



An eco-feminist reading of Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast – Giver'.

Nisha P V and Helen Unius Backiavathy

English Department Karunya University Karunya Nagar Coimbatore -641114.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 23 March 2016;

Received in revised form:
2 May 2016;

Accepted: 7 May 2016;

Keywords

Feminism, eco-feminism,
Feudalism,
Gender discrimination,
Sexual harassment,
Exploitation of women,
Oppression, patriarchy,
Women and nature,
Environmental concerns.

ABSTRACT

Dissent is a way of life for a few. Mahasweta Devi, a daring and tireless political activist, academician, journalist and creative writer, is one among those few who register their dissent at every given opportunity. She is widely acknowledged as one of India's foremost literary personalities. A prolific creative writer, she has to her credit over a hundred books including novels, plays, collections of stories, children's books and journalistic literature. Most of her works have been originally written in Bengali and translated into English and a number of other languages. The stark realities and systemic injustice around her paved way to become a writer – activist. Her involvement in the People's Theatre movement of Bengal, the wake of Naxalite movement of the 1950's and the first hand experience of the life and struggles of tribals in Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh shaped her life and career. Major part of her journalistic writings describe the "police atrocities, failures in the implementation of government programmes, exploitation of sharecroppers and miners, unemployment and landlessness, environmental degradation, and the need to protect and foster tribal languages and identity" opines Resil B. Mojares in a vehement tone. Even in her late eighties, Mahasweta Devi travels extensively and collect first hand knowledge about the people she writes about. The unique features that distinguish Mahasweta Devi mainly from the rest of the authors are her strong convictions and concerns over the ordinary people, who wage their battles in extremely ordinary circumstances. She wants her work to be read as a plea for the insertion of tribals into the Indian mainstream from which they have been hitherto excluded. Mahasweta Devi thinks that there are innumerable social evils that constrain tribal development in India and her works lend themselves to readings within sociological critical framework. Among her contemporary Indian writers, Devi occupies a unique position through her exceptional perspectives on social and political life apart from the commitment to the poor, downtrodden and the de-notified tribals. More than any other writer either in Indian languages or in Indian English, she is able to mix her political and social convictions and activism with writing. Her writings not only give voice to India's marginalized tribal people but also stress the abject subordination of women in Indian society. Her most memorable characters are often women - Draupadi, Doulati, Mary, Jashoda, Sanichari etc. These women are oppressed and marginalized by society in many ways. Yet their spirit of resistance and resilience transform these ordinary women extra ordinary. Scholars see her powerful tales of exploitation and struggle as extremely rich sites of feminist discourse. India is a country where activist writing is a recent phenomenon. Devi's activism distinguishes her from her contemporaries from across the country. Through translation her works are widely read and winning readers across the world. While most writers are keeping themselves away from the everyday struggles of the common people and concentrate on the imaginary worlds where romance, glamour and existential dilemma rules the roost, Mahasweta Devi's works are a slice of our society. "The Breast- Giver" is a part of a trilogy entitled *Breast Stories* by Mahasweta Devi translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It is the story of a female subaltern, a housemaid from post-colonial India who is subjected to exploitation, sexual harassment and oppression from patriarchy and male-dominated society. She finally succumbs to death in the most painful way, leading the readers to compare her with the dying Mother Earth. This paper attempts to explore how Mahasweta Devi's protagonist Jashoda in the short story " Breast-Giver" identifies herself with the Mother Earth and finds solace in the lap of nature.

© 2016 Elixir All rights reserved.

Introduction

An eco-feminist reading of Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast – Giver'.

Feminist theories have given rise to different schools of thought in the past. Prominent among them is eco-feminism. Feminism with ecological concerns has started gripping human society all over the world in the recent times, especially in the nineteen seventies. Feminist scholars have started the process of bridging feminism with ecological concerns as soon as environmentalism turned a global matter of concern and many have found comparison between serious degradation of environment and abuses and exploitation suffered by women. Thus, the two thought processes have integrated fully in the last three decades and the concept of ecofeminism has emerged. To be more exact, the term ecofeminism was coined only in 1974 by Francoise d'Eaubonne, a French feminist. Very soon, it became a movement that applies feminist principles and ideas to ecological issues and concerns. In general, it is a term used by feminists to address the symbiotic relationship between feminist and environmental concerns.

