

In Pursuit of Happiness: Women in Selected Breast Stories of Mahasweta Devi

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"The mind is its own place, and itself, can make heaven of Hell and a hell of Heaven".

John Milton

The Oxford Dictionary Thesaurus & Wordpower Guide defines the term 'happy' as, "feeling or showing pleasure; willing to do something; fortunate and convenient". However, the quest for happiness is endless and the search has been the ultimate motive of human beings since ages. But unfortunately the muted division of humans into the upper and lower classes has turned happiness, into a prerogative of the elite class only. In many cases, the association of the lower classes with happiness is only fleeting, which again depends on outer circumstances and whether societal pressures allow them happiness or not.

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), a celebrated Bengali writer and a known face in the Indian Writings in English, dedicated her entire life to the upliftment of the lower class deserves a special mention. She has created characters through her writings that are looking for happiness in myriad realms of their lives. All her characters are born from the under-privileged class of Indian society. Mahasweta Devi attempted to break the concept of happiness only being a prerogative for the elite, rather proved through her characters that happiness is just a state of mind and it can come to the commoners from simple pleasures of life. Her characters are portrayed struggling through familial problems, environmental issues, gender inequality and the choice to live by their own will. The quest for happiness is proved through some selected short stories of Mahasweta Devi. To discuss the argument characters from Breast Stories have been selected. These stories are comparable to the present day life where human beings are running a blind race for the

acquisition of happiness. For the characters of Mahasweta Devi, the quest remains a pursuit and chase; happiness often being only or at best a mirage, a delusion. This paper is an attempt to prove how Mahasweta Devi has been instrumental in ushering a change in the lives of the downtrodden and the marginalised.

Mahasweta Devi and her creative works largely span the pan Indian position and situation of women in the post independent India. Particularly, the images of dalit and tribal women abound in her literary creations. She scans the place of women in Indian society and unveils the hegemony forced on them and in case the woman is a dalit or a tribal the scanner enlargers and she is enforced to stringent ascendancy and dominance by the upper caste. Her writings lash at the cold and barbaric attitude of the upper caste men towards a dalit and tribal woman. The description of women is not imagined; rather it unfolds the true images of women in Indian society. Her women characters are firmly rooted to the ground realities who are trying hard to create a place of their own and are in quest for happiness.

Breast Stories by Mahasweta Devi is a collection of short stories which have a common motif: the breast. The breast in the stories is highly symbolical. They not only stand as symbols of woman's beauty and provider of milk but also the same breast becomes the reason of neglect and disregard in her stories. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says in the 'Introduction', "The breast is what the stories have in common and what they do not share is shown by the staging of the names of three protagonist: Dopdi, Jashoda, Gangor; in Draupadi, Breast- Giver, Behind the Bodice" (vii).

The story "Draupadi" revolves around the Naxalite movement active in the West Bengal and draws our attention towards the ruthless methods employed by the state to crush them. Large scale search oppression is carried out to catch them. The story narrates the agony of a woman Dopdi Mehjen, a tribal and naxalite who is punished by the police by not imprisoning her but by raping her a multiple times. The fight against the injustices met to them in their socio-economic improvement had provided impetus to this movement. The tribals were never interested in breaking the law and order; rather they wanted their inclusion into the mainstream life. The tribals have always been denied their inclusion as part of the central society, because of being considered illiterate and cheap.

The protagonist Dopdi along with her husband Dulna went missing after the 'Operation Bakuli'. The young couple was good at guerilla warfare and could stay hidden from the eyes of the soldiers. However, unfortunately Dulna Majhi is killed while drinking water from a pond and this puts Dopdi in charge of the many Santhals camouflaging in the forest of Tharkhoni. Senanayak gets the charge to search these couple and terminate or kill them. The day arrives when Dopdi is surrounded from all sides since two of her own men betrayed her. She is caught, apprehended and taken to the camp. Senanayak after his dinner commands his men to teach her lesson by raping her. Dopdi undergoes severe insult and is made to suffer the whole night. Tied legs and hands to the four posts, to avoid minimal struggle by her with the thirst remaining unquenched, Dopdi continues to struggle. Morning arrives and she is called by Senanayak 'Burra Sahib' but Dopdi refuses to be forced to meet him and even throws away her own clothes and tears them apart marching naked towards the tent of Senanayak, "Draupadi stands before him naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds"(36). The story ends with Dopdi flinging away all her nakedness by pushing Senanayak with her breasts. Sreemati Mukerjee writes, "... Draupadi's nakedness uproots

Senanayak from all the consolations and guarantees of culture, learning and power that gave his existence its value and meaning"(151). Dopdi's search for happiness remains unfulfilled unlike the mythological Draupadi from the Mahabharat who is rescued from shame by her Lord Krishna.

Jashoda is another protagonist from the short story "Breast Giver" appearing to be a happy ending story. The story describes the plight of another struggler Jashoda, the breast feeder to many. "Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings. Jashoda was a mother by profession, professional mother"(38). How can motherhood become a profession? But the harsh realities speak a different story. Survival is the requirement and the need of the hour and Jashoda is compelled to do so. Jashoda is a wife of Kangalicharan, whose legs were amputated because of an accident. This accident had left the family jobless and pushed them at the verge of starvation. Jashoda as a wife and mother could not see her family grieving for want of food and she begs the Mistress to give the job. Meanwhile, the Mistress asks her to suckle the child of her daughter-in-law, who is very sick. This incident germinates the idea of suckling the children of the Haldars. Jashoda who was blessed with good milk flow to feed the child. It was picked for the job of suckling as a professional mother to all the children born to Haldars but suckling them in turns meant she too had to be pregnant in order to continue the regular supply of milk. As a result Kangali was asked by the Mistress to take over cooking responsibility at home and the time passed. This suckling provided fuel to fire and Jashoda and her family survived the difficult times. A time came when the Mistress died, the daughters-in-law child bearing age was over and Jashoda too turned weak and aging when she was asked to go back. 'The blessed auspicious Mother' Jashoda was asked to leave the Haldar's but this idea shook her very life. As Goddess Mother Manifest, Jashoda performed her job well. But later, the same Goddess mother was kicked out of the house of Haldars'. Nobody was present around

