

I am a Woman: Converging Mahasweta Devi's Women Characters with Modern Feminism

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Abstract

The reminiscence of women as subjects is a glorified horror that modern society is trying to undo throughout the world, envisioning women as an emerging part of race that long awaited the opportunity to take part in worldly objects, advancing the growth of social, cultural, political, economic, and other constituents of the society that make it great as an equal holder with men. Women's empowerment is not only an emerging genre of modern society but also a truth uttered by centuries of women's subjugation. This article engages with the literary representation of post-independence Indian society through the realist vision of Mahasweta Devi. Her splendid portrayal of women characters in her work has allowed this article to work on the objectification of women and prostitution as open subjugation. "Breast Stories" is a well-renowned post-independence work of Mahasweta Devi that criticizes women's breasts as just objects of lust and greed for satisfaction. "Bedanabala", on the other hand, encourages the voice of the scarred lives of prostitutes. Both works condemn the society that takes women as a commodity like any other pet animals. This article aims to conjugate the explored and unexplored aspects of Mahasweta Devi by using a radical feminist critical approach towards the cultural constraints, sexual violence, bodily objectification, and male dominance over female prostitutes of contemporary society.

Keywords: Women in Literature, Women's brutality, Sexual violence, Female body, Critical Feminism.

Introduction

"I'm a woman Phenomenally." - Maya Angelou

Feminism in mid-17th-century England reintroduced society to the true meaning of 'woman', which had been obscured and marginalized for time immemorial under the norms of patriarchy across the social, political, and intellectual spheres. The urge to be

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seen as equal to men intensified alongside literary and philosophical expansion in the seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, with figures such as Aphra Behn, Mary Wollstonecraft, and the Bluestocking group. This demand transformed into a revolution with the coinage of the term 'Feminism' by the French philosopher Charles Fourier in 1837. In the light of these philosophers and writers, the subjugation and oppression of women became more prominent, and to free themselves from the age-old shackles became necessary as any other survival movement. Although the movement has become timeless, even in modern society, it leads to shame and humiliation for women's voice of struggle. As the world transformed, we were introduced to many philosophers and members of the literary elite in modern society who produced excellent works in global literature. These women carried forward the legacy of resistance against centuries of physical, psychological, or emotional suffering that long rendered them voiceless in matters of politics, society, and civil life. The movement did not limit itself to England but spread like wildfire around the globe. The nineteenth century marked a crucial turning point in women's history. Although India was engaged in the struggle against colonialism, it did not deter women writers from exposing and critically interrogating the timeworn traditions, entrenched orthodoxy, and perpetual patriarchal hypocrisy in the name of culture and customs. Authors such as Sarojini Naidu, Mahasweta Devi, Kamala Das, Anita Desai, and Kamala Markandey heightened expectations in the space of debatable criticism.

"I often say that my world is divided between two things - the needful and the needless. I am interested only in the former. I don't have much use for the needless" - Mahasweta Devi.

A distinguished literary figure of Bengali origin, Mahasweta Devi emerged as a prominent literary voice for marginalized and downtrodden communities through her exceptional and impactful works. Beyond articulating class struggle, she exposed the nature of struggling women and addressed the predicament of women's commodification and the battle of subjugation. The raw nature of her work captures the reader's attention.

This article analyzes Mahasweta Devi's short stories published in Bengali and later translated into English as a collection, "Breast Stories," by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, accompanied by an introductory essay, in 1997. This collection includes three short stories: "Draupadi," "Breast-Giver," and "Behind the Bodice: Choli ke Piche," alongside the novel "Bedanabala," translated by Sunandini Banerjee, to capture the essence of the woman's body and how men see them as an object of lust and vulnerability. This paper critiques and synthesizes the characters of the short stories in reference to modern and postmodern thinkers, as well as the emergence of 'womanism' during that time, exploring the theme of sexual violence, body objectification, and prostitution as a systematic study of oppression.

Literature Review

Early feminist theorists linked patriarchy to individual acts of discrimination, the formation of cultural norms, and the symbolic representation of women. The rise of the feminist movement prompted a shift in interpretation against the dominant cycle. The radical thinkers of contemporary society contend that gender inequality is not solely a product of social conditioning but is structurally embedded in the social and political systems, transforming into subalternity.

