



Volition and Motherhood: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's Breast Giver

Sapan Saloni

Ph.D. Research Scholar

University School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi, India

Abstract: The problematics of Motherhood find a central space in several of Mahasweta Devi's texts. Motherhood is traditionally seen, avoiding all the complexities, as a state of being a mother. Devi in *Breast Giver* has entered these complexities with a determined stance to liberate the woman from the traps of Motherhood. Jashoda's suffering is caused by the absence of her identity. She lives until she dies on a borrowed idea of motherhood which she never gets the chance to realise for herself. This emptiness in her personal life is replaced with the desire to fulfil the expectations of society. This paper deals with these invisible chains that smother a woman's life, specifically Jashoda in Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Giver*. Jashoda's suffering anchors on this pivotal decision of her choosing motherhood, a choice that she makes unconsciously. The lack of volition marks the dehumanizing aspect of the structure that gives birth to the tragic lives of mothers, where they are reduced to a biological function. Contrasting the issues with poems of Neruda, Shelley and Auden, the paper attempts to show how Nancy Julia Chodrow's concept of how gender difference is a "relational construction" describes the plight of Jashoda and the male perseverance to create its identity through the denial of motherhood.

Index Terms - Motherhood, Mother, Gender, Woman, Identity, Human, Volition, Suffering, Dehumanization, Freedom

The problematics of Motherhood find a central space in several of Mahasweta Devi's texts. Motherhood is traditionally seen, avoiding all the complexities, as a state of being a mother. Devi in *Breast Giver* has entered into these complexities with a determined stance to liberate the woman from the traps of Motherhood. This state of being a mother is generally perceived as rooted in her biological reality and not her intellect. A mother 'is' the one who has given birth and then a mother 'is' the one who sustains the child through its childhood; the rearing of the child is exclusively expected from the mother in the early stages of the child's growth for it needs to be breastfed, and requires other duties that involve child's cleanliness; and on the part of grooming the mind only the duty of the indoctrination of the family and societal values is given to motherhood. The role of a mother is derived from her biological function and the following quotidian duties related to the child are designated as the essential part of a mother's existence. Motherhood turns into an essence that begins to define the woman as soon as she turns into a mother, or rather the expectations begin as soon as she gets impregnated, without even waiting for the parturition.

All the complexities are precluded from a mother's existence by denying her womanhood. On the first page of the story Devi writes, "Jashoda doesn't remember at all when there was no child in her womb, when she didn't feel faint in the morning, when Kangali's body didn't drill her body like a geologist in a darkness lit only by an oil lamp. She never had the time to calculate if she could or could not bear motherhood" (34). Becoming a mother is a life-changing event in a woman's life. She not only changes biologically, the shape of her body, and different hormones affecting her emotional state, but also her psyche since a woman can no longer be expected to be seen the same after giving birth to a child. This ideological pressure that expects a woman to change her personality, without letting the realisation of motherhood takes its natural course and transforms her being organically, is represented by the drilling of Kangalicharan. Neruda has written in his poem *Body of a Woman*, "My rough peasant body digs in you/ And makes the son leap from the depths of

the earth.” His personal tone not only sets a more intimate engagement with the poem but also his sustained representation of this male experience with the woman, her body and personality, creates a site for exploring this shared space between a woman and a man, which is usually bridged in the romanticised notion of ‘union of two bodies’ or ‘one soul and two bodies’. The man ‘digs’ into a passive earth and expects a ‘son’ to be born out of her. There is no “hour of vengeance” that falls, and there is no declaration of “I love you”, not even subtly, in the story. Kangali never persists in her grace, he never explores her beauty. Jashoda represents a functioning role in society where a woman is expected to perform her duties tied to her body. A woman has been given the role of ‘Prakriti’ in the Indian philosophy and it makes Neruda’s words relevant across the continents. She is constantly shaped by society to form a certain mould through which the status quo can continue its dominance without resistance. A mother is conditioned in values that help in conditioning the child in a certain way which turns the child away from the organic mother-and-child relationship and serves the societal values instead. The child forgets that there was ever a bond between itself and the mother. The love is slowly dispersed and adulterated by the power structures and consequently with its values. This can be seen in the stark contrast of Jashoda’s expectation when she ponders upon the milk debt and dies alone at the end of the story in a world where she birthed and reared so many children. She dies in a delirium, and no one comes to her funeral. Halidar’s conveniently keep their telephone off at night and Kangali equally conveniently leaves it upon the Halidar’s to inform him. After a brief spell of guilt, in both Kangali and some characters of the Halidar family, the inhuman reality envelopes the social matrix once again and her passing is also done systematically, “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” (Devi 69). The darkness in Jashoda’s life represents that spiritual darkness where she could not realise her potential and explore her being. She dies meaninglessly, believing in something outside of her.