to look after her, not even her own sons and the suckled sons of Haldars. Only one fine day, the second daughter-in-law noticed her swollen breast and asked her to visit a doctor but Jashoda refused and succumbed to more pain. Ultimately, Jashoda's breasts were completely ruined till Kangali rescues her by taking her to the hospital. She is admitted but dies of breast cancer. Everybody leaves her at the end: husband, children and Haldar's are not present even at her death and an untouchable cremates her. She thus remains for long in the hearts of the readers as an embodiment of suffering and unhappiness.

The short story is a living tale that voices the cruelty of humans. Breasts, which become the soul saver of Jashoda and her family, are later responsible for her death. She feeds her family after nursing the children of Haldars' but unfortunately the means of her livelihood-the breasts kill her. While she nursed children she was invited to give blessings to all but when she actually needed somebody to be around her. She could not understand, "Why did those breasts betray her in the end?"(66).

The short story "Behind the Bodice" begins with a rhetorical question: Choli ke piche kya hai? or What is there behind the Choli, which is a homemade undergarment that covers the breast of women. The title of the story is picked from a famous song from the film *Khalnayak*, released in 1993, "Choli ke piche kya hai, chunari ke niche kya hai, choli mei dil hai mera chunari mei dil hai mera". The issues of national importance were neglected and the national problem for the year was 'What is there?' The short story revolves around Upin Puri, an ace photographer, who is missing and Ujan and Shital, Upin's wife and a famous Himalayan climber begins their search.

While investigating about his whereabouts many shocking facts are revealed. A woman named Gangor had attracted Upin's attention, who wanted to capture the beauty of her breast. The exposure of her breasts makes her an object of disgust in her own community as well

as a sexual object in the eyes of the police. His investigating nature of photography tries to represent the misfortunes experienced by the affected lot in India. He is an urban man who earns his livelihood by selling these pictures of violence to the west. Gangor understood the secret motive of Upin clicking pictures and started asking for money for each picture. Gangor's asking money for clicking pictures reflects the helplessness of the woman. The survival needs and requirements of the little breast-fed child are plenty that compelled her to do so. This reflects how life has turned commercial. As labourers, Gangor and her crowd were living in the city. Upin too clicked pictures for selling them in the market. Unfortunately when Upin again meets Gangor, the natural breast was gone. There only remained two scars which horrified Upin and he realizes the secret behind the bodice- rape and gang rape nothing else. The national song 'choli ke piche...'is but a farce because behind the bodice lies dirty and filthy thought of many. The character of Gangor is very dynamic and bold; she asserts her presence in the world. She emerges as a fighter in a difficult world where a woman is a subject of fun and entertainment. Her symbol of beauty her breasts become a reason for her own suffering. They are not looked as natural mammary glands to feed an infant but as objects of desire and lust. Towards the end of the story these mammary glands that had fetched attention of many turn to, "Two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat"(155). They were sacrificed due to the gang rape. Again the search for happiness has been thwarted by adverse circumstances which leave the protagonist helpless.

All the three characters Dopdi, Jashoda and Gangor are found struggling to their way to happiness as the life demands. They also make efforts to be happy with their little attempts. Unfortunately, they fail and suffer; they discover the real truth behind their attempts. The character of Dopdi is a unique character of valor and bravery that fills her reader with great respect for Dopdi Mehjen. Her strong revolution crushes the audaciousness and overriding Senanayak and all

the men involved in this heinous crime. Women's sexuality is believed to be a subject of men's foreplay and especially in a patriarchal society her sexuality is used against her to teach a lesson. Senanayak and his soldiers attempt to strangle this sexual identity of Dopdi yet remain unsuccessful. Huma Yaqub says, "Draupadi becomes a metaphor of resistance. She is representative of millions of tribal women who are fighting against the oppression and who can dare to challenge imperialism and patriarchy"(763).

The character of Jashoda describes the typical Indian woman, who for family's happiness sacrifices her life but with regard to herself adopts an attitude of neglect. Mahasweta Devi suggests a different picture of the subaltern. Through Jashoda the typical image of 'Mother India' is broken. She is the present day reincarnation of mythical Yashoda who suckled the Holy child, serves to dismantle the complexity of professional mother. She as foster-mother is in fact an economic necessity. The idea of happiness derived out of bearing and suckling children is here broken and the whole notion of happiness is foiled. The joys of motherhood in "Breast Giver" changes into agony of motherhood.

Devi through the story "Behind the Bodice" conceptualizes the mangled breasts of Gangor as the metaphor of violence. She is victimized by the protectors (police) of society within the custody. How a common man can have faith and trust in the present law and order system, when they are ones responsible for the condition of Gangor. The patriarchal society undervalues the importance of the sanctity of the breast. This view of writer reflects on eco-feminist approach. As Mother Earth Gangor remains an easy source of gratifying the lust and depleted of all resources without replenishing it.

All the three women are epitomes of sufferings and subjugations hurled on them by society. Their efforts for happiness are but attempts made in vain. Mahasweta Devi leads the reader to think deeper and evolve measures to

change the bent of mind of society towards the weaker sex. The tale of each character ends on a sad note leaving the readers enthralled at their capacities to endure pain in the modern world. Their pursuit for happiness is a journey without destination that leaves them unhappy and disgruntled.

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