



From Sacred To Spectacle: Deconstructing The Sacred Feminine In Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*, to explore how the sacred feminine, traditionally revered in Indian socio-religious culture, is dismantled and reconfigured within narratives of exploitation, commodification, and resistance. Based on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translations and theoretical insights alongside Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality and biopower, the study interrogates the paradox of goddess worship juxtaposed with systemic violence against real women. Devi's works reveal how the female body, particularly the breast, is transformed from a symbol of sanctity into a site of political struggle, labor, and spectacle. Through close textual analysis, the paper highlights how Devi critiques caste, class, gender, and institutional structures that glorify female divinity in myth while erasing women's agency in lived reality. Ultimately, the study underscores Devi's intervention in postcolonial feminist discourse by exposing the deep cultural contradictions that sustain patriarchal domination.

Index terms: Mahasweta Devi, Biopower, Breast Stories, Sacred Feminine, Subaltern, Gayatri Spivak, Postcolonial Feminism, Foucault, commodification, resistance

Introduction

Indian society has long upheld the divine image of feminine power through the reverence of Goddesses such as Durga, Kali, Lakshmi and Saraswati. Each symbolizing strength, destruction, prosperity and wisdom respectively. The very constructs of *Shakti*(power), *Sampatti*(wealth), and *Sadbuddhi*(wisdom) are deeply connected to feminine entity. Kali, for instance is worshipped in her fierce and nude form standing on the chest of her husband Lord Shiva. Yet this spiritual exaltation starkly contrasts with the lived experiences of real women in Indian society, where those who embody even fragments of this divine feminine are subjected to moral policing, sexual violence, silence and systematic oppression. The sacred is thus split from the social; symbolic veneration coexists with brutal subjugation. This paradox is not confined to mythology or tradition but persists with alarming relevance in contemporary Indian. In a society where women are condemned for wearing "short" dresses and blamed for the sexual violence inflicted upon them, the focus continues to rest on regulating the female body rather than interrogating the deeply ingrained misogyny that permits such violations. The same hands that fold in prayer before the Goddess Durga often point fingers at women in their own homes, questioning their character, autonomy and attire. Worship of the goddess is conducted with utmost devotion, but within the domestic and public spheres, women are often denied even the most basic recognition of their humanity.

Mahasweta Devi, is a dynamic writer and chronicler of marginalized lives. She was born into a progressive Bengali family in the year 1926 and gets involved in community based activism among Dalits, Adivasis and women who are bereaved. Her commitment to political writing was not abstract but grounded in decades of fieldwork and revolutionary empathy. Her stories do not romanticize resistance but instead expose how caste, class, and gender slickly intersect to commodify the female body. In her *Breast Stories*, a triad comprising “Draupadi”, “Breast-Giver” and “Behind the Bodice”, she presents the breast, an emblem conventionally tied to nurture and sanctity, as a potent site of labour, violence and resistance. Through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s powerful English translations and theoretical insights, these stories are situated within a wider postcolonial feminist discourse. In “Draupadi”, Dopdi, a tribal revolutionary is stripped and raped by a group of army officials. Despite this she uses her naked body as a weapon to fight against her oppressors. In “Breast Giver”, Jashoda, a Brahmin woman who becomes a professional wet nurse, is honoured for her ability to nurture but discarded once her body ceases to serve others. Again, in “Behind the Bodice”, Gangor’s breast becomes a site of spectacle and sexual exploitation, fetishized by the media and brutalized by the state machinery.

Across these stories, “the sacred” breast, once a divine symbol is transformed into a site of exploitation. Mahasweta Devi dismantles the ideological comfort of goddess worship, revealing how the glorification of the sacred feminine is strategically used to mask the dehumanization and control of actual women. Her narratives compel us to confront the deep-rooted contradiction that glorifies the goddess but devalues the woman. It does not matter either she is in a tribal forest, a domestic space, or a bustling urban street.