"Ecofeminism, is a theory that rests on the basic principle that patriarchal ways are harmful to women, children and other living things" observes NeeruTandon(56). Both women and nature are getting assaulted and abused by the male dominated society. Their greed and prejudices are converting both women and nature as means of exploitation. The dominance of men over women and nature often subjected to close scrutiny of eco-feminists. According to NeeruTandon, "Exploitation of nature and women go hand in hand under the system of patriarchy. Nature is being contaminated and spoiled by business and modern technology" (161).

Our country is witnessing large number of protests against gender discrimination and environmental destruction in the last three decades. More and more women are coming to the center stage by actively involving in struggles for survival and subsistence. In most of the issues plaguing the country at present, one can see that the elements of caste, class and gender issues are deeply interlinked with environment. Many women strive for the equality of women as well as the judicious use of natural resources. And a few of them combine their writings to convey the issues of both women and environment. Mahasweta Devi, the coveted Bengali writer, is prominent among them.

The Jnanpith Awardee's, short story 'Breast-Giver' is the tale of an ordinary woman named Jashoda. Her husband Kangalicharan's untimely accident crippled him and his big family. The extreme poverty forces Jashoda, the protagonist to take up the job of a cook in a lower class, yet a wealthy Haldar household despite her high brahminical origin. But in that house, she is sexually abused and branded as a thief by a male member of this family. Yet, she remains silent for the well being of her poverty-stricken family consisting her crippled husband and young children. The greed and worldly pleasures of the male members of the Haldar family defines her profession as a wet nurse. Jashoda thus becomes a professional mother who breeds yearly in order to keep the milk flowing in her breasts. Thus, she suckles twenty of her own children and thirty children of her employer's family. The excess suckling gradually deteriorates her health and she is finally diagnosed with breast cancer. Apparently, the mother of fifty children dies a miserable death with no one to take care of. In this story, the imageries used by Mahasweta Devi

conjure up two equal images of suffering women and Mother Earth.

When the story opens, Jashoda the protagonist is a mute spectator whose identity is just the wife of Kangalicharan. She is an ordinary woman who cannot see anything beyond her family. Her past is also vague. She lives to satiate her husband, whose lust "drills her body like a geologist in a darkness lit only by an oil lamp"(38). This very description of love making explicitly says the kind of life Jashoda leads. She is just a sexual object in the hands of her husband. Here, Jashoda's body is compared to the Earth, wherein drilling is a painful process with no love or affection involved in it. Though both women and nature are life sustaining and resource giving, their role in the society is neglected and ignored. Both Jashoda and Mother Earth are often being bruised and abused and they are suffering victims of men's continuous lust and greed.

Jashoda endures rape not just because of the extreme poverty in her family but also due to the popular social system, which silently tells women of poor background to obey and surrender to the whims and fancies of even the junior members of their master's family. The author is asserting through the rape incident that such patriarchal notions that a woman is a mere sexual object run strong even in the mind of a young boy. Rape is nothing but the assertion of power and dominance over a woman by a man. Here, the rape is used as a metaphor of abuse towards nature like mining, destruction of hills and mountains, sand mining and varied other activities that destroys the ecological balance. The male dominated society often views housemaids as instruments of subservience and they are always vulnerable to sexual and other modes of invasion by male members of the families for which they work for. The plight of Jashoda portrays the misery and predicament of housemaids in our country.

Jashoda symbolizes motherhood. Jashoda's desire "to become the earth and to feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest" (46) can be seen as an effort to identify her with mother earth. She has no one to turn to and therefore trying to find solace from her sufferings in the lap of nature. Her yearly breeding and her many children she nurtures make her equivalent to Mother Earth. She knows clearly she is the only savior of her physically challenged husband and her poor young children and thereby resolves to take care of them even at the cost of her life.

