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Motherhood Re-defined by Mahasweta Devi in Her Short-Story *Breast-Giver*

Manju, M.Phil.

MOTHERHOOD



Re-defined by Mahasweta Devi
In “Breast – Giver”

Wife and Mother

The two significant positions that dominate the society's understanding about women are that of the role of a wife and of a mother. In Indian culture, the daughters of a family marry and move into their husbands' houses, which include their entire families. Daughters-in-law manage households and provide heirs to the families. For the growth of the human race, God gifted women with the unique power to give birth while bringing a new life into this world.

Pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood are some of the sex-specific roles that are assumed to be an essential part of every female's development. Without attaining motherhood a woman's persona remains hollow. During pregnancy, the child is connected with mother through the umbilical cord which is the medium of nourishment for the child. It's the mother who initiates the child's journey in this amazing new world, gives him or her his or her food, provides the child with lessons, exposes him or her to real life, answers all their queries, helps them discover their roots and teaches them the art of living.

Motherhood

Today, the term motherhood is not only confined to the "biological mother" but also connected with the "surrogate mother", "legal mother" and "Nurturing mother".

Motherhood in the Indian society crowns a woman with an honoured status "not in the sense of special right but as an attribute" without which she is looked down upon (Krishanraj 35). In the context of a mother and the nation, a nineteenth century Swedish writer, Ellen Key says: "The Mother is the most precious possession of the nation, so precious that society advances its highest well-being when it protects the functions of the mother." Many historians believed that the "golden age" for women was a genuine attempt made by the (nineteenth century) Indian reformers, who were eager to wipe out

the social evils (widow immolation, child marriage, superstition) widespread in the country (Bumiller 17).

Mahasweta Devi on Motherhood

Mahasweta Devi attacks the silence that surrounds the social-political-cultural issues, and through her narrative on "Jashoda", focusses on the experience of motherhood and also on the exploitation of women which remains unobserved otherwise.

The Focus of This Paper

The aim of the present paper is to depict how Mahasweta Devi uses motherhood as a metaphor for exploitation of women. Her keen and perceptive study of the unheard stories of a section of Indian society brings to light the exploitation of women.

Breast Trilogy

The story of Jashoda demonstrates the theme of commodification of mother's milk; it is the first true story in the "Breast Trilogy", the other two being "Draupadi" and "Behind the Bodice: Choli Ke Piche." *Breast-Giver* is prominently rich in its encrusted complexity and concentration on the same theme. Jashoda belongs to an economically weak class. She adopts the profession of wet nurse to support her family when her husband Kangalicharan gets crippled in an accident. To support her family she feeds twenty children. Though this new employment forces her to be repeatedly pregnant, yet it gives her social and political significance in the form of "Mother of the world" (52). In the present story breast is the source of food and livelihood for Jashoda's family. Haldar household was using Jashoda's body. Jashoda is paid to breastfeed the many children of her master and mistress. Her abundant milk becomes a vehicle of income for her husband and family. Jashoda is not exploited because she is a woman but because of the class structure, the change of time and situation. It's only the difference of class that the upper

class women of Halidar family pay lower class Jashoda for breast feeding their children in order to escape from ruining their figures.

Jashoda serves her husband whole heartedly, the ideal wife exclaims:
"You are husband, you are guru. If I forget and say no, correct me" (51). The Halidar household takes advantage of the fact that she is poor and that God chose motherhood as a profession for Jashoda. Jashoda dies a lonely death due to breast cancer. When she is no longer "useful" for her friends and relatives, they abandon and forget her.

Devi says:

Jashoda's good fortune was her ability to bear children. All this misfortune happened to her as soon as that vanished. Now is the downward time for Jashoda the milk-filled faithful wife who was the object of reverence of the local houses devoted to the holy mother. (62)

Wet Nurse

The concept of wet nurse is a rarely explored concept in the literature. In the very opening of the story Jashoda is introduced as:

Kangalicharan's wife from birth, the mother of twenty children, living or dead, counted on her fingers – Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings. Jashoda was a mother by profession, professional mother. (40)

When her breasts get affected with cancer with which she fed, the infants mock at "her with a hundred mouths and hundred eyes." The endless sacrifices that Jashoda made returned her nothing but suffering alone in silence. Jashoda in her innocence feels that all around her are milk sons:

Who's looking? Are these her own people? The people whom she suckled because she carried them, or those she suckled for a living? Jashoda thought, after all she had suckled the world, could

she then die alone? The doctor who sees her every day, the person who will cover her face with a sheet, will put her on a cart, will lower her at the burning ghat, the untouchable who will put her in a furnace, all are her milk-sons. (74).

Sadly, Jashoda leaves the world silently burdened with the pain of having none of her "own" attending to her in the last stages of her life.

Gloomy Reality of Motherhood

In this paper an attempt has been made to bring to light how Mahasweta Devi redefined motherhood. How it can be a burden, oppression, and how it may be a reason of exploitation. The story of the "*Breast Giver*" brings to the surface, the gloomy reality of the process of sanctification of motherhood. Jashoda becomes a "Milk mother" for the Halder family and dies suffering alone in silence due to breast cancer. In spite of so many children, she receives a lonely cremation by the hospital staff. As long as she remained fertile, the exploiters became happy with her produce and the moment she gets cancer, they abandon her. Thus Mahasweta Devi shows how the "Milk mother" pays a heavy price for her ignorance and dies of severe pain. She exposes the hidden exploitation of a poor woman, a faithful wife and a great mother, Jashoda.

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