



FROM REPRESSION TO RETALIATION AS RENDERED IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *BREAST STORIES*

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A woman is an inevitable force who possesses an unflinching determination in her life and career. A woman continues to work relentlessly towards her noble cause lending a ray of hope to many lives. She is the harbinger of absolute happiness and the reaper of good deeds. A woman is always garbed with a perpetual look of amiable beatitude on her face. The universe has to perpetuate the benediction of a woman without subjugating her illustrious power with a chauvinistic dictum. In the bygone years, nature and women were protected and cherished as the most exquisite jewels to safeguard from the savage men victimizers. Nature is always at her mercy when she is revered with due respect and if the humans fail to address her with much approbation, then the whole universe should pay her the penalties for iniquity of the false doctrines. If both woman and nature are ready to undergo the repression, then the entire world will be at chaos and in need of just action. Consequently, woman and nature have to realize their own potential and should never allow to be subjugated by the patriarchal society and their social deems. Women are always a long-term champions and advocates for the political, social and economic advancement of people in backward communities. The concept of repression of a woman and then retaliating and taking stand for herself is vividly portrayed in Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* where she has taken 'breast' as a metaphor to indicate her theme. The book showcases on the punitive patriarchy and its virulent norms that induce gender inequality and discrimination in India over centuries.

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A woman possesses the complete power within herself as she is a benefactor of life and a purveyor of new hope for all human beings. She has not paid alertness whether she is superior, inferior or equal in the social hierarchy. As Nigamananda Das in the article, "Womanism versus Feminism: A Study of Select Tribal Fictional Narrative" proclaims: "Feminism roughly means championing the rights of women which they were deprived of for centuries. Women

across the globe through the years from immemorial have been the worst sufferers of the patriarchal dominance.” (Behera 177). These women undergo every difficulties in her life because of her “tolerance, humility, sincerity and strong devotion for loving and caring children and family.” (Behera 177).

In *Breast Stories* Mahasweta Devi, a versatile genius enlightens the audience on the dark reality where women are commoditized with their, ‘breasts’ “Indian woman authors in the present milieu have begun to voice their concerns on globalization in India, and its impact on gender and family relations.” (Bharti 222). These prominent women of the society are incredible to emulate by the patriarchal realm. The author weaves the story with a realistic backdrop where women are oppressed and treated indignantly by the societal norms. Eco-feminism propagates that all forms of oppression are inter-connected and that “structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality. Oppression of the natural world and of women by patriarchal power structures must be examined together or neither can be confronted fully.” (Pandey S 181). These socially constructed oppressions are formulated out of the power dynamics of the dominant patriarchal systems.

One position involves an argument that patriarchy equates women and nature, so that a feminist analysis is required to understand fully the genesis of environmental problems. In other words, where women are degraded, nature will be degraded, and where women are thought to be eternally giving and nurturing, nature will be thought of as endlessly fertile and exploitable. (Sturgeon 28)

In all the stories in *Breast Stories*, breast act as the common motif for violence against women in an exploitative social system and acts as an instrument where the repression of a woman turn as a great resilient. Pravin Sheth in the article, “Caste, Class and Violence in Rural India” propagates on “Social and political tensions in India, caused by caste, ethnic class and communal lines have become salient features of India’s development syndrome.” (Desai 420). Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak asserts in the ‘Introduction’ of the books “The breast is what the stories have in common and what they do not share is shown by the staging of the names of three protagonist: Dopdi, Jashoda, Gangor; in *Draupadi*, Breast –Giver, Behind the Bodice” (Devi vii). In the fictions of Mahasweta Devi, she often “depicts the brutal oppression of tribal people and the untouchables by potent, authoritarian upper-caste landlords, lenders and apathetic government officials.” (Ahuja 110).

In the first story, “*Draupadi*”, Dopdi Mejen, a prominent tribal rebellious character who was a vigorous person in the Naxalite movement was active in the West Bengal and callous methods of the government to suppress them. Dopdi along with her husband, Dulna went missing after the ‘Operation Bakuli’ and since the couple was good at guerilla warfare, they managed to hide themselves from the eyes of the soldiers. “Enslavement of other people through military conquest typically took the form of killing the males and enslaving the women and their children for labor and sexual service. Women’s work becomes identified with slave work.” (Pandey S 5). Regrettably, Dulna Majhi was killed while drinking water from a pond and that made Dopdi to be in charge of the many Santhals camouflaging in the forest of Tharkoni. Mahasweta Devi’s major source of writing comes from the sufferings of human beings.