Aims and objective

This study seeks to analyze how Mahasweta Devi dismantles the idealized notion of the sacred feminine by exposing the violence and silencing faced by women. It interrogates how the breast, conventionally tied to divinity and nurture, is refigured as a site of political resistance and commodification. By engaging Spivak’s postcolonial feminist framework and Foucault’s theorization of power, the paper situates Devi’s narratives within a wider critique of patriarchal and institutional structures.

Literature Review

Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast Stories* have attracted extensive critical attention for their poignant portrayal of the intersections between caste, gender, and class subjugation. Urvashi Butalia, in “The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India”, emphasizes how Devi’s narratives expose the female body, especially the breast as a symbolic and literal site where maternal sanctity is violently eroded by socio-political oppression. Butalia contends that Devi’s work powerfully critiques how women’s bodies are exploited under patriarchal and capitalist structures, transforming the sacred into a spectacle of suffering and control. Again,

G. Nair, in “Mahasweta Devi and the Subaltern Voice”, articulates how Devi’s storytelling confronts institutional power by revealing the intersecting violences imposed on marginalized women’s bodies. Nair discusses how Devi’s subversion of the “sacred feminine” trope serves as a radical intervention into dominant nationalist and caste narratives.

Research Methodology

The research methodology of this paper is both analytical and descriptive. It draws on both primary and secondary sources to formulate the study. Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast Stories* serves as the primary text, while the secondary sources include e-resources, online articles, journals, and scholarly essays. The theoretical framework is grounded in Gayatri Spivak’s ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ to examine the silencing of marginalized female voices, and Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘Governmentality’ to explore the mechanisms of power and control operating through institutional and socio-political structures in Devi’s narratives.

Analysis

Draupadi/Dopdi: Nakedness as Defiance

Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast Stories* subvert traditional conceptions of the sacred feminine by exposing the brutal realities that of marginalized women, especially adivasis who face intersectionality of colonial, patriarchal, and state violence. In “Draupadi,” Devi reimagines the mythic figure of Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* not as a passive, divinely protected woman but as Dopdi, a tribal woman caught in the crossfire of historical and contemporary forms of domination. This re-naming, from “Draupadi” to “Dopdi,” is a

deliberate act of tribalisation, that foregrounds her adivasi identity and, by extension, the erasure and marginalization of indigenous peoples in India's socio-political history. Devi does not merely identify Dopdi ethnically, but historicizes her positioning as a survivor of multiple colonialism. Through Dopdi's narrative, Devi critiques the persistent structures of oppression that continually reduce adivasi bodies to sites of spectacle, subjugation, and resistance.

Foucault's concept of power and governmentality is crucial in understanding the mechanisms through which state authority, embodied in Senanayak, exercises its dominion over Dopdi and her community. Senanayak's order to "do the needful" is not a vague instruction but a calculated act of biopolitical control—using sexual violence as an instrument to punish, petrify, and reassert the hegemonic order. This violence is a form of disciplinary power designed to produce docility through corporeal and psychological subjugation. However, Devi's narrative disrupts this exercise of power by presenting Dopdi's body not as a passive site of victimhood but as an active locus of resistance. When Dopdi defiantly stands naked before Senanayak, tearing off the bloody cloth that once covered her violated body, she refuses to be shamed or silenced. Her nakedness becomes a powerful counter-spectacle that unsettles Senanayak's authority and challenges the colonial and patriarchal gaze. This moment embodies what Foucault might describe as a rupture in the power relation, a refusal to be fully subjected, where the body reclaims agency even amidst degradation.