Jashoda loses her personality and her individuality after becoming a mother. The countless worries of a woman that pertain but are not limited to her experiencing pregnancy, childbirth, and the notion of becoming a mother, either get repressed or voluntarily suppressed by her for she rarely ever gets the space to decide if she can bear motherhood or not. The realisation of motherhood gets deferred. The acceptance of pregnancy, the monetary security, reflections on living her own life before transcending to a role where her own needs take a back seat, preparation for the pain during parturition, worrying over her relationship with the father of the child in the vulnerable times, and then after giving birth negotiating with the guilt to spend time with the child and help it during its most impressionable stage, these issues are never resolved, and she gets shoved in an alien world. Mothers jump from womanhood to motherhood with no bridge in between. In Jashoda’s case, it is mentioned that her sexual experiences were one-sided, dominated by Kangali, her husband, who meticulously kept Jashoda “not working her over-much” (36), keeping her decorated and fit for his pleasures. Her neglected existence caused her to not process her hopes and desires, but rather turn herself into a socially accepted personality that involved treating her husband with the same motherly love as she had for her children. Devi writes, “Jashoda is fully an Indian woman, whose unreasonable, unreasoning and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness, have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati-Savitri-Sita through Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani. The creeps of the world understand by seeing such women that the old Indian tradition is still flowing free—they understand that it was with such women in mind that the aphorisms have been composed—A female’s life hangs on like a turtle’s—‘her heart breaks but no word is uttered’—‘the woman will burn, her ashes will fly/ Only then will we sing her/ praise on high’” (41). The perversion of motherhood is more conspicuously seen in Jashoda’s motherly love for Kangali.

Breast for Jashoda becomes a tool to preserve her standing in society. This is even before she turns into a “professional mother”. Her breast is a site of affection for both her children and Kangali. She understood Kangali’s obsession with her breasts. After Kangali’s accident, he doubted Jashoda’s fidelity by accusing her of having an affair with Nabin. She quells his suspicion by pushing his head “between the two hemispheres of the globe” (38), her explanation of how she was guarded by Halidar’s maidservants comes later. Kangali’s obsession with Jashoda’s breasts was highlighted during his accident when he was preoccupied with his dreams of fondling Jashoda as soon as he got back home. Devi writes, “Frankly, Jashoda never once wants to blame her husband for the present misfortune. Her motherly love wells up for Kangali as much as for the children. She wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest. Sages did not write of this motherly feeling of Jashoda’s for her husband.” This criticism of having motherly feelings for the husband points towards a mother’s incapability of translating the apolitical space of motherly love from its abstract roots to its practice in a sustainable way. The literal translation causes her to extend her all-encompassing and all-forgiving love, her non-judgmental care, to her husband. The innocent relationship of a mother and child is apolitical because the need to protect oneself through an ideological form,

one's idea of oneself that protects them from the ideas of others, is absent because the child is away from the gossamer world of words that convolute human nature and make it capable of manipulating others through disguised means. This innocence of an ideal apolitical space cannot sustain itself for long in the politically driven world. Her excessive engagement with this idea of motherhood causes her to become sacrificial and derive her meaning of life through this larger-than-life ideal. The constant presence of the Lionseated in the background of the story marks this constant shaping of Jashoda's motherhood personality. The interpretation of the holy events by several characters in the story represents the corruption in religion. The systematic construction of a society where individual roles fall into an unalterable state with no freedom of expression is the hell Jashoda lives in and becomes a victim of. Neruda writes,

I was alone like a tunnel. The birds fled from me,
And night swamped me with its crushing invasion.
To survive myself I forged you like a weapon,
Like an arrow in my bow, a stone in my sling. (Neruda 4-8)