Nature is beautiful, so are women. But sadly, both are mostly ill-treated and abused in the hands of male dominated society. They are supposed to be the property of men. Also, both are seen as objects of pleasure by greedy men. Sexual objectification and the male libido play a pivotal role in the story. The daughters-in-law of the Haldar family do not have names. They are powerless, passive and strictly adhering to the gender roles assigned to them by a patriarchal society. Nothing is said about these six faceless women except their yearly breeding. Their presence can be felt through others, especially their lust driven husbands. They are a silenced and marginalized lot. They are reduced to the level of sex toys and do the service of wet nurses. The extreme lust of men is destructive and highly dangerous to both women and nature. The lives of these women reveal a lot about the state of life of the women in India in relation to their male counter parts thereby giving more material for feminists. Despite several social reformation movements in the 19th and 20th century seeking gender parity, most Indian country-sides are yet to acknowledge the identity, independence and even the mere

existence of their women. In most parts of India, feudalism still exists at its ferocious best and each and every feudal mind finds both earth and women as their means to enjoy life. Greed and lust are the two emotions that hijack their minds and it strip women and nature of dignity.

Once Jashoda becomes a professional mother, she attains the dubious distinction of a universal mother. Like Mother Earth sustains life on the planet, Jashoda finds oneness with nature and earth too. In another aspect, she herself is the Mother Earth that helps grow the off springs. Jashoda painfully gives into the sexual advancements of Kangalicharan which bred her yearly, by comparing herself to a tree bearing fruit seeking solace in nature. Her question "Does it hurt a tree to bear a fruit?" (50) explains her misery. Though it is a means of livelihood, Jashoda performs the role of a breast giver with extreme dedication and commitment and that is the reason she feels innumerable pain when the children whom she has fed ignore her when hospitalized. Devi brings in cancer as the reason for Jashoda's death is symbolic. Cancer is a dreaded disease that eats one's body slowly, cause extreme pain and kills gradually. Men's invasion and exploitation of nature have slowly started taking its toll on nature like the dreaded disease cancer. Devi warns that if it is not diagnosed and treated on time, Mother Earth, will die an immature death like Jashoda.

The second part of the story which is set in 1980's, Mahasweta Devi refers to a "new wind"(53) which is clearly the emergence of feminist movement. Devi writes the story Breast- Giver in 1987 at a time when the waves of feminism started creating fluctuations in Indian society as well. As part of the third wave feminism, women become conscious of their rights and they start voicing against oppression and indiscriminate meted out to them. They become aware of their rights over their own bodies and their sexuality. This empowerment of women in the Indian society is referred as the new wind by Devi in this story. It makes the women in the Haldar household bold enough to say no to their yearly breeding. This is seen as the bad result of the new wind by some wise person and they "never allowed the new wind to enter their house" (54). The mistress is disappointed with the change that has come to her family and her suicide marks the end of the 'sixteenth century' in the Haldar's household. Here the mistress can be seen as one of the many wise people who are not ready to accept the change. She is otherwise portrayed as an example of women with patriarchal and misogynistic mindsets.

Unfortunately, this "new wind" (53) marks the beginning of all the misfortunes in Jashoda's life. Haldar's household splits into nuclear families and the granddaughters-in-law never breed yearly. Kangalicharan finds another partner in Golapi. She realizes that "her usefulness had ended not only in the Haldar household but also for Kangali" (58). The neglect from all around affirms that the usefulness of Jashoda is over. This also indirectly tells that Jashoda belongs to a society where women willfully dance to the tunes played by men. With the new wind of feminism women like Jashoda are fast becoming an extinct species.

It is extremely difficult for Jashoda's sons to digest the fact that the woman affected with breast cancer is the same woman who provided them breast milk and initiated them into the world around with love and warmth. Now she looks ugly and devoid of anything that binds a child with his mother. It again reminds us of the way men damage the ecological system, makes it filthy and later discards it. She embodies

class and gender violence prevalent in South Asia. Therefore she does not look for pity or sympathy.

