Maternal Divinity, Fetishised Commodity: The Multi-faceted Symbolism of Breasts in Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver"

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ABSTRACT

Women's bodies in postcolonial Indian society are interpreted and utilised to serve multiple systems of oppression, as examined in the work of writer Mahasweta Devi. Her short story "Breast-Giver" is about a professional wet-nurse named Jashoda, whose breasts and body are continually exploited until she succumbs to breast cancer. By engaging with several conceptual frameworks, including Marxist, subaltern, feminist, and psychoanalytic theories, I examine how the symbolism of Jashoda's breasts changes throughout Devi's story. In the first half of the story, Jashoda's breasts are objectified in sexual and consumerist terms by her husband, while her body is perceived by her employers as a tool of labour. Since she produces a surplus of breast milk for her employers' children and grandchildren, Jashoda's exploitation is venerated through frequent comparisons to Hindu goddesses. In the second half of the story, Jashoda's inability to lactate and her subsequent cancer completely invalidate her existence and reduce her to an expendable and discarded body, especially in the juxtaposition between her desirable breast milk and the abject pus from her cancer sores. Therefore, religious veneration and sexual attention awarded to Jashoda's breasts are relevant only as long as they can be exploited to produce milk for the capitalist enterprise of her employers. Devi's story thus uses the imagery of Jashoda's breasts to conceptualise the effects of the intersecting oppressive systems of patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism on the subaltern woman in postcolonial Indian society.

Mahasweta Devi's four-part short story "Breast-Giver" explores the multifaceted symbolism of breasts, revolving around a woman named Jashoda, who becomes a professional wet-nurse for the wealthy Haldar family through various turn of events. Jashoda's husband, Kangali, is a sweet-seller at a temple dedicated to the Hindu mother goddess Durga. Since he is a Brahmin, belonging to the highest echelon in the Hindu caste system, he is revered by the caste-observant patriarch of the Haldar family. When Haldar's car accidentally runs over Kangali's leg, resulting in the latter's amputation and subsequent unemployment, Mr. Haldar assumes responsibility of providing for Kangali's family. With Mr. Haldar's sudden death, the charity stops, and thus Jashoda seeks work in the Haldar household. Haldar's widow, Mistress, appoints her as the wet-nurse of the family. The daughters-in-law are frequently impregnated by Haldar's sons, but they are also expected to maintain their sexually attractive figures; hence Jashoda must nurse the constant stream of children. However, in order to produce milk in her own breasts, Jashoda also has to be frequently impregnated by Kangali. Over time, with the influence of Second Wave Feminism, the wives of the Haldar household refuse to become pregnant, which renders Jashoda's services redundant, coinciding with the end of her reproductive years and her inability to lactate. Jashoda's value thus becomes null to both Kangali and the Haldar family. The years of prolonged excessive lactation of her many children and foster children take a toll on her body, culminating in her fatal breast cancer. In this essay, I engage with several conceptual frameworks, including Marxist, subaltern, feminist, and psychoanalytic theories to analyse how Mahasweta Devi uses the imagery of breasts to chart Jashoda's trajectory as a woman in postcolonial Indian society. The essay concludes that several oppressive systems complicate the issue of women empowerment in postcolonial Indian society.

In the first part of "Breast-Giver," the language used to

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describe Jashoda's breasts is that of sexual and consumerist objectification. Kangali perceives Jashoda as a hotbed from which he can glean sexual pleasure by drilling "her body like a geologist in a darkness lit only by an oil-lamp" (Devi 39). Devi uses the imagery of resource extraction to describe sexual intercourse between Kangali and Jashoda, comparing her body to a mine from which natural resources can be extracted for capital. The extraction imagery also hints at Jashoda's overexploitation that culminates in her breast cancer, parallel to the environmental damage that is caused by excessive mining. Apart from the extraction imagery, Kangali also thinks of Jashoda's body in terms of consumer products like food, linking the metaphor of food consumption with sexual pleasure. Right before the accident that leaves him disabled and unable to work, Kangali fantasises about fondling Jashoda's breasts on his way home from work: "He was picturing himself as a farsighted son of man as he thought that marrying a fresh young thing, not working her overmuch, and feeding her well led to pleasure in the afternoon" (41). Kangali's view of Jashoda is hence littered with food metaphors, as her body is a "fresh young thing," which can be easily satisfied by "feeding her well" with literal food from his earnings. In return, he gets to feast on Jashoda's breasts. By focusing on Kangali's objectifying gaze over his wife's breasts, Devi shows how Jashoda's entire personhood is merely reduced to certain body parts.

