

Woman's Body and Motherhood as a Tool of Marginalization in Mahasweta Devi's works Breast Giver, Bayen and Draupadi

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Abstract: Problems of women, especially the ones belonging to the tribal community, are not much discussed but deserve to be heard and demands justice. Women in India have been facing various forms of violence throughout their lives and even today they are forced to endure them silently which makes it serious and complicated issue. Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is one brave woman who fearlessly adopts several relevant social and political themes in her works. She is an eminent Bengali writer who has studied and written about the struggles of women and tribal communities and a political activist who has worked for the rights of women and marginalized sections of Indian society. The works Bayen, Breast Giver and Draupadi bring to the surface different levels of marginalization faced by women in relation to caste, class, gender and body. This paper analyses how woman's body and their motherhood have been treated as a tool of marginalization in the selected works of Mahasweta Devi and also attempts to understand how subalternity and marginalization prevents women from achieving success and leading a happy life.

Key words: Mahasweta Devi, Breast Stories, marginalization, resistance, social exclusion, subaltern studies, gender politics.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Marginalization is the process of pushing groups of people to the margins of the society by ignoring them and not allowing them to have an active place or voice of their own so as to take part in any of its activities. Peter Leonard defines marginalization as "being outside the mainstream of productive activity or social reproductive activity" (15).

Issues related to women and tribal community is tense as there has been various incidents of subjugation; political, social and cultural. Mahaswetha Devi in works like Draupadi, Bayen and Breast Giver focuses on marginalization of women and their emotional and physical struggles to overcome them. She narrates the stories of oppression faced by poor and underprivileged people at the hands of the powerful government officials, landlords and moneylenders.

In subaltern female study we look at women from their original perspectives and learn how their identities grow with their language, experiences and struggles. Woman's body and motherhood is often employed as a tool of marginalization and oppression by using various forms of exploitation as is seen in works of Mahasweta Devi.

2. Denial of motherhood in "Bayen":

"Bayen", published in 1998, discusses the marginalization of women by the name of caste, class and gender. Chandidasi is separated from her husband and son and isolated by villagers when she becomes accused of becoming a Bayen- a woman who breastfeeds dead children. This play establishes many aspects of gender subalternity that is practised within the existing patriarchal and superstitious society.

Throughout the play her identity is singled out from the mainstream and her status of being a mother is taken away. In such a system Chandidasi loses her voice and agency to speak thus making her a subaltern. When the play begins, Chandidasi sings affectionately and emotionally at the thoughts of her son. In the first lines of the play we see a mother singing a lullaby for her long lost child.

"come sleep, come to my bed of rags,
My child god sleeps in my lap,

The elephants and horses at the palace gates,
The dog jhumra in the ashheap.” (*Five plays*, 94)

Society sidelines certain people by calling them witch and ostracize innocent people. The play demonstrates how society transforms a working class woman into a public scapegoat.

As Gayatri Spivak remarks:

When the subaltern ‘speaks’ in order to be heard and gets into the structure of responsible (responding and being responded to) resistance, he or she is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual. (4)

In spite of disturbed illusions and dehumanization at the hands of her community Mahaswetha Devi’s Chandidasi survives emotional and physical devastation.

3. Exploitation of motherhood in “Breast Giver”:

In her story “Breast Giver” from the collection of short stories called “Breast Stories” Mahasweta Devi traces women’s identity as body and object. Jashoda is required to take up the profession of a breastgiver when her husband loses his feet and her fertile body turns out to be the sole source of earning bread. Mahasweta Devi presents Jashoda’s maternal body as that of a professional mother where her “motherhood was her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings. Jashoda was a mother by profession. A professional mother” (*Breast Stories*, 33).

Yet Jashoda endures a painful and pathetic death. Her plentiful breasts become a gaping wound. “The sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes” (*Breast Stories*, 61).

In “Breast Giver” Mahasweta Devi focuses on the progression of oppression. In her classic work, Andrienne Rich states that “patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms; therefore they are treated as axioms, as ‘nature’ itself and not open to question...” (16). According to her, male institutions devalued child birth and exploited idea of motherhood to keep women in an inferior position.

Simone De Beauvoir (1949) claimed that a woman’s ability to give birth is the chief source of her subordination. She states, “One is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman” (283). Jashoda’s womanly body and her motherly instinct becomes the flaw that leads to her pitiful condition.

4. Exploitation of body in “Draupadi”

Dopdi Mehjen, a twenty seven year revolutionary of the naxalite group working under the leadership of the urban guerrillas, is captured and brutally raped by officers. Senanayak who expected her to beg him for mercy after the rape was astonished to see her refusing to get clothed and become a submissive woman. She goes naked and challenges him to see how they ‘made her’.

Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her lips, laughs and says, “The object of your search, Dopdi Mehjen. You asked them to make me up. Don’t you want to see how they made me?” (*Breast Stories*, 33)

She tells him that her spirit cannot be defeated. She asks him “you strip me but can you cloth me again? Are you a man?” (*Breast Stories*, 33). The extraordinary mental strength of Dopdi is noticed when she declares that there isn’t a man here that she should be ashamed of. She thus becomes a woman who is ready to stand up for her rights and beliefs.

All these stories show how women are exploited, suppressed and marginalised by the existing social, cultural, political and economic factors. Hence, these stories portray the politics of body and gender and how women endured all these exploitations and discrimination silently.

5. CONCLUSION:

To conclude it could be said that Mahasweta Devi was successful in portraying the authentic picture of the pathetic life lived by voiceless and marginalized people. This paper attempted to reflect the various forms of oppression, exploitation and subjugation faced by women belonging to the lowest strata of Indian society. Jashoda was made a victim of the exploitation by high class people. Dopdi was raped, killed by Senanayak and other higher officials. Chandidasi was called a witch and her community ostracized and prevented her from seeing her son and husband. All these stories show how women’s body and motherly instinct are treated as a tool of marginalization to keep the voiceless and others away from mainstream culture. Devi’s stories portray the life of common women who undergoes much pain and suffering at the hands of destructive gender, social and political exploiters and therefore it can be said that her tales gain importance all the time.

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