The story of Jashoda is titled aptly as "Breast-Giver" by the author because the whole hardships of Jashoda are reflective of the pangs being suffered by the Mother Earth. Breasts in the story stand for life. Breast milk is the life sustainer. Her sorrow is the sorrow of the dying mother Earth overburdened by the extra weight of her own children and greed of human beings. When the balance tips over, we will have apocalypse. The world is what it is because men have forgotten the difference between right and wrong. Here, the breast is evolving as powerful metaphor of how Earth infuses life and dignity on each creature in this world like the breast milk of Jashoda sustains the lives of fifty children. The Mother Earth feeds her children with her bounties without expecting much in return. But both the Earth and Jashoda are used and disposed by an extremely discriminatory and greedy patriarchy. Though women and nature are life sustaining and resource giving, their role in the society is neglected and ignored. As nature, she gives lavishly. Everyone lives at her cost. Amidst all the ill treatment meted out on her, she remains to keep herself cool. Finally, when her children grow up they neglect her forgetting the fact that they have drunk her life. It is important to note in this context that Jashoda compares herself to a fruit bearing tree. Man has grown up in the lap of nature enjoying nature's bounty but has never bothered to reciprocate. Once he is independent, he neglects and abuses nature in all possible ways.

By Mahasweta Devi's own account 'Breast Giver' is a parable of India after decolonization. Like the protagonist Jashoda, India is a mother-by-hire. All classes of people, the post-war rich, the ideologues, the indigenous bureaucracy, the diasporas, the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her. If nothing is done to sustain her, nothing given back, and if scientific help comes too late, she will die of a consuming cancer. (77)

At the end, Jashoda is discarded by all her children and both her family and that of her master's. Her many children is quite a reminder of the many destructible activities and abuse of man towards nature in the name of technology, development, industrialization and modernization. As a champion of the downtrodden and the marginalized of West Bengal and Jharkhand, Devi skillfully weaves the story of Jashoda as a reflection of large scale invasion of corporate and business groups over the lives and livelihood of the aboriginal communities in these regions.

Eco-feminism can be seen not only in the writings of Mahasweta Devi but it is her way of life too. In the documentary film, *Journeying with Mahasweta Devi* directed by J Joshy, Devi says "I don't want to be cremated after death. Instead, I wish to be buried at Tejgarh in Gujarat and a Mahua sapling should be planted there, as I am very fond of Mahua trees". According to Devi, "human beings come from the Earth and they do not give anything back to her. So I wish to give my body back to the Earth to get it fertilized as in the case of an organic farming". Here, the writer and her characters together are having a common mission and approach to the way exploitation happens in the country sides. They return to Mother Earth and in that process they highlight the need for the harmonious existence and judicious use of natural resources. Devi emphasizes through her life philosophy and writings that greed is the cause of inequality and imbalances in the country sides. There she opens up a new dialogue on feministic and ecofeministic thoughts based on

her concepts of life with dignity and lesser exploitation of the nature.

To live a peaceful life on this earth, it is important to treat the women and nature with dignity. Ecofeminism attains as a movement to save nature and women. And developments should not be at the cost of natural resources.

Works Cited

Primary Source

Devi, Mahasweta. *Breast Stories*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Seagull, 1997. Print.

Secondary Source

---. *Breast Stories*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Seagull, 1997. Print.

Collu, Gabrielle. "Speaking with Mahasweta Devi: Mahasweta Devi interviewed by Gabrielle Collu". *Mahasweta Devi: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Sen, Nivedita and Nikhil Yadav, eds. 220-241. Print.

Journeying with Mahasweta Devi. Dir. Joshy Joseph. Drik India, 2009. DVD

Mojares, Resil B. "Biography for Mahasweta Devi". *Rmaf.org.ph*. N.p. n.d. Web. 19 May 2012.

Tandon, Neeru. *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift*. New Delhi: Nice printing Press, 2008. Print.

Declaration

This is to certify that the article, "Eco-feminist Reading of Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver" is submitted for publication in *Elixir* is an original work by me based on my research, that I have duly acknowledged in the said paper the work or works of others I used in writing this article, that I have duly cited all such work/s in the text as well as in the list of references, and that I have presented within quotes all the original sentences and phrases, etc. taken from the sources that I have consulted in writing this article.

I further declare that the paper submitted for publication in *Elixir* has not been previously published, is not currently submitted for review to any other journal, and will not be submitted elsewhere before a decision is made by this journal.

I also declare that I will pay the formatting fee for the article/dissertation (specified in the Guidelines) as and when my paper/dissertation is accepted for publication.