

Symbol of Woman's Body in Mahasweta Devi's Breast Stories

Wairokpam Yaiphaba Chenglei

Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

Pravabati College, Imphal West

Email id: yaiphabawai38@gmail.com

Abstract

Symbolism in Literature was introduced by the French Poet Charles Baudelaire in his *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flower of Evil), a poetry collection published in 1857. Symbolism is the practice or art of using an object or a word to represent an abstract idea. Woman's body is a general subject in symbolist art and literature. Mahasweta Devi's unique employment of symbols in the representation of women's predicament especially of the subaltern stands out in the sea of popular Feminist fiction of this day. Although it was originally written in Bengali, *Breast Stories* was translated into English by feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1997. The three stories are titled: "Draupadi", "Behind the Bodice", and "Breast Giver". They have one connecting thread – the breast, a symbol of retaliation and power. In each of the story Mahasweta Devi conceptualizes the woman's body, more particularly the breasts as a symbol subverting the social codes constructed for woman.

Keywords: symbolism, subaltern, Feminist fiction, retaliation, subverting.

Women's bodies, beauty, sexuality, and character have been defined, regulated, and monitored by the values and conventions that are established by every society and age. Women have historically experienced sexual objectification, marginalisation, and humiliation. Women are inherently oppressed by the dominant society since they are viewed as the "other" or "second sex" on all fronts. Men are typically seen as rational, powerful, and protective, whereas women are typically seen as irrational, weak, and subservient. The scholars, intellectuals, and writers of the era idealised and extolled women's submissive obedience to the point where it became an obligatory rule of behaviour and a commandment. The traditional conception of women linked the conflict between the male and female to the opposition between the mind and body, with the female being perceived as being so deeply entwined with her physical existence that achieving rationality was doubtful. Mary Douglas proposes that the female body serves as a model for social structures in her analysis of the female body as the object. The human body serves as a social emblem. The borders of any social system are defined by the body in its unique arrangement of interior and exterior figures, according to prominent British anthropologist Mary Douglas: "The symbolism of the body's boundary is used to express danger to community boundaries." (122) Mahasweta Devi masterfully conveys how the female body—which is often seen as the most vulnerable—overcame social norms that might otherwise impair men's reasoning. Mahasweta Devi's subaltern female characters defy the stereotype that they lack voice because they reject the dominant power, which manifests itself in various forms such as patriarchy, the feudal system, caste, class, and gender ideals and arrangements.

Mahasweta Devi gives women's bodies the strength to rebel against their oppressors. The female lead Draupadi, also known as DopdiMejhen, in Mahasweta Devi's short novel "Draupadi" is the exact opposite of the role that the patriarchal society assigns her. Dopdi, a twenty-seven-year-old woman, and her spouse Dulna were both actively committed in the Naxalite Movement. When Dopdi becomes enamoured with her husband, the Indian soldiers sexually abuse her. Dulna passes away, and Dopdi, who was gang-raped, fights for her life. Convention dictates that Dopdi's spirit should break, however she doesn't exhibit any signs of weakness. She shreds her garments stands naked in front of Senanayak.

Dopdi is unarmed, but she appears more powerful than any armed man. She isn't ashamed of her bare body. Senanayak and the soldiers were astonished to see Dopdi respond in such an unexpected way. In fact, she used her victimised body as a weapon to mock the male ego. Her nakedness challenges the attacker's manhood. "Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time, Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid" (Devi 196, p. 2). The body that was thought to be the reason for Dopdi's demise turns out to be the very tool she uses to defend herself. Sexual violence perpetrated by men against women is known as rape. Therefore, even though Dopdi was the victim of rape, her courage and strength are demonstrated by her refusal to accept the humiliation that her oppressor placed upon her as a result of the deed. She understands that being a man does not automatically make one "masculine." In actuality, it defeats the goal itself. Dopdi inquires, "What is the purpose of apparel? I can be stripped by you, but how can I be clothed again? "Are you a man?" (Devi 33) Women's freedom and modesty being violated or exploited is not a recent development. The Mahabharata's legendary Draupadi is a prime example of a marginalised and objectified woman. In the Mahabharata, Lord Krishna's divine intervention saved Draupadi from being stripped nude. However, DopdiMejhen, the female lead in Mahasweta Devi's story, is not saved by a male operative or a god, in contrast to the legendary Draupadi. Her attackers gang-rape her on a regular basis, and her severely battered body is the only thing that helps her fight back against them. Therefore, the body of the lower creature serves as a tool of revenge against the dominant male, who stands for both colonialism and patriarchy in post-colonial India. Draupadi has dismantled the idea that rape is inherently shameful. Dopdi uses her nude body to oppose her captors, defying the submissive nature of being a woman. Through her portrayal of Dopdi, Mahasweta Devi dismantles the silence around rape. Dopdi's physique thus becomes a representation of strength and retribution.

