun doctor. A forgetting guilt clouded the Haldar mother and her son, he said: "when Arun doctor said she had cancer, she might have survived if treated then". His mother added, "what an active body she had, milk leaped out of her, we never thought she would have this disease". Kangali's mind "seeing Jashoda's broken, thin, suffering form", his selfish "belly-centered consciousness" reminisced the past of his "milk filled bosom of his faithful wife" is now "pained, aged, cracked" sore that immediately erased all lust, "There's no use going anymore. She doesn't know us, doesn't open her eyes, doesn't realize anything. The doctor is doing what he can", added Kangali. But "one patient's cancer means the patient's death and the defeat of science and of course of the doctor", a then followed notion of infant India after independence. The "Mother of All" spirals into the cobweb of approaching death bid farewell by an unanswerable delirium, "who is looking? Are these her own people? The people whom she suckled because she carried them, or those she suckled for a living?". And she died alone, only to be cremated in the funeral ghat by another subaltern, an untouchable.

Motherhood Amidst the Subaltern Politics

"Mothering- feelings of identification, lack of separateness or differentiation"(Gomick and Moran, 133-146). A mother invests all her energies in children bonding an outlet for emotional need, and fulfillment. Image of Motherhood is ordered to efface all identity, power, and autonomy, and impregnates self-sacrificing virtues exhibiting the imaginary and symbolic order. Jashoda, equates an analogous metaphor of "Mother India", sacred cows, Krishna's foster mother Jashoda, Lion-seated Goddess and fruitful mother Earth.

"The process of deification is essentially a process of self-estrangement, of fetishisation". (Tanika Sarkar). Lion-seated Goddess becomes Jashoda's sole confidante, refuge, and survival instincts. Jashoda fast for the safety of Kangali at "mother's temple". The symbolic dream of the arrival of Goddess as a midwife, "she creates as mother and preserves as midwife", culminates as Mother's will of being employed as a wet-nurse. Turn of Goddess idol, Mistress death, loss of job, infidelity of husband, bowing down at idol's feet, three days fast, and silent powerless transition of devotion to the icon of life to the image of death, Shiva. She is monikered as "Mother of World", "Cow Mother", "Professional mother", "milk filled faithful wife", "Divine Mother", "earth" with a "fulsome' harvest", "Cow of Fulfilment", "Object of the reverence", etc. "Return to mother, a reversing to the womb, to state of innocence', of pleasure". (Tanika Sarkar). Jashoda's personifies herself as the "Divine mother" who preserves the progenies while all men assume both as "Brahma", creator of life and "Holy child" in bed. With a perpetual maternal identity and ambiguous age estimated by twenty children, including stillbirths suffixed by generations of Haldar "milk-offspring" crossing thirty. "Motherhood was always her way of living" – procreation, nurturing, lactating, wearing, morning sickness. Conceived incessantly without any chance of counting days and "no child in her womb" articulates the professional elite-amateur motherhood

binary. She blossomed into harvest full earth for the survival of her family – whims, and abuses of own children for foods and jobless crippled husband. Thus, her milk-flowing bosom becomes her sole survival tool, adored by maternal plentitude, maternal holiness, and prophetic lactation. Jashoda's daughters are married off to established families as a faithful daughters-in-law, while sons and husband amassed wealth by fishing out devotees. Jashoda is revered in marriages and baby showers as a symbol of nourishment, even worshipped by the wanton saint like Nabin as "Mother". But the ultimate suckling of last Halder offspring parched the last of her breast milk, maternity concluded with "pained, aged cracked, milk-less breast" and when the money ceased she conjured the truth of infidel corrupted husband who lived on his "wife's carcass". Kangali's "sons are his sons. Their mother had become a distant person for a long time. The person lying in the hospital is someone else, not their mother." The mother who self-effaced herself for the sake of children, was cremated as an orphan corpse by an untouchable milk-son. Arun doctor said, "she sees her milk-sons all over the world" and thinks him also as one of her Haldar milk-sons. The Haldar couples married twice for record procreation; their wives wore a European-cut blouse, and also be mothers when they have their own personal wet-nurse working like a machine. Nutritious food and delicacies are shared by only pregnant women. The new generations of daughters-in-law broke the procreation protocol unlike their precursors. The shift of power to the last reigning Haldar daughter-in-law, and her son are infiltrated By guilt of ignoring their social-emotional duty of their "milk- Mother for whom motherhood was an addiction". "To be borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy joins with physiology to render into the definition of femaleness." (Adrienne Rich, 37)