In the realm of values also the tribals have some core standards which have been traditional to them. The Bhil is brave and chivalrous. If he promises to do something, he would always redeem his promise. All his thoughts are the present, he is least bothered about tomorrow. Neither does he think of the transmigration of the soul. He lives in the present and consumes it to the hilt. (Kothari 136).

On a particular day, Dopdi was surrounded on all the sides and got arrested by military men as she was betrayed by the two of her own men. Prasanta Ckraborthy in the article “The Marginalised and Terrorism: A Feminist Construct in *These Hills Called Home* and *The Collector’s Wife*, propounds an idea, that women are portrayed “as marginalized group facing both the insurgents and the military. But in the crisis, they show resilience for any sort of adjustment and exercise the much needed courage, will power and intelligence to face opposition in compromise and cooperation.” (Mouli 91). Senanayak commanded his men to torture Dopdi and therefore she was molested by a group of men for the whole night by her legs and hands being tied to the four posts. Sukanya Saha in her article “Portrayal of Women’s oppression in Select Indian Fiction” enlightens the readers: “Women are fettered with ties, both external and internal. This accounts for their exploitation, margianlisation also powerlessness.” (Saha 53). In the morning when Senanayak ordered Dopdi to meet him, she refused to go and further, she threw her clothes and torn her clothes apart and marched towards the tent of Senanayak. When she was raped brutally to suppress her valiant nature, she never gave up and decided to resist the oppression by transforming her own naked body and her breasts as the powerful weapons to make the men around herself to feel degraded by their behavior. Hitherto, nature is “subordinated to man; woman to man; consumption to production; and the local to the global, and so on. Feminists have long criticized this dichotomy, particularly the structural division of man and nature, which is seen as analogous to that of man and woman.” (Shiva 5).

A woman can find her freedom only when she decides to know her worth. Oppression “is an age-old reality woman have been confronting constantly being denied of opportunities.” (Saha 52). Eventually, she has to be brave, compassionate and independent to achieve every possible dream in her life. A woman is a guardian force who similar to nature protects every other soul on the earth and similarly, when she is not treated with reverence, she takes the ultimate power to reveal her identity to suppress the opponents. Mahasweta Devi involves the suffering of the tribal communities in almost all her works “She has been a long-time champion for the political, social, and economic advancement of these communities, whom she characterizes as ‘suffering spectators of the India that is travelling towards the twenty first century.’” (Ahiya 111).

From the cluster of stories, the second story “Breast-Giver” demonstrates the story of the plight of a woman who was the real breast feeder to many. Jashoda, a wife of Kanagalicharan, whose legs were amputated out of a terrible accident. This particular accident had left the family jobless and pushed them at the verge of starvation. In order to feed her family at the time of starvation, she sought the help of her mistress. Meanwhile, the mistress asked Jashoda to feed the child of her daughter-in-law who was a sick. “Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings Jashoda was a mother by profession, professional mother” (Devi 38). Deane Curtin propounds in the seminal article “Compassion and Being Human” that compassion is more or less easily misguided, compassion “requires wisdom concerning the true causes of suffering, conversely, without compassion, wisdom is

coldly analytical, compassion involves a feeling of judgment and feeling about such important life situations.” (Adams 47).

The incident of feeding a child germinates the idea of breast feeding as the profession to support her family at the time of financial crisis. However, in order to feed the children of Haldars at regular intervals, she has to be pregnant to have a continuous flow of milk for the supply to other children. A time arrived when the mistress of the Halder family dies and even her daughter-in-laws grew old and even Jashoda as well. Consequently, Jashoda was sent out of their house and felt dejected at that situation. When she had acute pain in her breast, nobody was there to take of her health and only on the persistence of her second daughter-in-law, she moved to the hospital for the check-up. Unfortunately, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and none of her real sons and the children to whom she fed her milk supported her and moreover, abandoned her on the streets. “Why did those breasts betray her in the end?” (Devi 66). In the end, after her sad demise, only an untouchable cremates her. Breasts, the soul-saver of Jashoda, the means of her livelihood killed her in the last. The justice can be availed for a woman only if “The story of a land where women live at peace with themselves and with the natural world is a recurrent theme of female utopias. This is a land where there is no hierarchy, among humans or between humans and animals.” (Tandon 22).