From the postcolonial feminist perspective offered by Gayatri Spivak, Dopdi is a typical subaltern figure. She exists outside the hegemonic discourses of power and knowledge, "unable to speak" within dominant social frameworks. Yet, Devi's Dopdi paradoxically speaks through her silence and corporeal defiance. Unlike the Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*, who is divinely rescued by Krishna's miraculous sari, Dopdi receives no such divine intervention. Instead, she embodies a raw and embodied resistance that refuses to be clothed by patriarchal notions of honor or modesty. Her challenge to Senanayak, "You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?" (Devi33) is a reclamation of narrative and corporeal sovereignty, unsettling the colonial and patriarchal narratives that seek to contain and define her. Dopdi's resistance is a violent but necessary rejection of victimhood, transforming the spectacle of her violated body into a symbol of indomitable strength. This re-appropriation of the sacred feminine as a site of spectacle and resistance complicates traditional cultural and religious conceptions rooted in Hindu mythology and Aryan cultural hegemony. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* have long served as cultural texts that reinforce patriarchal and caste hierarchies, legitimizing the marginalization of adivasis and women under Aryan supremacy. Devi's narrative intervenes in this cultural genealogy by emphasizing the historical colonization of the adivasi people, who were forcibly displaced and subordinated by successive waves of invaders. The persistent denial of water and resources to Dopdi's people by local landowners reflects this ongoing exploitation, where economic and environmental violence functions as a tool of political control.

The story's layering of historical, mythological, and contemporary realities creates a complex narrative that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries. Devi's "Draupadi" becomes a powerful commentary on the endurance of colonial and patriarchal violence, while simultaneously exposing the nuanced ways in which the subaltern resists and survives. Dopdi's naked, bloodied, yet unyielding body is a site of sacred defiance, a spectacle that unsettles dominant power and refuses to be erased. In this way, Devi deconstructs the sacred feminine from within, transforming it from a passive ideal of purity into an active, embodied form of resistance that confronts the brutal realities of oppression and colonization.

Jashoda in Breast-Giver: Motherhood as Biopolitical Labor

In "Breast-Giver", Mahasweta Devi crafts the figure of Jashoda as a tragic embodiment of the sacred feminine, whose sanctity is orchestrated by the very structures that strip her of agency. While revered as the "Mother of the World," Jashoda is reduced to a biological instrument of service, her breasts not symbols of nourishment but commodities to be exploited. Her story lays bare the brutal irony of how patriarchal-capitalist society constructs and consumes the sacred feminine not to empower, but to render her invisible once her productivity ends. Jashoda is not a rebel. She is a devotee of the system that consumes her. Her own words reveal her ingrained belief in patriarchal virtue and her unwavering loyalty to her husband, even in the face of exploitation. When she says, "You are my husband, you are guru. If I forget and say no, correct me. Where after all is the pain? Didn't Mistress-Mother breed 13? Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit?" (Devi46), she verbalizes a deep submission not just to her spouse but to a cultural apparatus that defines womanhood through silent endurance.

Here, the writer does something profoundly political: she does not romanticize Jashoda's suffering. She exposes the internalized patriarchy that sustains it. Jashoda never questions why her husband Kangalicharan cannot work. Instead, she accepts pregnancy as duty, lactation as livelihood, and motherhood as divine burden. This form of governance of the self, as Foucault theorizes, is achieved not through overt violence but through normalization through cultural and moral codes that make women complicit in their own subjugation. Jashoda's "professional motherhood" is a regime of bodily regulation, where reproduction is tethered to productivity, and agency is relinquished in the name of duty. Jashoda's caste identity adds a sharper layer to her symbolic construction. As a Brahmin woman, she stands at the top of the Hindu social order. An epitome of purity and piety. Yet her life is dictated by physical labour, sexual, maternal to sustain a bourgeois household that neither sees her as a full person nor a family member. Her caste sanctity does not protect her from exploitation. It merely adds to the cultural spectacle of her role: a Brahmin wet-nurse, the embodiment of self-sacrificing motherhood. But the moment her milk dries and her body is diseased, she is cast off. She no longer serves the spectacle. This culminates in one of the most striking ironies of the story: Jashoda, the Brahmin "mother of sons," is cremated by a Dalit hospital orderly. The act is not just symbolic of her social degradation, but of the collapse of the ideological scaffolding that once kept her sacred. It strips bare the transactional nature of her sanctification: she is only divine when useful. Her caste does not secure her dignity; her motherhood does not ensure remembrance. The society that upheld her as a milk-giving deity now erases her like clinical waste.