Devi also incorporates allusions that foreshadow Jashoda's future as a venerated yet exploited wet-nurse, when her breasts unlock new potentials other than serving to sustain her own children and please her husband. For instance, Devi makes references to Durga (a major Hindu mother goddess) and milk to hint at Jashoda's eventual transformation into a professional wet-nurse through the power of her breasts. Considering Kangali's preoccupation with Jashoda as a consumable body, it is interesting to note that he "stirs the seething vat of milk in the sweet shop" at Durga's temple, which consequently associates his own profession with Jashoda's copious breast milk and the divinity that will soon be appointed to it (41). Perhaps the most noteworthy foreshadowing is Jashoda's prophetic dream where she receives a vision of Durga, who "came to her in a dream as a midwife carrying a bag and said, 'Don't worry. Your man will return'" (43). Nabin, Kangali's co-worker at the temple, also associates Jashoda with Durga (also known as the Lionseated): "Whenever Nabin tries to think of the Lionseated, the heavy-breasted, languid-hipped body of Jashoda floats in his mind's eye," therefore the object of his lust and the subject of his devotion morph together (45). These visions signal towards Jashoda's assumed role of divine motherhood in the following section.

The milk motif is also found in Haldar's philanthropic gestures to Kangali, including fulfilling the daily needs of the latter's family, after Kangali's accident. Haldar, a caste-observant Hindu businessman from East Bengal, has a prejudice towards Indians of other ethnicities and West Bengalis. Therefore, his "milk of human kindness toward the West Bengali Kangalicharan" comes as a surprise, but Haldar justifies his decision of taking full responsibility of the West Bengali Kangali and his family because there is no question of discrimination when it comes to giving Brahmins, the highest caste group, their due respect (45). Here, milk could be interpreted in two ways in addition to Jashoda's lactation: as Haldar's offering to the "unquestioned supremacy of Brahmans" and his class-based position as a benevolent near-divine figure responsible for the sustenance for Kangali's family (O'Hanlon 95). Therefore, the motifs of Durga and milk allude to the misleading veneration of Jashoda's breasts since, in the end, she is exploited to her death.

The second part of "Breast-Giver" is where these subtle allusions come alive, beginning with Jashoda mobilising her breasts to provide for her family, hence complicating her position as a subaltern woman. After Haldar's sudden death, the halt to charitable donations looms as a threat over Kangali's family because Haldar's charity had become their livelihood. Jashoda therefore exercises unprecedented agency by negotiating her potential for labour to Haldar's widow, referring to the late Haldar's devotion towards Brahmins, "Your Brahmin-son does not have his two feet … give me any kind of job. Perhaps you'll let me cook in your household?" (Devi 49). Jashoda's position as an upper-caste but working class woman is further complicated when as a woman she is subjugated by patriarchy. Her Brahmin caste identity does not privilege Jashoda as her class and gender positions make her a subaltern. This term was first coined by Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who explains that "subaltern" applies to any group "that is excluded from the dominant hegemony of a society, and is hence denied the same benefits of the dominant class" (Felluga 295). As cultural and postcolonial studies scholar Rifat Rezowana Siddiqui concurs, the position of the subaltern is already complicated in the story because, despite being a "higher caste Hindu" than the Haldars, Jashoda is "in an 'othered' position," thus the ideal of Brahmin supremacy is at odds with the class position of Kangali's family (132).

To some extent, however, Jashoda's expanded financial role in her family is precipitated due to her being subjugated by intersecting forms of oppression as a subaltern. The socioeconomic positions of the characters in "Breast-Giver" can be understood with the help of Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?". The Haldars belong to the "dominant indigenous groups at the all-India and at the regional and local levels' representing the elite" (Spivak 39). This challenges the ideals of the caste system in which Brahmins are supposed to be the most prosperous, rendering the reality of social stratification in India much more complex. Although the Mistress ignores Jashoda's preference for working as a cook or a maid, putting her breasts to

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work instead, Jashoda's professional motherhood allows her to replace Kangali as the breadwinner of the family. In a complete reversal from the beginning of the story, the Mistress orders Kangali to take Jashoda's place as homemaker, "you used to stir the vat at the shop, now take up the cooking at home and give her a rest" (Devi 52). Jashoda's breasts therefore facilitate the dynamic movements of her confines as a high-caste gendered subaltern, and refute the orthodox notions of social and gender-based stratification.

Yet, Jashoda blurring the lines of gender, caste, and class hierarchies is not as empowering as it might appear according to Western neoliberal feminist schools of thought. Her breasts ultimately serve to propel the reproductive cycle of the Haldar household, which itself has patriarchal underpinnings that exploit the bodies of both Jashoda and the Haldar wives. Neoliberalism is a concept in political economic theory that is a proponent of "sustained economic growth as the means to achieve human progress … minimal state intervention in economic and social affairs," and "freedom of trade and capital" (Smith). Feminist critiques of neoliberalism include its co-option of feminist discourse to propose that the highest ideal of feminism is women who achieve well-paying careers within a meritocracy based on capitalism, while overlooking women who cannot reap the benefits of this system due to factors like disadvantaged socioeconomic positions, (Vallier).