When read together with Picasso's sketch of this poem the primitive images in these lines of "an arrow in my bow" and "a stone in my sling" reveal the civilizational roots of this 'forging' of a woman and how she has performed this functionary role of appeasing the man's thirst and his fears. This creation of a woman is old, something which has been extensively researched by feminists such as Beauvoir. However, here this deference of this "hour of vengeance" is long overdue and its absence speaks ghastly of how humanity is functioning and human-scapes are forming. This theoretical formation of a systematic world has left out love from its construction of humanity. The children are bereft of this motherly bond and men are clinging to their psychosexual makeup from childhood with their obsession with breasts. There is no 'romantic' space that Jashoda can explore. There is no realisation of the collective 'we' of the system to reflect on its actions and turn itself into an intimate personal 'I'. Jashoda cannot move beyond the biological act of sex to the realm of love with Kangali. That possibility has been extinguished by losing the space of womanhood.

There is an enduring prowess of ills in the society that sustains itself. The ills continue to flow from one period to the next. Devi has written in the text about the Haldar family existing in the "sixteenth century" once on page 36 and then again on page 50. There is a contrast between the old with the new. The old has persisted in the way of religious hypocrisy. When there is commotion regarding the turning of the Lionseated's head, Jashoda exclaims to Nabin "You think I don't know you turned the image's head yourself?" (Devi 54), Nabin replies, "Shut up, Joshi. God gave me the ability, and intelligence, and only then could the thing be done through me." A similar evasion from responsibility could be seen in Kangali's affair with Golapi. He similarly asserts to Nabin that it was divine play. This lack of confrontation with actions is present throughout the text. Haldar Babu's hypocrisy can be seen in these lines, "Now his employees tell him, you have had a change of heart, so much kindness for a west Bengali, you'll see there is a divine purpose behind this. The boss is delighted. He laughs loudly and says, there is no east or west for a brahman. If there's a sacred thread around his neck you have to give him respect even when he's taking a shit" (Devi 40). This kind of superficial respect towards Kangalicharan is Haldar Babu's reality. This dissolution of form and lack of engagement with the abstract can be attributed to the transactional modus of living mainly culminating in the monetary exchange. Nabin advises Kangali to start a Hare-Krishna racket and while suggesting it he also clears his conscience that he cannot make a racket out of Shakti-power. Similarly, Haldar Babu could have ensured the well-being of Jashoda's family but he did not truly envision it. His hollow belief in respecting Brahmans could not be sustained in his bloodline after his death. His wife and daughter-in-law both give inferior and exploitative deals to Jashoda in comparison to the conscience-clearing deal of Haldar Babu. Jashoda mentions to Nabin that the mother's glory ended when he put his hands on her. This manipulation of the form for personal gain is present throughout the story. Even Haldar Babu translates Jashoda's dream of Lionseated appearing in the form of a midwife as "The bastard unbelievers say, the Mother gives a dream, why tagged as a midwife? I say, She creates as mother, and preserves as midwife." Here it is also significant to note that men are defining a space for a woman; this rings in harmony with Neruda's 'forging' metaphor. Motherhood when seen as a symbol of the source of humanness, the perpetual fountain of human compassion that sustains a human being throughout life, its demeaning treatment by the characters, reducing the nurturing of the child to simply breastfeeding, and turning the piety of the act in a business transaction shows the hollowness with which Jashoda had been engaging. Here the idea of the "new wind" becomes significant. Devi writes, "Wise men have never allowed a new wind to enter the house. I've heard from my grandmother that a certain gentleman would come to her house to read the liberal journal Saturday Letter. He would never let the tome enter his home. The moment wife, or mother, or sister reads that paper, he would say, She'll say 'I'm a woman! Not a mother, not a sister not a wife.' If asked what the result would be, he'd say, They would wear shoes while they cooked. It is a perennial rule that the power of the new wind disturbs the peace of the women's quarter"