Spivak's framework of the subaltern finds devastating relevance here. Jashoda's voice is not absent, but it is unheard in any meaningful discourse. She speaks in fragments, reiterates societal codes, and never transgresses. Her silence is not literal but systemic, she is a speaking subject denied subjectivity. Her labour, her pain, her cancer, all become background noise to a system that recognizes only her utility. As Spivak might argue, Jashoda cannot "speak" because what she says merely replicates the dominant ideology that erases her. Her home too reflects this social script. While Kangalicharan rests, she bears twenty pregnancies, continues household chores, and remains loyal. The domestic inversion where the husband becomes idle and the wife the breadwinner might suggest subversion of gender roles. But this is no feminist emancipation. Jashoda's acceptance of this role does not challenge patriarchy but reinforces its internal logic: women as caretakers, mothers, providers but never as autonomous beings. Her own children view her body in terms of its production; her husband allows, even expects, her continued exploitation; the Haldars see her as part of their household economy.

In Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver", Michel Foucault's concept of biopower is reflected in how Jashoda's body is subjected to systemic control and commodification. Her role as a wet nurse transforms her into a biological resource, where her reproductive and nurturing capacities are exploited to serve the needs of a wealthy household. Her body becomes a site of governance not through overt coercion, but through social norms, caste duty, and economic necessity. This aligns with Foucault's idea that power operates through the regulation of bodies and populations, turning individuals into instruments of productivity. Jashoda's eventual illness and abandonment further highlight how the system discards bodies once they are no longer useful, illustrating the violent disposability at the core of biopolitical control. And yet, even in her degradation, Jashoda becomes a figure of radical critique. By showing how she is exalted and discarded in the same breath, Mahasweta Devi demystifies the sacred feminine. She shows it for what it often is a cultural apparatus to regulate, use, and eventually erase women's bodies. Jashoda's breasts, once sites of reverence, become the cause of her death. Her body, once sacred, becomes untouchable. Her voice, once echoing with hymns of duty, becomes irrelevant in the silence of her cremation.

In this way, "Breast-Giver" continues Devi's project of interrogating the ideological constructions around womanhood. Unlike Dopdi, Jashoda does not rebel. But her slow death, her silenced suffering, and her posthumous erasure become a more insidious critique of how power works not only through violence, but through reverence which is always conditional.

Gangor in Behind the Bodice: From Sacred to Spectacle

In "Behind the Bodice", Mahasweta Devi offers a scathing dissection of how sacred femininity is consumed and desecrated by overlapping structures of patriarchy, casteism, and capitalism. Gangor, a tribal mother, is not merely a character but becomes a site of semiotic, political, and material violence, rendered voiceless and spectral through the very mechanisms that claim to "see" and "save" her. Her breasts, initially organs of maternal nourishment, are gradually severed from their life-giving function and transformed into

objects of fetish, threat, and ultimately, erasure. The tale begins with Devi's own caustic irony, a national issue reduced to "Choli ke peeche kya hai?" (What lies beneath the blouse?). The phrase borrowed from a popular Bollywood song is weaponized here to expose how national and political discourse continually displaces real violence against women by aestheticizing their bodies. What could have remained a moment of sacred maternity, Gangor breastfeeding her child is reconstituted through the invasive gaze of Upin's camera. His photographs, published under the headline "We must protect the breast!", signal not a concern for Gangor but a moral panic over the symbolic degradation of Indian femininity. The breast ceases to belong to Gangor it becomes a national artifact.

Through Foucault's theory of surveillance and bio-power, the camera becomes an extension of state apparatus. In photographing Gangor without consent, Upin exercises what Foucault identifies as a form of disciplinary power: rendering visible the body in order to contain, regulate, and control it. The image of the breast is not innocent it is politicized through circulation, stripped of agency, and subjected to public gaze. As Foucault insists, "Visibility is a trap" and for Gangor, the moment she is made visible, she is also marked for punishment. The photograph does not liberate her; it brands her. The police, as state actors, read her body as obscene, illegal, and violable. Here, Devi illustrates how patriarchy and state violence converge not to protect the sacred feminine, but to punish its autonomous presence. Gangor is arrested, incarcerated, raped, and permanently disfigured. This is not incidental brutality but it is systemic. The body which nourished is mutilated. The breast that symbolized mothering is now a political liability, an object to be censored or destroyed.