Although subalternity has multiple political and social variations, Antonio Gramsci's idea of subalternity can be approached from a feminist view to identify the broader aspect of this concept. If the concept is dissected and intersected with the core of feminism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak stands as an important figure. Her foundational essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) interrogates the Western representation of 'others' and the limitation imposed on subaltern subjectivity. The concept of subaltern challenges the dominant narrative of women being marginalized by both patriarchy and colonial power. This approach to subaltern theory emphasizes the embodied form of resistance that emerges outside institutional recognition and linguistic representation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translated "Breast Giver", a collection of three short stories by Mahasweta Devi, while explaining her critical theory in relation to subaltern and third-world countries.

A political aspect of Mahasweta Devi's characters can be viewed through Michel Foucault's concept of 'Biopolitics' and 'Biopower', which critically analyzes the mechanisms of the regime of authority that influence human life. He first used the term in his lecture courses at Collège de France, later included in the print, 'The Will to Knowledge' (1976), his first volume of 'The History of Sexuality'. His articulation of power operating through the management of life, bodies, and biological processes has been extended by many modern feminists to analyze the patriarchal commodification and disciplines put on women's bodies, intercepting political and social identity.

The social conditioning from political to ideological shift is quite an expansion within feminist theories. Visual culture and representation constitute another domain of women's domination, which is articulated through Laura Mulvey's idea of the 'male gaze'. The concept was first introduced in her 1975 essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. The eminent feminist film theorist discusses that women are depicted as sexual objects in the world's visual arts and literature from a heterosexual perspective, which can be considered as an assiduous agent of violence, endowing women with a consumable image. Alignment of 'Biopower' and 'Male Gaze' complements the characters of Mahasweta Devi.

Bell Hooks, the American philosopher, wrote "Feminism is for EVERYBODY" which speaks out for everyone. This article continues with the voice speaking on behalf of prostitution and sexual labor. Modern thinkers like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon conceptualize prostitution as an institutionalized expression of male dominance, wherein women's consent is shaped by economic coercion. MacKinnon, in her book 'Towards the Feminist Theory of the State' (1989), proposes an answer to this problem and takes Marxism to situate sexual exploitation within the broader system of power, labour, and inequality.

Several theoretical interventions provide a comprehensive theoretical structure of multilayered female oppression that is socially conditioned. This article studies these critical traditions by integrating modern and postmodern theories of radical thinkers through the analysis of Mahasweta Devi's female protagonists.

Theoretical Orientation and Methodology

This study employs a radical feminist perspective to examine the regulation of women's social and moral status under a patriarchal power structure. The analysis mobilizes the concepts of Biopolitics, subalternity, and the male gaze to construct

female subjectivity and interrogate the growing debate of empowerment through the practice of body consumption and escapism.

The study incorporates a qualitative textual analysis rooted in feminist literary criticism, enabling a comparative analysis of selective texts of Mahasweta Devi's short stories and novels to explore how literary narrative constructs womanism as a site of domination, resistance, and survival across social hierarchies.

Critical Reading and Discussion

Naked Resistance in 'Draupadi'

Devi's reimagination of the titular character 'Draupadi' not as a mythic character of the Mahabharata protected by a divine god, but as a tribal woman 'Dopdi' who is being hunted by political and physical resistance, and has no divinity to save her, gives an edge to the narrative. Dopdi Mehjan is an active member of the Naxalbari movement fighting against colonial resistance, which somehow makes her an easy target of the landowning class. The irony of the character remains in the name itself. Devi's portrayal of Dopdi's resistance is both feminine and social, where the mythic character 'Draupadi' brought about the destruction of wit and dominance for her dignity, but 'Dopdi', on the other hand, is gang raped with a generalization of both being a tribal woman and a revolter of the dominance and tagged as a skillful deceit to be most wanted criminal in West Bengal with her husband as a support. The couples are renowned for their art of murdering landowners who primarily own wells and water. While Devi composed 'Dopdi's character as a weird, ambiguous, rather than a functional woman, the most striking nature of 'Senanyak' is the completion of her agenda. A law-abiding army officer who is in charge of taking 'Dopdi' into the hands of the unhinged judiciary, disguised as the saviour of society. While Dopdi is gang raped and mutilated till she could not leave the floor, careless and unsaved, Senanayak's existence in the situation raises a crucial question of why a paradoxical representation.

