

Importance of Breasts in Mahasweta Devi's Breast Giver

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Abstract

The paper entitled IMPORTANCE OF BREASTS IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *BREAST GIVER*. It talks about the importance of the breasts of the Protagonist Jashoda and how they help her in some situations and later how they lead to her death. It also shows the way in which Jashoda was treated as a commodity and common utility and left all alone when she lost her middle age and her breast milk. This shows the commodification and objectification of women on the basis of their body and beauty, which is a wrong deed and which should be avoided by everyone.

Keywords: Breast, Objectification, Importance Importance of Breast in Mahasweta Devi's Breast Giver

The definition of breast is the two protruding organs located on the upper front of a woman's body, which secrete milk after childbirth. It is not only a body part but an important element which is used with respect to sexuality. In literature, breasts represent the powerful symbols of motherhood and womanhood. Breasts remain as an important concept for the Literarians and the Victorian Age Authors. Even many Indian women authors use the concept of breasts in their works. Mahasweta Devi talks about the objectification, feminine defiance and commodification of female body in her book *Breast Stories*. Other authors try to show the womanization of woman more, but Mahasweta Devi tries to use feminine body here as a centre of change, revolution and even awareness. But she did not show the woman characters as heroes, instead she shows them as a representative of sufferings under male dominance, dependence of a woman over other people and many more. In *Breast Giver* Mahasweta Devi shows motherhood, nourishment and survival of a woman and how she gets changed into an object, milk giving machine. Jashoda was a woman who was left as nothing, after her breasts, the source of milk became empty. She became a useless woman in front of all.

Jashoda is the protagonist of the short story *Breast Giver*. She is a representative of Yashoda, the foster mother of Lord Krishna and wife of Nandagopa. Jashoda was known as Stanadayini in her village. Stanadayini means a woman who works as a professional mother. Jashoda and her husband Kanganalicharan belonged to a Bengali Brahmin family with three children. They were highly poor. Kanganalicharan worked in a sweet shop and Jashoda stayed at home. Jashoda had highly attractive body and breasts, everyone admired her for her body and especially her breasts. Even Kanganalicharan was attracted towards the

magnificent body and breasts of his wife. This can be proven with the line, “When Kangali’s body didn’t drill her body like a geologist in a darkness lit only by an oil lamp.”(Breast Stories, Mahasweta Devi, 39)

The Haldar family household also play an important role in this breast story of Jashoda. The youngest son of the Haldar was a boy who always wanted to satisfy the “whim in mind or body.”(Breast Stories, Mahasweta Devi, 40) that is he wanted to satisfy his own sensual needs. For that he took advantage of the cook worked in his house. He used her body and later fired her. Kanganalicharan was lost in the dreams of his wife’s “large round breasts” and got hit by the car of the youngest son of Haldar. Haldar thought it was a sin committed by his son to hit a Brahmin. He took responsibility of Kanganalicharan’s treatment. Haldar promised to Kanganalicharan that as his son was the cause of Kanganalicharan’s loss of legs, he will set up a shop for Kanganalicharan nearby his house as a compensation. He provided food to the family also, but Jashoda decided to get a work at the Haldar’s house as a cook and earn money. She got the job there, but from a commercial employment she went to commercializing herself in the Haldar’s house. The Haldars family discussed about the breasts of Jashoda and made a selfish plan and asked her to serve as their wet nurse and to give milk to the children of Haldar family and even do surrogacy for the women of Haldar family.

Here in Breast Giver, in this situation, the chastity and the purity of motherhood turns into objectification and commercialization. Through the Breast Giver, Mahasweta Devi shows the life of the poor women, who are thrown into a situation, where they are forced even to sell their own bodies to get money. In the same way here Jashoda agreed to the condition of the Haldars that she would breast feed the kids of Haldars and do surrogacy for them in order to feed her own husband and children. In this way she does a trading of her own body for the welfare of her family. Through this, one can easily understand that Jashoda was not taken as a human being for the job, but only her “breasts” were employed for the job feeding. Everyone looked at Jashoda as a source of milk, who had large quantity of milk in her “two breasts” and allowed the children of the Haldar to suckle and feed on her. So she became the “professional mother” of those kids and Kanganalicharan became the professional father. He worked at his house, cooked and took care of his children. Jashoda’s use as a professional mother, whose only work was to provide breast milk to the children of Haldar family can be proven from the following lines:

Around the paved courtyard of the ground floor of the Haldar house over a dozen of auspicious milch cows live in some state in large rooms. Two Biharis look after them as Mother Cows. There are mountains of rind-bran-hay-grass-molasses. Mrs. Haldar believes that the more the cow eats, the more milk she gives. Jashoda’s place in the house in now above the Mother Cows. The Mistress’s sons became incarnate Brahma and create progeny. Jashoda preserves the progeny. .”(Breast Stories, Mahasweta Devi, 52)

So, from the above mentioned paragraph, one can easily understand that Jashoda was degraded to the range of farm animals because of her feeding job, at the same time she was not considered as a human being but a commodity and a source of “breast milk” for the children of Haldars. She was accommodated at the house of Haldars and they provided her with good quality food, so that she can produce more amount of milk and can feed their children. Here Jashoda was not considered as wet nurse, but was only considered for her “breasts.” Earlier everyone viewed Jashoda and her husband as Goddess and God as they belonged

to upper class and they also thought that Jashoda was the incarnation of Goddess Durga and that is why she had “beautiful breasts with large quantity of milk”, but later she was treated as a cow.

Even Jashoda and her breasts can be compared to India which was there before independence and after independence. Just like Jashoda, who was used for milking purpose, the colonizers took all the benefits from India and treated as a commodity. After independence the nation fed lakhs of people and gave them peaceful life, but still, people extracted all the essence from India and treated it like a device. But this issue is not taken into consideration, just like the situation of Jashoda, where she was treated like a cattle and no one opened their mouth against it. Mrs. Haldar was the only woman, who took care of Jashoda, but she did not take care of her considering her as a human being, but for her “breasts” and considering them to be the nourishing source of milk, which Jashoda would give to the grandchildren of Mrs. Haldar. She was used as a cow in the Haldar family, who used to wait for the children who came to suckle her breasts and fed them with her breast milk. She was treated as “common utility”. It can be proven with the below mentioned lines:

“As soon as the value of Jashoda’s milk emerges, it is appropriated. Good food and constant sexual servicing are provided so that she can be kept in prime condition for optimum location.”(Breast Stories, Mahasweta Devi, 86)

The “breasts” were considered as very important part by the women of Haldar family. The Haldar family ladies were happy to know that Jashoda would act as a wet nurse for them, because it was the only way, through which they could “escape the process of motherhood” and “avoid ruining their perfect body shape and breasts”. They were happy that they could wear blouses of “European Cut” without any issues and shyness.

Later Jashoda started working for them and breastfeed the Haldar family children and at the same time, she gave birth to her own children also. In that way, she fed around fifty children, twenty of her own and thirty of the Haldar family. When Mrs. Haldar was alive, Jashoda was given proper food to eat and good shelter to live and everyone treated her as god, but after the death of Mrs. Haldar, Jashoda was not treated well by the Haldar family. She was thrown into the house of servants. Earlier she was thought to be the symbol of goodness and was called for every function, but now, she was left all alone. She was forced to beg for job of cook and live with servants.

Jashoda was the Stanadayini for the Haldar family and they considered her as of no use after she lost all her milk. For them she was a human vessel with “mammal projections that is breasts”, who nurtured their children and fed them. They took care of her when she had milk and when kids were there in their family to be fed, but later, when she lost the milk and also when there were no children in their family, they thought Jashoda to be useless. After spending thirty years in the process of breast feeding the kinds and now living in the basement due to lack of milk and the non-availability of children to feed on her, Jashoda started questioning her role in her family. Her work of the “milk-mother” now remains just like a memory for her. Even Kanganalicharan, the husband of Jashoda, who once loved her, now started neglecting her, the cause of the negligence was that, Jashoda was not having her previous beautiful body and “round beautiful

breasts”, which he used to admire. As a male his manhood did not allow him to accept it and he brought a young woman along with him to enjoy his time and be happy with her.

Jashoda thought herself to be a spent resource, and a source of minerals, which is empty now. She was alienated from her both shelters, her own house (Kangalicharan threw her out of the house) and the house of Haldars. She had a fate to live with an empty body which is of no use for anyone anymore. “Now is the downward time for Jashoda, the milk filled faithful wife”.

Soon Jashoda started experiencing a different kind of depression. It affected both her mind and body, she was acting as if she was suffering from postpartum depression, which is a situation, where a change occurs in the mother after giving birth to a child and she thinks that her child is being taken away from her. This change can be physical, emotional and behavioural. Jashoda spent most of her life allowing children to suckle on her “breasts”, but now she felt empty and useless. She thought that her empty breasts were like rudderless ship. She also thought that “her own body”, which brought her fame, money, respect and dignity is now not supporting her and has become completely useless. Mahasweta Devi says “her breasts feel empty, as if wasted. She had never thought she wouldn’t have a child’s mouth at her nipple”.

