ABSTRACT

The present paper aims at interpreting Mahasweta Devi’s text Breast-Giver from the feminist point of view, which emerges as a predicament theme in some of the works of Mahasweta Devi. Mahasweta Devi is one of India’s foremost writers. Mahasweta Devi has her unique pattern to represent stories from the side of those ignored group of people. Her powerful fiction has won her recognition in the form of the different national awards. Mahasweta Devi believes in writing for the tribal, downtrodden, and underprivileged. In Devi’s writing is the condition of India’s indigenous people and of other economically marginalized people were envisaged. She puts female within them with their strength and modes of existence. These influences can be seen in her short stories, including Standayani as well as in her novel Hajar Churashir Ma (Mother of 1084). She could easily envision the life and feeling of those females. Devy Ganesh remarks Mahasweta Devi as “she has a strange ability to communicate with the silenced, her best speech reserved for those to whom no one has spoken” (18). She is taken as a rare creative writer in bringing the challenging stories from the unheard groups. Mahasweta’s story represents a feminist literary appropriation. With her book, “Breast Stories,” Mahasweta Devi, as an Indian intellectual, is known for her feminist position. The stories, written by Mahasweta Devi, represent the real context of female existence. The voiceless figure of female has her own consciousness that grows along with her stories.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is by no means a monolithic term. If one seeks a common strand in a number of its varieties, it is the critique of the patriarchal modes of thinking which aims at the domination of the male and the subordination of the female. This patriarchal ideology teaches women to internalize this concept in the process of their socialization. It brings forth the
concepts of gender which are man-made. Simone de Beauvoir is of the view that the history of humanity is a history of systematic attempts to silence the female. She states, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature…which is described as feminine” (The Second Sex 295). Very often what has been termed great literature is preoccupied with the androcentric ideology which focuses on the male protagonists providing the female secondary roles.

Throughout the twentieth century there has been a study of a ubiquitous male control over every aspect of a woman’s existence. Sarah Grimke observes:

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means of selfish gratification, to minister to his sexual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. (67)

Feminism strives to undo this titled and distorted image of woman whose cries for freedom and equality have gone, and still go, unheard in a patriarchal social structure. Kamala Das writes:

I don’t know politics
But I know the names
Of those in power
And can repeat them like
Days of weeks or names of months. (Ramamoorthi 148)

Feminism refutes these masculinist approaches to women. It aims at looking things from “a woman’s point of view…an outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the centuries” (Spacks 4). Theories of female creativity generally make use of four models of difference like biological, linguistic, psycho-analytic and cultural. Mahasweta Devi’s stories concentrates primarily on the last of the models.

**DISCUSSION:**
Breast-Giver by Mahasweta Devi is a text that can be read through many different lenses. Patriarchy is a prevalent theme throughout the text, as well as the changing role of women in society, at least this society. The women, namely one woman in particular, in this text are for the most part not the stereotypical women of the household under the iron fist of their husbands. This text, however, seems to be ideologically conflicted by reinforcing and undermining patriarchy at different points. Jashoda the protagonist is oppressed by not only the man in her life, but by the women as well, perhaps unconsciously. That oppression can be economic, social, and psychological. She is oppressed economically in that she doesn’t receive any money for her services. She is instead given clothes, food, and shelter. She is oppressed psychologically by the women by whom she is employed. They treat her as a commodity rather than an actual human being. Jashoda, the ‘breast-giver,’ is in most ways a powerful woman overcoming the oppression that womanhood can sometimes entail.

Overcoming the oppression of men and society to gain equality is a major theme in Breast-Giver. After her husband is crippled in an accident, Jashoda has to become the provider for the family. Jashoda is said to have taken “motherhood as her profession” (Breast-Giver 826). When she sees that her family is in need, she asks the Mistress for a job of any kind to help support her family. The Mistress makes Jashoda the wet nurse for her family. Jashoda becomes the sole wage-earner in her family, making her an empowered woman not dependent on her husband. She uses her ingenuity and comes up with a way to support her family instead of just becoming the passive wife of a crippled man and doing nothing to help herself or her children. Using her own body, she does her work outside of her own home with only her own family’s well-being in mind, as some modern-day women do.

Though she is the provider for the family, Jashoda is not free from her responsibilities as a wife and mother to her own children. She has to do both jobs simultaneously, which speaks to the complexities of many women’s lives. Just because a woman works outside the home to earn a living doesn’t mean that she cares any less about the goings on in her household and family. A working woman needs to continue to be strong for her family even though she may not be present some of the time and it is known that women can be both nurturing and powerful at the same time.

Jashoda also has to overcome the oppression of a predominately patriarchal society, which is an important ideal in feminist theory. According to Tyson, in every area where patriarchy is in control, “woman is other: she is objectified and marginalized, defined only by
her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have” (“Feminist Criticism” 92). Jashoda overcomes being ‘other’ in many different ways. The society in which Jashoda lives holds men in a higher regard than women. The men are the providers for the family, as well as the heads of the household. Jashoda reverses these traditional patriarchal norms. She becomes a leader and she goes to work outside the home to provide food for her family. In this way, she becomes equal to or greater than her husband and the other men of society. She takes on responsibilities that are usually left for the man of the house to fulfill. Jashoda and Kangalicharan switch stereotypical ‘roles’ of men and women. Kangalicharan “took charge of the cooking at home” (Breast-Giver 834) while Jashoda went to work. This reversal of traditional roles speaks to Jashoda’s initiative as well as her power within the family and society. She and her husband become equals in regards to the work done at home that is traditionally the work of the woman.