Devi likens the Haldar house to a factory which demonstrates the microcosm of a neoliberal capitalist system that is self-containing, free to produce goods without outside intervention. However, the operation of the factory requires unequal division of labour, with Jashoda doing most of the work. "[The wives] breed every year and a half. So there is a constant epidemic of blanket-quilt-feeding spoon-bottle-oilcloth-*Johnson's baby powder*-bathing basin" (Devi 49, emphasis in the original). The wombs of the Haldar wives are the machines that assemble the babies to become further processed on the assembly line, which consists of blankets, quilts, and basin. However, the Haldar sons realise that the bodies of their wives need maintenance; in other words, their sexual desirability must remain intact to retain the sons' interest in their wives. Therefore, Jashoda's breasts are tasked to keep the Haldar reproductive factory running:

Since they will be mothers as long as it's possible – progressive suckling will ruin their shape. Then, if the sons look outside … they won't have a voice to object … If Jashoda becomes the infants' suckling-mother, her daily meals, clothes on feast days, and some monthly pay will be enough. (51)

However, they overlook the fact that Jashoda's breasts are not self-sustaining sources of milk, as Kangali observes, "You'll have milk in your breasts only if you have child in your belly" (51). As a result, Jashoda's body must transform into a reproductive machine like the Haldar wives, but she also has the additional labour of maintaining the flow of breast milk to not only keep the Haldar birthing factory running, but also to feed her own incessant brood of children.

The relationship between the Haldar family and Jashoda's breasts is thus reconfigured based on the Marxist economic principles of use value, exchange value, and surplus value. Firstly, use value means the material used to which the object can actually be put, like Jashoda using her breasts to nurse her own children. Secondly, exchange value represents the commodities of human labour that are produced and exchanged for something else, usually money. In this case, Jashoda sells her breast milk to the Haldars for her family's subsistence. Lastly, surplus value means the excess product that exceeds the cost of hiring a labourer. For example, Jashoda produces extra breast milk to nurse the Haldar grandchildren by being constantly pregnant and giving birth. Her surplus breast milk is the most desirable value from the capitalist Haldars' perspective (Felluga 321-22). As Kinana Hamam notes, this exchange reconfigures Jashoda's dynamic with Kangali by transforming her "motherhood from a biological experience and rite of passage into a waged labour attributed to socio–economic necessity … In order to produce surplus milk for the master's household, the sexual division of labour is reversed because Kangali rather than Jashoda performs domestic tasks" (143).

Moreover, going back to the industrialist imagery of the Haldar household, Devi portrays the Mistress as the bourgeois factory owner or manager who oversees her labourer Jashoda's performance, keeping a "strict watch on the free flow of her supply of milk" in order to reap as much profit as she can from Jashoda's surplus labour (52). In addition, the Mistress invests in Jashoda's labour with ample food so that Jashoda's body becomes "as inflated as the *bank account* of a Public Works Department *officer*" and the Mistress gets a satisfying return on her investment with more breast milk (53, emphasis in the original). Hence, Jashoda's increased financial mobility does not provide any real sense of empowerment because her gendered subaltern body, even if possessing limited agency, is still subdued by the joint oppressions of the patriarchy and capitalism.

Perhaps in order to subdue the blatant exploitation of Jashoda's body that eventually leads to her terminal breast cancer, the Haldar household, Kangali, and other people in Jashoda's vicinity exalt her breasts as an embodiment of divine motherhood. The second part of "Breast-Giver" contains many references to Hinduism that gives Jashoda a false sense of empowerment, which sets up the poignancy of her eventual breast cancer. When Jashoda goes to the Mistress to ask for a job as a cook, the latter exclaims, "[y]ou come like a god!" (49). Even Kangali's recurrent impregnation of his wife has religious connotations as he becomes "illuminated by the spirit of Brahma the Creator" (51). When he explains to