Years of commercializing her own body and treating herself like a machine which gave milk greatly affected her body. Jashoda now remained sick. Soon the sons of the eldest daughter-in-law of the Haldar family noticed her physical sickness and the only reason they thought about her sickness and treating her was that they did not want a Brahmin woman to die in their house. After doing some investigations and consenting with a doctor they found out that the “red lumpy thing, which was there on the breast of Jashoda was terminal breast cancer.” In the time, when women struggled, Mahasweta Devi brought out an awareness about breast cancer and the way it can be detected at its early stage. She has told about the disease, which takes away the lives of many women every year.

Here is Jashoda, a woman, who is betrayed by her own “breasts”. Those “breasts” earlier made her the “milk-mother”. The breasts provided her with a nurturing life, food and shelter and many other things. But when the children of the Haldar family grew up, she was neglected. Her “breasts were of no use”. She was thrown away. Her situation got worsened when she got affected by the disease called cancer. Sores were there all around her breast and water was running from those sores. This made her breasts look ugly and smell awful. The people who earlier took care of her ran away from her, no visitors came to see her. Even her own husband Kangalicharan, who admired her body and loved her for her breasts also left her all alone and moved on with another young woman. Her own sons and daughters, who were raised by her did not come to see her, even the children for whom she acted as the “milk-mother” did not give a glance at her. They also betrayed her. She had a hallucination as if “the sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths and a hundred eyes.” She was unable to tolerate her own situation and condition.

Jashoda had forever scrubbed her breasts carefully with soap and oil, for the master’s sons had put the nipples in their mouth. Why did those breasts betray her in the end?” (Breast Stories, Mahasweta Devi, 67)

As the cancer started spreading deeper in her body, the people whom she loved moved away from her. Her own husband removed her from the rights of motherhood over his children and from the rights being

his wife. She was left all alone by the children also. She was admitted in a hospital alone and no one came there to meet her and ask about her well-being in the hospital. Whenever she looked at the doctors, she thought they were her milk-sons. Mahasweta Devi says, “She sees her milk-sons all around over the world.”

At the last moments of her life, when the fatal disease cancer overpowered her body, the only thing which she around herself was her milk-sons, whom she fed. But in reality, she was left all alone in hospital as a Hindu Woman with ill fate, who had so many children, some were her own, while some were her milk-sons, but still she died alone in the hospital.

Finally one night, Jashoda understood that her feet and hands were getting cold. She understood that death was coming. Jashoda couldn't open her eyes, but she understood that some people were looking at her hand. A needle pricked her arm. Painful breathing inside. Has to be. Who is 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 the furnace, are all her milk-sons. One must become Jashoda if one suckles the world. One has to die friendless, with no one left to put a bit of water in the mouth. Yet someone was supposed to be there at the end. Who was it? It was who? Who was it? 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. (Breast Stories, Mahasweta Devi, 74)

No memories, no name, no fame and no identity was left about her. She was only the Brahmin ill-fated wet nurse, who died alone at the hospital due to breast cancer. She hoped that someone would visit her at the verge of her life. “Yet someone was supposed to be there at the end. Who was it? It was who? Who was it? (Breast Stories, Mahasweta Devi, 74).

Hence Jashoda, a woman who was highly recognized for her breasts and was respected by the people for her caste and her miracle now died in a normal way and another soul got lost in the ocean of business, commodification, objectification and commercialization. She was highly respected for being a Brahmin woman, but later she was cremated and burnt by an untouchable man. It is the fate, death never does any discrimination. It comes to a person when it is destined for him or her to die. It never takes consideration for the caste of people while taking away the soul of people with it.

Jashoda died at 11 pm. Jashoda Devi, Hindu female, lay in the hospital morgue in the usual way, went to the burning ghat in a van, and was burnt: she was cremated by an untouchable. Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone. (Breast Stories, Mahasweta Devi, 74, 75)

Hence Breast Giver is the story of the breasts and a woman who has those breasts. Author shows the commodification of feminine body in this story and how a woman gets affected by the greed and selfish

nature of other people. It was Jashoda, who lost her individuality as a woman many years ago and lived as a “milk-mother”, later she lived with two empty “milk less breasts”, one affected by breast cancer and the other, which was left alone not suckled by any child.

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