Although one can read this text through a feminist view, there are instances that seem to contradict that point-of-view. Even after overcoming the oppression of men in her life, Jashoda fell under the oppression of another group of people: the women whose children she gave her milk to. The very fact that she is hired by them subjects her to their will and command. The women in the household treat Jashoda as a commodity rather than a living human being. To them, she is just someone who gives milk to their children in exchange for food. The fact that she is paid for her services in clothes and food rather than actual cash money just furthers the oppression that she is under. She and her family are completely dependent on Haldar’s women for their life and livelihood. They seem indifferent to her as a person and anything she has to offer besides her milk. This becomes clear when the Mistress dies.

Even after all the children were weaned and Jashoda’s milk was no longer needed, Mistress continued to send food to Jashoda’s family. But when the Mistress dies, the daughters-in-law stop giving that food and Jashoda is left to find another way to provide for her family. As would be expected, Jashoda doesn’t know what to do to provide for her family because breast-feeding babies is the only thing she has known for thirty years. The women have complete control over her life and livelihood. When the women have no need for Jashoda anymore, they get rid of her and leave her to fend for herself without a thought for her well-being or the survival of her family.
The fact that the women that employ Jashoda are in fact playing a role in oppressing her contradicts the feminist notion of “sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy” (“Feminist Criticism” 119). The women are basically taking the place of a man or a husband and continuing the oppression that Jashoda may have felt in her home. The women see Jashoda as someone who is not their equal and is performing a service and nothing else and they exploit that service to a point where Jashoda ultimately pays with her life. The women discard her as soon as they have no use for her services any longer, like a machine that is broken beyond repair. The women, instead of joining together with Jashoda, turn against her and ultimately support the patriarchal society in which they live.

Although she is the sole provider for her family, the fact that Jashoda is a woman plays a monumental role. To earn a living, Jashoda can only use what she has as a woman: her breasts and milk. The Mistress praises Jashoda about the amount of milk she produces and Jashoda comments that that there was “a flood of milk although she was between pregnancies and she didn’t have any special food or pampering” (Breast-Giver 832). When the Mistress gives Jashoda the job, Jashoda goes home that night and says to her husband, “Look, I’m going to pull our weight with these” (833).

She obviously takes great pride in her body and what she is able to do with it, but the fact that her job is a sexist one cannot be overlooked. It is obvious that only a woman can do a job such as the one Jashoda does. Women are again objectified and subjected to the view of only being good for certain things that men cannot do. In this way, you could say that the work is ‘gendered’ and the text is supporting traditional gender roles. Jashoda is, in a way, the stereotypical woman, raising children (though some are not her own) and keeping a home for her husband. She is seen as submissive and nurturing in a way that traditional gender roles support. Women are seen as “emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive”, while men are portrayed as “rational, strong, protective, and decisive” (“Feminist Criticism” 85).

The belief that men are superior to women is also evident in the text. The only reason Jashoda goes to work outside the home in the first place is because her husband is injured and cannot work and provide for their family any longer. Before her husband’s accident, Jashoda was in the home, raising children, and was stuck in a traditionally female role of housewife. She had no other use to him besides bearing and raising children and keeping a home for him and their family. The traditional roles are switched, however, when Jashoda goes to work as a wet nurse.
Breast-Giver dramatizes the exploitation and gruesome death of Jashoda, a subaltern woman character in Devi’s historical fiction, who is employed as a professional mother. She became a wet nurse in the upper-class household of the Haldar family in part of land where everything was dependent to male. Morton, Stephen explains Spivak’s careful observation of Devi’s descriptions about “Jashoda’s cancerous body in the closing sequence of the story, especially the phrase, the sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes” (26). It is the stage of forbearance and the power of motherhood in professional context. Morton, Stephen argues it as, “what is more, Jashoda’s revolting and cancerous maternal body offers a powerful and situated counterpoint to the universal valorisation of women’s embodied resistance and political struggle” (26). It could be calculated as the performative mode of female existence in her own context that no male and social phenomena could defy.

Jashoda becomes more and more revered for her body’s otherworldly tolerance, as the story that plays out on Jashoda’s body. Jashoda suffers a painful and sickened death. Her plentiful breasts now become a gaping wound. She did not get the food and survival sources from Haldar’s house as they parted here and there. Neither her husband followed her. She remained alone and she searched to pass out the life. She got cancer in her breast. Kangalicharan, her husband and her son came to support her. But, it was already late that they could not do anything. She is destined to die with breast cancer. It is the extreme phase of female resistance without defying male dominance. She showed it to her husband who came after listening to her disease. Devi, Mahasweta justifies the Jashoda’s existential struggle with such a condition where, “[she] showed him her bare left breast, thick with running sores and said, ‘See these sores? Do you know how these sores smell? What will you do with me now? Why did you come to take me?” (Breast-Giver 27).

It is the biggest question over the patriarchal system, and vain existence of master and male characters. She became mother to all, and left them all helpless to help her. Breast experience for female is the experience of own existence. Young, Marion Iris agrees the phenomenological claim “The chest, the house of the heart, is an important centre of a person’s being. I may locate my consciousness in my head, but myself, my existence as a solid person in the world, starts from my chest, from which I feel myself rise and radiate”(28). Jashoda did not lack being female. She remained able to challenge the social structure that it could not defy her as she became spiritual figure, ‘Mother.’
CONCLUSION:

The argument that *Breast-Giver* can be read as a feminist text is a strong one. The text portrays Jashoda as a strong, empowered woman who has overcome obstacles and oppression in her life to do something important for others as well as her own family. While the text portrays some patriarchal views of the roles of women, Jashoda plays an important part in reversing the readers’ views on women and their contributions to society. Being a woman in a patriarchal society can present challenges, but Jashoda takes them in stride and makes something of her without being dependent on men or others to provide for her.

REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCE


SECONDARY SOURCES


Young, Marion Iris. *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays.*