doi: 10.29173/spectrum258

Jashoda that she will need to undergo repeated pregnancies to extract the full economic potential of her breasts, Kangali directly compares his wife to the goddess Durga and refers to her prophetic dream, "[y]ou are a faithful wife, a goddess. You will yourself be pregnant, be filled with a child, rear it at your breast, isn't this why Mother came to you as a midwife?" (51). According to Hillary Rodrigues, Durga's idols can, in some cases, take the shape of a jar, which "resembles a squatting or pregnant woman … She is a Cosmic Mother, ready to give birth to the creation" (262). Since Jashoda is perceived to be a manifestation of Durga due to her suckling a near-infinite stream of babies, along with the sense of empowerment she feels from being the family breadwinner, the false veneration overshadows the sinister reality of her exploitation. Similarly, Jashoda is also frequently associated with the cow goddess Kamadhenu due to her milk-heavy breasts since cows are venerated in Hinduism (Dietz 324). The Mistress calls Jashoda the "Cow of Fulfilment" and places her "above the Mother Cows" because her milk is more valuable and more venerated than cow milk (Devi 50-52). Even though Jashoda is compared to not one, but two goddesses, it is a mere façade as the very object of veneration soon becomes that of repulsion due to breast cancer.

In the third and fourth parts of the story, Jashoda's near-divine sense of validation decreases as she passes her reproductive years and stops lactating, rendering her breasts barren and her body disposable since they contain no profitable commodity. As a result, the Haldars and Kangali both turn away from Jashoda as her labour can no longer be exploited for their own benefits. This gradual process begins when the Haldar wives, influenced by second-wave feminism, resist their own gender roles by refusing to have more children and going to work (55-56). The earliest developments in second-wave feminism were a "reaction to [American] women returning to their roles as housewives and mothers after the end of the Second World War," and hence these ideals are appealing to the similarly positioned Haldar wives (Anand). However, these progressive ideals do not include or positively impact Jashoda because her position as a subaltern woman isolates her from the same benefits of feminism movements that privilege middle and upper class women. The Mistress' death allows the wives, who had already stopped giving birth, to dispose of the barren-breasted Jashoda. Secondly, Kangali also betrays her as he had been re-appointed at the temple without her knowledge all these years while Jashoda's body had been consumed inside and out (Devi 58). Since she does not need to produce milk anymore to support her family, Jashoda's usefulness ends, and Kangali leaves her for other women (59). Being discarded by both parties reveals Jashoda as "the construction of the nurturing subaltern mother as object for exploitation – with the gaze from below – worshipful respect for the divine mother" (Arnott 7). As a result, Jashoda realises that her wet-nurse career had been a double-edged sword of veneration and exploitation. The latter edge is the sharpest because Jashoda's gendered subaltern status enables the hegemonic systems of patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism to alienate her from the profits of her labour, and discard her when her exchange value becomes depleted.

Jashoda's breast cancer can thus be interpreted as the physical result of the years of oppression and exploitation on her body, which is especially pronounced in Devi's juxtaposition between the desirability of breast milk and the abjection of pus-filled cancer sores, both oozing from the same breasts. When the doctor learns about Jashoda's prolific wet-nurse career, he correlates her over-suckled breasts to her cancer, "when people breast-feed too much – didn't you realize earlier? It didn't get to this in a day" (Devi 69). Hence, Devi makes a clear association between overconsumption and overexploitation of Jashoda's body with the literal disintegration of her breasts. Some critics question the utilisation of breast cancer as a metaphor, as Kasthuri and Venkatesan describe:

Often cancer, [...] is associated with affluence and degeneration and is regarded as secretive, invasive, and demonic by the society. Such perspectives [...] evoke military metaphors leading to the disintegration of the body and the self in the sick person. (27)

However, I posit that Devi aptly uses breast cancer to illustrate the horrors of neoliberal capitalism on a gendered subaltern figure like Jashoda, which is much more realistic than the metaphorical treatment she gets from the people around her as a representation of divine motherhood. The sores on Jashoda's breasts "gaped more and more," with the pus giving off the "sharp smell of putrefying flesh," which nullify everything the breasts once stood for except its status as an exploitative commodity (Devi 71). The vivid imagery of Jashoda's decaying breasts embody the psychoanalytic concept of abjection, theorised by Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva, who explains, "the object … settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning … abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (1-2). Kristeva classifies horrified physiological responses, like vomit and feces, as reactions to the abject since it threatens a breakdown in meaning between the subject and object. Consequently, Jashoda's sores express the horrors neoliberal patriarchy and capitalism inflict on her gendered subaltern body, as her own breasts betray her to others and alienate from her own labour.

In conclusion, Mahasweta Devi uses the imagery of breasts as an impactful and greatly nuanced manner to conceptualise the effects of the intersecting systems of oppression on the Indian subaltern woman. Jashoda's breasts give her a sense of empowerment because she is appointed as the breadwinner and is praised as the physical manifestation of multiple goddesses. However, as Devi reiterates throughout the story, the

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empowerment is merely a cover that cloaks the ugly truth behind how her breasts are ultimately utilised: a commodity that is exploited until nothing but the abject ruins of exploitation remain on her body in the form of cancer.

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