Spivak, while translating, puts her theory of subaltern, calls Senanyak "I find the closest approximation to the First-World scholar in search of the Third-World, I shall speak of him first." (Mahasweta Debi, 1997, 16). When Senanayak demands to see Dopdi, he finds a mutilated naked body standing upright in front of him, covered in silence and unashamed to be unclothed. The lawful dignity of Senanyak breaks when Dopdi pushes him with her two mangled breasts, curating a shiver of fear within him for the first time in his life. Being uncomfortable when he asks her for her clothes, Dopdi's reply is a mere awakening of the readers: "What's the use of clothes? There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of" (Mahasweta Debi, 1997, 33). Her challenge to Senanayak is a presentation of all the women suffering violence, but also of necessary resistance: "You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?" (Mahasweta Debi, 1997, 33). While Devi's unsaid comparison of Panchali as Draupadi and Dopdi as Draupadi clears the air of illusioned ideologies, Spivak uses a different approach: "My approach to the story has been influenced by 'deconstructive practice'. I clearly share an unease that would declare avant-garde theories of interpretation too elitist to cope with revolutionary feminist material." (Mahasweta Debi, 1997, 17)

Consuming Motherhood: Biopolitical Resistance of Jashoda

A concurrent patriarchal theme emerges through the figure of Jashoda in the second short story of the collection, "Breast-Giver". Devi's deliberate and unapologetic naming of the protagonist is more intentional, accentuating the weight attached to motherhood. The sacred embodiment of maternal identity is transformed into a tragic site of dissociation in the economic society that commodifies the female body. Jashoda's breasts are consumed not as a symbol of feminine empowerment or charisma, but as a material of labour and capitalist exploitation. On Devi's interpretation of cruel social norms, Spivak clearly agrees and criticizes the glorified patriarchy, "The underclass 'Hindu female', ('Breast giver'), as long as she credits Hindu maternalism and family values, is unable to save herself" (Mahasweta Debi, 1997, 7).

Jashoda's transfiguration as the primary economic provider somehow subverts the conventional patriarchal roles due to Kangalicharan's paralysis, disrupting the traditional conflation of femininity with domesticity. Her belonging to a brahmin family doesn't mitigate the oppression on her as a woman. Her only source of providing for twenty youngsters in her house is her body, which is fertile enough to render her a wet nurse for the Halder family. While the protagonist's name signifies the epitome of motherhood, Devi deliberately contradicts the character's role into a labour of motherhood. From a feminine perspective, Jashoda is the norm breaker, yet shackled by her own unheard voices. Her changed roles do not support feminist emancipation; her acceptance of subalternity, she, as well as her family, knows and accepts her body's utility, and nobody disrupts as long as they are fed. Spivak carefully places the protagonist's position and questions Gramsci's idea of hegemony in the rise of subalternity. She did not stop there, also encompassing Marx's concept of associated labour into the subalternization to spare Jashoda's reverse gender. "It is the loneliness of the gendered subaltern that is staged in 'Standayini'" (Mahasweta Debi, 1997, 90)

The character's repercussion in the real world can be observed under the light of Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, as the protagonist's use of her body is subject to systematic control and regulated as a natural resource of commodified use, and how individuals are modified into an instrument of productivity under the sustenance of power. "The Milk-mother" of the Halder family was left off as soon as she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her breast, which was her provider, became a burden for her death. The abandonment and aloofness from those who once fed on her milk promptly align with the idea of Biopower, the system that discards the body once it's no longer useful. Devi demonstrates Jashoda as a loyal wife, a wonderful mother, but a futilely prosecuted suffering from untimely and painful death; "Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone." (Mahasweta Debi, 1997, 69)

Subjugation of Gangor: Violence and Visibility

"What is there? -was the national problem that year" (Mahasweta Debi, 1997, 119), is how Mahasweta Devi commenced the third short story of the collection 'Breast Stories', 'Behind The Bodice - Choli Ke Pichhe'. This narrative displays the prolific conjugation of overlapping discontinuity of sociopolitical problems being stepped on just by the crude urge of mutilation of the female body. Devi unapologetically cites the ongoing social and political discomforts being overshadowed as she observes, "

Watching cassettes of Khalnayak under cover became ‘norms of the day’” (Mahasweta Debi, 1997, 120).