(50). The peace in the women's quarter is not pleasing but a deafening silence of unrealised voice. This new wind threatens not the peace of the women's quarter but the politics that stands upon the subjugated secondary position of the women whose marginal existence has sustained a structure suitable for the patriarchy to flourish. It is this peace that stands upon trodden women that the new wind threatens. Shelley talks about the wind's impact on the "sapless foliage of the ocean" (line 40) in his "Ode to the West Wind", which speaks of this removal of age-old and unfertile ideas that are mere carcasses without substance. This "sapless foliage" hears the voice of the wind and "grow gray with fear, / And tremble and despoils themselves" (lines 41-42), this fight is more ideological than physical. Gender is a constructed phenomenon, a useful political tool to exploit and maintain hierarchical inequality. Chodrow argues in her paper, "It is women, as mothers, who became the objects apart from which separateness, difference, and autonomy are defined" (Chodrow 18). The "relational" and "situational" aspects of gender are the first to be kept aside and instead of doubling down on the salient features of the sex, and representing it as an immutable part of human existence, is time and again forced to be unanimously accepted as true. The insecure male gender who is perpetually trying to separate itself from the "mother", and who does not follow a male role model to fashion itself, is quick to make these differentiations tangible; perpetrating to make the female subservient to the male. Jashoda is the creation of an intentional political agenda to make sure that the power struggle amongst the males can remain unchallenged by the females. Her deification is the proof that Haldar family, which represents the centre for power, is bound to profit from the exploitation of Jashoda by making sure that men keep their distance from such an overt motherly character. This motherliness is missing in the rest of the female characters within the story. Devi's insistence on including political concerns in literature instead of not making her political ideas literary to persuade, can be seen in her constant return to the epidemic of the shrinking coasts of humanness. This new wind is not simply the violent overturn of the old but a desperate call for transforming the stagnating structures of thoughts.

Mahasweta Devi paves the way to magnify the personal space of a woman in motherhood, the dialectics between the woman and her motherly duties, in the 'mother and child' and simultaneously the 'mother and society' relationship. This personal space is the presence of a complex reality in a woman's life. She is at once a mother who is engaging in a transcendent role where she acts beyond her needs and simultaneously negotiates her personality with it. This becomes a pivotal site in the divergence of different shades of motherhood that are present in different mothers. This negotiation creates opportunities to express motherhood in different and unique ways. However, these differences, while they undeniably exist, have to constantly participate in the transcendent role of a mother, and this gives birth to a fellowship of mothers, in the form of motherhood. This is something that Mahasweta explores in her other texts such as *Mother of 1084* and *After Kurukshetra*. Devi writes in *Mother of 1084*, "Somu's mother tells her, those who suffer understand suffering" (69). It is after a long internal lonely battle that Sujata finds someone who she can relate with and form a certain friendship based on a shared ideological plane. This kind of unity amongst women, based on the existential plane of suffering has been kept away from women's threshold through different means. What is this desire of Uttara when she says in *The Five Women*, "Really, I know nothing about anything! Imagine men and women, singing together..." (13), in response to Godhumi's description of her village life? Mahasweta's attempt to bring together women and create a space for idealising harmony between men and women is as existential as it is ideological. This need for the fellowship of mothers has been neglected and unrecognised by society, giving rise to lonely battles that mothers fight, like Thetis in "The Shield of Achilles"; there is no one to share her vision when Auden repeats the line "She looked over his shoulder" to show her loneliness in different stanzas and her situations.

Jashoda's suffering is caused by the absence of her identity. She lives until she dies on a borrowed idea of motherhood which she never gets the chance to realise for herself. This emptiness in her personal life is replaced with the desire to fulfil the expectations of society. Her life does not grow organically from her experiences but gets constantly negotiated and dictated from without. Jashoda's cancer is that growing bubble of her personality that she created on these unsustainable ideas. Her left breast eventually bursts, and as Devi writes, "becomes like the crater of a volcano." It even smells bad representing the idea of the ugliness of the approach she took to create her space in the world. She falls into the trap of the morally bound role of motherhood that has been controlled by society since olden times. Jashoda cannot enter this idea of motherhood with any active intellectual engagement, the motherhood which kills her in the end. For her, it was an addiction. It was the only way to keep up with the act. Devi writes, "but her heart could not abide by the empty room. Whether it suckled or not, it's hard to sleep without a child at the breast. Motherhood is a great addiction. The addiction doesn't break even when the milk is dry" (55).

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