Class and Caste as Marginalised Subaltern Politics

The marginalised women are represented as passive, quiet, powerless, and "silent subaltern" due to multi-levels of exploitative oppressions executed by class-based oppression, caste-based oppression, caste and class-based gender oppression by all men, and caste and class-based oppression by other women. "Hence, identity politics dismisses feminist homogeneity due to the notions of gender or sexual difference, or ever patriarchy which cannot be applied universally and cross-culturally."(Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 21). Subaltern studies evaluate the new terminologies of motherhood, patriarchy, religion, culture, society, identity, sexuality, body, race, ethnicity, colour, politics, nation, family, history, health, poverty, gender, and others by redrawing the dominant bourgeois master as colonizer and subaltern as colonized. The fresh veins of the Bengal Partition rekindle through multiple hatred and stereotypes. Mr. Haldarbabu is a man of British Divide and Rule era, imprinted with prejudices towards East Bengali from then Dhaka but Eastern origin Kangali's sacred thread of caste label demanded respect rather than the Brahmin curse. He does not trust anyone – not a "Panjabi-Oriya-Bihari-Gujarati-Marathi-Muslim", his kindness flowed only in the Western direction. The shop owner is enraged to see the unmannerly act of his employee Kangali's stealing samosas and sweets from his sweetshop exemplifying economic class struggle. "Higher education was the opium of the Indians, especially the middle-class babus." (Tanika Sarkar). A literacy divide and inaccessibility to learning create illiterate-literate power division justified through the exploitative relationship between Doctors and Haldar members, and people like Jashoda, Kangali, Nanbin etc. The untouchable subaltern grave cremator, a simile of Shiva, The unknown universal milk-son is the only human witnesses the transition of the soul. Mistress and Haldar women envied and objectified Jashoda's bosom locking it as a million-dollar deal which exposes the economic divide as the partition of feminist sisterhood. Haldar's young son's unchecked whims of raping the maidservant and falsely accusing her of robbery, soon escalates to destructive aggression of stealing and joy riding, all his victims including Kangali's voice and lives

are bought by his family money, a catalogue of 'silent subaltern' circled the economic politics. The variegated approach towards Kangali's medical attention and Jashoda's medical rejection by the Haldar family can be sketched as the gender politics. Prolonged exploitation of Jashoda as wet-nurse is based on gender and economic politics. The question of duties and time balance for own children by a professional mother or working women is arcanelly challenged. The story forms an in-built multi-dimensions of identity politics.

Mercurial notions of Beauty and Politics of 'Beauty Myth'

"The Beauty myth is always actually prescribing behaviour and not appearance", "a culture fixated on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience." (Naomi Wolf). All women are subjected to the beauty myth to satisfy their men's illusion of perfection. Jashoda's voluptuous bosom is the fetish obsession of Kangali's "filial inclination" of his habitual sexual rites. His adultery propagates in the absence of Jashoda's body substituting her with Gopali-auntie. Nabin's wanton desire manifests while dreaming of Jashoda's breast like her husband Kangali is embittered by the price of beauty, "open wound" reeking of putrid smell. These men's fantasies are fractures by the reality of the human body and beauty. Mistress mitigates Jashoda to be categorized as a wet-nurse because of her bosom revealing the sexist employment selection criteria and objectification of body image. Men of Haldar family are in a dilemma to choose between wives' bodily perfection and child rearing. Mistress second son's million-dollar saving scheme to save his wife and his European ideal of beauty costs a subaltern like Jashoda's life and health. The wives would clad in European-cut blouse, and be their sensual fantasies without damaging their body shape while lactating babies – beauty formula to combine multiple pregnancies and beauty "so they do not have to go out" to satisfy their carnal lust. Now their wives would not have an excuse of 'no' – a basic right to sexual equality. These women including Jashoda are yet proud of their beauty charms. Halder men's male gazing of other women exposes the insatiability of beauty illusion. All that matters is almanacs' astrology and "fair skin, beautiful face and body, expertise in domestic chores retain their old importance" (Tanika Sarkar). Even the archetypal image of heavy breasted lion-seated Goddess serves the sexually innocent image of "domesticated gentle femininity", (Tanika Sarkar) and thereby serves as an alternative self-image of Jashoda herself.

Body, Identity and Sexuality

Woman's identity is formulated by the structure she inhabits and women are labeled as object or commodity consumed as a tool and trophy by the consumer – men. Thematic indicators of constant fear of castration in men is represented by Kangali's legs, sole means of livelihood. While women are strangled by lack indicates how sex is biological structure while gender is a social construct, and both infiltrate the norms of ethnicity. "Depiction of the homeland as a female body whose violation by foreigners requires its citizen and allies to rush to her defence" (Andrew Parker, 6). Body is consistently fore bodied to validate the centrality of the female body in terms of labour tool, reproductive womb, and anatomical functionality, a re-reading of the consciousness of the breast-giver. Female body assimilates the idea of preserved purity and any usurpation that eventually culminate in surrender and destruction. Female body and sexuality are defined in terms of cultural war zone strategies rather than as biological and psychological discussions, forcing the focus on the individual, not on the body. The reproductive body part, breast transforms into core matrix of body image, identify politics, and sexual gender roles. The marginalisation of Jashoda with only a surname and "milk filled" bosom, conflicts with identity formation and sexual equality. None of the women have the basic sexual right of choice of sexual intercourse, no right to say 'No'. Body is

commercialised beyond the limits of human anatomical structuring. Most female characters except Jashoda and her daughters are without a formed identity, name, and existence, constituting into the anonymous female mass labeled by patriarchy.

Conclusion

Hence, Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast Giver' lulls the readers with the thematic lullabies of subaltern struggle, holy motherhood, maternal plentitude, Sati-Savithri syndrome, imaginary and symbolic orders, male desire and castration fear, gender-class encounters, hegemonic discourses, patriarchy, capitalism, self-effacement, survival instincts, commodity-consumer illusion of Beauty and dilemma of employment rights and guidelines. Jashoda, "the subaltern is not similarly privileged, and does not speak in a vocabulary that will get a hearing in institutional locations of power". (Spivak, 2125).

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