The powerful convergence of political distortion with feminine subalternation is forcefully portrayed through Gangor’s character, irrevocably shaped by Upin Puri, a freelance writer and photographer whose professional gaze changed her life completely when Upin photographs her picture while she was breastfeeding her child; the divine power of birth and nourishment is subsequently reduced to a product of lust, fetishization of threat in the vicious public sphere.

The thoughtless mistake of publishing Gangor’s breastfeeding photographs in a prominent newspaper made her a target of disgust and exposed her to public scrutiny. Gangor is detained in jail by the Jharoa police to be gang-raped, exposing the collusion of the state authority and patriarchal violence. The cruel presentation of being stripped of dignity and abandoned by her own family and friends has no choice but to survive through prostitution, underscoring the brutal consequences of the visibility of a subaltern woman. Upin is taken aback when he learns about Gangor’s terrible change of fate. The sudden realization of “rescue the breast” seemed hollow and pointless to him, while he was being accused of being one of the molesters of Gangor. Upin is numb to the point of mental disassociation, the bitten, rotten “statuesque breasts” reveal the evidence of violence that was wrought upon her and shocks him to the core of her heart, where he found solace in crushing his life on the railway track.

Spivak’s reflection of the voiceless subaltern woman is aptly shown through Gangor’s visuals. Her tribal identity foregrounds the political mishaps of ongoing casteism, as well as the unheard voice of complaints against the offenders, questioning the authority, critiquing the ideological system that distorts, translates, and, in terms of marginality, can erase a voice in a moment of acute vulnerability. While we can always argue in reference to Spivak’s idea, Gangor’s experience can also be productively examined through the feminist theory of ‘Male Gaze’, which disturbingly fits the role. Popular feminist theorist Laura Mulvey, in 1975, came up with the idea of ‘Male Gaze’ in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, where she articulated how the man behind the camera objectifies the female figure: “The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.” (Mulvey, 1975,11). The ‘erotic way of looking’ precisely characterizes what happened to Gangor; her marginalization was not limited to her Dalit origin; rather Upin’s photography reframes a different approach to her body as an object of erotic contemplation. Mahasweta Devi’s interpretation not only opened a new path for understanding the brutality inflicted upon women’s bodies but also a horrific social logic and the malicious patriarchal ideology.

Commodified Survival in Bedanabala

While Mahasweta Devi consistently criticized the ideological construction of ‘Woman’ as a part of subjugation through her short stories, she has never backed off from engaging in the conversation of the age-old tradition of prostitution. She disrupts the moral taboo by bringing ‘sex workers’ into the light of critical focus. ‘Bedanabala’ starts with the first-person narration of the narrator’s mother, Kamal’s escape from the brothel house, although being abducted by the owner of the whore house. Did’ma, who hunts for pretty girls of the noble household to labour them in the prostitution line, can be considered the only person who understands the value of girls, which is exactly

opposite to the outer world of the whorehouse. She buys infant girls and raises them with utmost care till their puberty, and prepares them with many rituals to employ them in bed. They are groomed with every possible art of dancing, singing, ever reading and writing that can allure noble men, especially Bandhan Babu, a regular customer of the brothel. Very few girls are lucky enough to get a big house, jewels under their wing, and the rest are left to continue entertaining the others, where their destiny is either getting infected with a sexually transmitted disease and dying or getting murdered as the worst case possible. Men are glorified for changing their taste of women from brothel to brothels, "They go to brothels for new flavours, and nobody brands them sinners" (Devi, 2005, 10).