Spivak's formulation of the subaltern woman is disturbingly apt here. Gangor, a tribal woman from a marginalized caste, has no representational sovereignty. Her body speaks a language that the structures of state, media, and intelligentsia refuse to understand. Spivak reminds us that the subaltern woman cannot speak, not because she lacks language, but because her utterance is always filtered through ideological systems that distort, translate, or erase it. Even Upin, who believes himself to be a progressive journalist, projects Gangor's body to further his own moral and artistic agenda. His declaration "We must protect the breast!" is hollow because what Gangor needed was not symbolic protection of an abstract organ, but human recognition, autonomy, and safety.

The story's turning point occurs when Upin encounters Gangor once more, now a shattered figure. Her body mutilated by custodial violence, her spirit broken, and her dignity stripped away. Abandoned by her own community and left with no means of survival, she is forced into prostitution. This encounter starkly exposes the brutal intersection of patriarchy, state repression, and media complicity, highlighting how the subaltern woman's body becomes a battleground for both symbolic and literal violence. Her searing accusation, "You are also one of the rapists" is not metaphorical. It is a profound indictment of representational violence. Upin, like the state, has violated her not physically, but symbolically and structurally. His camera, like the police baton, acts with impunity. This moment shatters the binary between the liberal savior and the authoritarian violator. Both operate within a network of power that objectifies, appropriates, and dismembers the sacred feminine. Devi radically shifts the locus of critique here: the violence is not just at the level of action, but at the level of epistemology in how we come to know and represent bodies. Through Spivak's lens, one sees how Gangor's breast becomes the site of this violent epistemology. Even the nationalist call to "protect" becomes a veil for deeper voyeurism. The breast, sacred in its nurturing capacity, becomes obscene once detached from its maternal context and inserted into a libidinal-political economy governed by elite and upper-caste patriarchy.

Upin's final vision of Gangor's mutilated body is not a moment of realization, it is a brutal confrontation with what he chose to ignore: that his gaze was never neutral. When he sees that "her breasts were no longer there", he sees not just the horror of her bodily loss but the collapse of his own fantasy. He stumbles, shocked, toward a railway track and dies under a train, symbolically obliterated by the very forces of modernity, media, and colonial infrastructure that enabled his voyeurism. Devi's refusal to redeem him is crucial.

"Behind the Bodice" is not just a narrative of personal tragedy. It is a systemic critique of how sacred femininity, particularly in the bodies of tribal and subaltern women, is spectacularized, consumed, and disposed of. Devi constructs Gangor as the embodiment of sacred labor, only to show how that labor is constantly expropriated by media, masculinity, and the state. What begins as a story of breastfeeding ends as a story of mutilation, a literal deconstruction of the sacred feminine.

In the dialectic between “sacred” and “spectacle,” Mahasweta Devi does not romanticize femininity; rather, she exposes how quickly sacredness can be evacuated, how the maternal can be morphed into the obscene, and how women’s bodies remain the battlegrounds upon which caste, gender, and power intersect violently.

Conclusion

Thus, Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast Stories*, comprising “Draupadi,” “Breast-Giver,” and “Behind the Bodice”, powerfully unveil how the sacred feminine, traditionally revered as a source of creation and nourishment, is subjected to ruthless systems of caste, patriarchy, and political appropriation. In each narrative, Devi draws from mythology, social realism, and postcolonial insight to depict how the woman’s body is commodified and brutalized, often under the guise of care, duty, or national protection. Through these texts, the breast typically symbolic of nourishment, fertility, and sanctity is reduced to a site of exploitation, dismemberment, and spectacle. The stories articulate an acute political consciousness and forcefully interrogate how caste, class, gender, and nationhood intersect through the female body.

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