The final story of the book exhibits the miserable tale of a woman, Gangor, whose breast fascinated and attracted the attention of several men in the society, including the police officials. The story begins with a rhetorical question: *Choli ke piche kya hai?* or What is there behind the Choli? The short story pins around Upin Puri, an ace photographer and Ujan and Shital. While investigating about the whereabouts of the missing Upin Puri, many shocking revelations are exposed. As a photographer he usually sells the pictures of the violence to the West. Randomly Upin came across Gangor and her uncovered breasts attracted his attention to take a photo of her image. The exposure of her breasts makes her an object of disgust in her own community itself. Her physical appearance captivated the attention of many men folks in the region.

Upin captured the images of Gangor and after inferring the intention of the photographer, Gangor demanded money for each of her photos that was snapped. Upin absolutely forgot about Gangor and unintentionally when he noticed Gangor, he was bewildered at her current situation as her breasts were flat and her scars were deep and that breast was not the same that he was spellbound to take a photo “A Dalit woman in our society suffers from various problems such as rape and sexual assaults. Violent acts perpetrated against Dalit women, both domestic and other otherwise are common features of Indian society.” They are “treated in a dictatorial manner and is vulnerable to intimidation and bullying in contemporary India.” (MJP 105). At that moment, he seemingly understood the gravity of his photo of Gangor’s breasts which was in circulation. People had a great concern only towards the body of a woman and not her pure heart.

The change in a historical epoch can always be determined by the progress of women towards freedom, because in the relation of woman to man, of the weak to the strong, the victory of human nature over brutality is most evident. The degree of emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation. (Shukla 68)

Gangor’s present stage vividly portrays the desire of a patriarchal society to devour the body of a woman. She stranded with her children in a deplorable condition and a horrendous sight

for Upin to even look at her. Despite her horrible situation, she chose to live her life as she wished without compromising her ideals.

An ecofeminist ethic is both a critique of male domination of both women and nature and an attempt to frame an ethic free of male-gender bias about women and nature. It not only recognizes the multiple voices of women, located differently by race, class, age, [and] ethnic considerations, it centralizes those voices. (Merchant 7)

The protagonists of the cluster of the stories of *Breast Stories* –Dopdi Mejden, Jashoda and Gangor are the victims of the social whims. Indeed, these women are mercilessly whipped by the doctrines of the social construction. Though Dopdi and Gangor were molested by men in plenty, they never took the worst decision of killing themselves out of the tragic incident. They were confident to take a stance for themselves to show their worth to the male dominant world. Most of women in this world are always in their pursuit to find their absolute bliss and indeed, they have a longing to find a utopia where women are treated equally with men and are recognized for their noble identity. These three stories related to ‘breasts’ entice the readers on the life of the downtrodden and the myriad ways in which they face oppression and how women are eventually double marginalized and are invariably oppressed by man’s greed, narrowness and selfishness of the society. As philosopher Karen Warren conceptualizes it:

For the earth has still to be won. The removal of most of the more blatant of the injustices against women has served to concentrate attention on those that remain. After the euphoria of the first handful of spectacular triumphs, late twentieth-century feminism had to come to terms with the fact that, with every battle won, the enemy regroups elsewhere; new oppressions emerge, which like their predecessors are only symptoms and expressions of more fundamental inequalities whose roots are hard enough to identify, let alone remove. (Miles 278)

Mahasweta Devi’s *The Voice of the Road* pivots on the life and cultures of West Bengal where the author has analysed the sufferings and afflictions in the lives of tribes in West Bengal. The writer has never ceased in her choice of exhibiting the lesser known dark world of tribes and the downtrodden people who were absolutely marginalized and deprived of their social status. The political scenario made those people to be dependent on socially acclaimed elite group to make their living. Albeit the tribes has a close affinity with nature, the tribal community enforced to be the victims of forced displacement, land alienation and eruption of violence.

Mahasweta Devi’s writings are a powerful weapon to publicize on the oppressions faced by the people of nature. India is an abode to a large number of tribes with population of nearly 80 million and each of the tribes is rich in their heritage in terms of culture, folk tales, folk songs and folk narratives. There is a dearth of awareness among people in enforcing laws to protect indigenous people to ensure their safe living. With the advent of industrialization, the rights with the tribes had on the land and the forest had a severe blow. Mahasweta Devi is considered virtuous in raising voice for the voiceless people who are totally forgotten by the society and where the politicians attempt to obliterate the whole clan of people to obliterate from human history without a trace.

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