The narrator talks about being a family woman, a dream of every girl in the whore house and reluctantly narrates the story of Mani, who eloped from the brothel house with a partner, only later to be ditched and come back to an endless loop. "whores die when their bodies break" (Devi, 2005, 6) is not uncommon as Did'ma's own daughter committed suicide after being betrayed, Devi artistically observes that these girls have no where to go except an untimely death of not having customers or begging for death after being betrayed. While she recounts her mother's escape, Devi persistently raises a more unsettling question through Mani: if liberation was possible for her, then why not others? Mani's anguish stems from her recognition that she lacks the beauty and a respectable family name to get the special privilege of breaking the shackles as Did'ma did for Kamal. Kamal's marriage to Balaram-babu, a dream shared by many brothel women, offered her salvation; yet this transition merely relocates her into a society that rejects sex workers. Once married, she was cut off from meeting her foster mother, Did'ma. Even when Mani visited, she could feel silent hostility and unspoken exclusion. Despite Balaram's sympathy, he can't deny the ruthless fact of society where he has to survive as a man in the constrained patriarchal society, "want any of them coming and going" because "people will talk" (Devi, 2005, 42). Devi further exposes the hypocrisy with sharp political interrogation; why, when brothel workers helped Swadeshi with their contribution of money as well as shelters in need, are denied recognition as equal to any of the men in the society doing the same, "Is just the burning of foreign goods enough? And what about the superstition heaped upon your soul?" (Devi, 2005, 53). Within the bleak trajectory of the novel, the sole moment of fragile hope was Bedanabala's birth; ironically, if it had occurred in the brothel, it could have been the moment of utmost despair.

This novel perfectly aligns with the analytical patriarchal oppression of women's bodies as observed by Catharine MacKinnon (1989), "male control over women and female sexuality is reified in the monetary transactions of prostitution in which men can pay for control of women's sexuality and bodies" (MacKinnon, 1989, 109). Patriarchal control over women is mostly glorified; while talking about prostitution, the assertion "No whore gets to heaven" (Devi, 2005, 7) exemplifies how social condemnation is normalized and divinely sanctioned. This logic resonates with Andrea Dworkin, a feminist theorist's contention that prostitution embodies an extreme form of misogyny and remarks that "when men use women in prostitution, they are expressing a pure hatred for the female body" (Weitzer, 2009, 214). Women's apparent acquisition is not consent but survival, "in order to be loved and approved and paid, in order just to make it through another day" (MacKinnon, 1989, 138). Thus, Devi's

narrative exposes prostitution not as an individual moral failure but as a structurally enforced condition shaped by patriarchal power and economic necessity.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's unapologetic mode of representation brings characters to life in her works, which stand out in the sociopolitical transformation. She has used her peculiar devoid of sentimentality to approach the economic exploitation of women's reproductivity, bringing individual awareness to the characters into the light of dominant atrocity. Her works elucidate a diverse group of women with intellect from different castes and backgrounds, all attempting to navigate family hypocrisy, body consumerism, and prostitution. The female protagonists of her works resist conventional literary idealization and instead reflect ordinary women situated in the real world. Dopdi(Drapaudi)embodies open rebellion; Jashoda represents silent endurance of exploitation through maternal labour; Gangor, on the one hand, is a victim of commodification through politics of representation, and on the other hand, Kamal, in contrast, appears as an escapist, whose attempted liberation ultimately reinforces the unspoken brainwashing of systematic norms imposed exclusively on women. Her stories give voice to the voiceless and echo class and gender as the instrumental tools of oppression.

This research specifically envelops the marginalization and oppression against women under the pressure of patriarchal societal norms through Devi's work, whose visions symbolically dismantled the boundaries of feminism in literature. The thorough interrogation of narrative plots and characters through the lens of radical feminist and postmodern thinkers contributes to a deeper understanding of women's internal and structural ideology while articulating a clear vision of figurative structures that have been imposed through Devi's literary corpus. While the stories predominantly expose the everyday oppression and atrocities forced onto women, they also encourage the gesture towards possibilities of resistance through the thinker and their views. Taken together, the analysis ultimately affirms women's empowerment as the central philosophical impetus of an evolving movement breaking the shackles of subjugation across all spheres of society.

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