The second story in the anthology, "The Breast Giver," also known as "Standayini," tells the story of a Bengali wet-nurse. Devi portrays Jashoda, the female lead, as a marginalised Brahmin woman residing in 1960s India. She must embrace "professional motherhood" after her Brahman husband amputates both of his feet. A central topic of Breast-Giver is the fight against societal oppression of men in order to achieve equality. Following her husband's accident-related paralysis, Jashoda is forced to take on the role of family provider. According to some accounts, Jashoda chose "motherhood as her profession" (Breast-Giver 826). As Jashoda becomes the family's only wage earner, she gains independence and self-determination from her husband. She practically feeds the Halдар family's children with her own breasts in order to support her own children and keep her family afloat in the face of extreme poverty. Rather than becoming a helpless spouse to a disabled husband and not taking any action to better herself or her kids, she finds a method to provide for her family. Like some modern women, she works outside the home and breastfeeds her children, putting her family's welfare first. Even though she supports the family, Jashoda still has obligations as a wife and mother to her own children.

Jashoda must also triumph over the oppression of a society that is dominated by patriarchy, which is a crucial feminist ideal. Lois Tyson asserts that "woman is other: she is objectified and marginalised, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have" (Tyson 92) in every domain where patriarchy is in power. Jashoda finds numerous strategies to overcome being the "other." Kangalicharan and Jashoda alternate the traditional "roles" of men and women. While Jashoda left for work, Kangalicharan "took charge of the cooking at home" (Devi 834). This reversal of roles highlights Jashoda's authority in the family and society, as well as her initiative.

The final tale in the Mahasweta Devi's Breast series, "Behind the Bodice," tells the tragic tale of what happens when migrant labourerGangor's breasts are photographed by master photographer Upin Puri while she is nursing her kid. She becomes a sexual object in the eyes of the police and a source of disgust in her own community due to her breast exposure."Itinerant ace-photographer" Upin is (Devi

141). He is an urbane man who makes his living on the violence that takes place in the impoverished and rural regions of Bihar and Orissa. Gangor's "statuesque" and naturally semi-covered breasts pique Upin's interest.

"The ample-breasted, half-naked female figures of Orissa are about to be raped," is the message that appears beside an image of Gangor's breasts. Preserve them! Preserve the breast. Somehow, these photos end up in Jharoa and get the eye of the local law enforcement. Gangor is taken into custody by the police, who then gang-rape her. Gangor's victimisation is consequently caused by Upin's depiction of her nude breasts. The police officers' patriarchal stare turns to Gangor's breasts. Rather than give in, Gangor decides to report the culprits to the police, in contrast to ordinary women who would give in to such abuse and perhaps even commit suicide. Despite the fact that women have historically been seen as the weaker sex due to the differences in their bodies from those of males, Gangor calls on society to treat them with respect. Upin decides to find out if Gangor has started turning to prostitution as a means of earning a living after hearing about her tragic fate. Gangor's family has abandoned her, thus this is her only remaining option. When the two finally meet, Gangor accuses Upin of being one of the people who had abused her. She believed that Upin also exploited her by taking pictures of her partially nude chest in order to get money. Gangor removes her bodice to display the proof of her body being violated. The signature of the violence inflicted upon Gangor are the two wounds that now stand in for her breasts. Upin is shocked to find Gangor's severed breasts there. He dies when he is struck by a train while fleeing from her and the consequences of his actions. Gangor is a lady who represents all women in society. The power of patriarchy overpowers us, and despite our "subtle protests," we yield to their beliefs and aspirations. The woman in this narrative entirely loses her identity because of her naked breasts. In this day and age, Upin is so displeased with her mistreated breasts that he flees from them. The act of women baring their breasts dispels the myth that a woman's body is associated with lust and desire and instead serves as a symbol of unity.

There is a compelling case to be made for reading Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* from a symbolist viewpoint that emphasises the oppressed Subaltern women. Because of their enormous numbers, women can be considered the most marginalised and disadvantaged group. After independence, not much has changed in terms of the condition. The state, the language, and the patriarchal elite culture pretended for a very long time that she did not exist—that is, that she was not a human being. In other words, women were either playthings or hussies, or they were always beautiful, sensual, and mothers.

As a result, women have historically been viewed as objects rather than unique people in politics and society. Women were forbidden from speaking the alphabet or handling books for a considerable amount of time, just like members of the dalit or lower castes. But eventually, this pub had to be abandoned. Mahasweta Devi uses the breast as a symbol of feminist struggle in her stories, which centre on the gendered subaltern. She powerfully illustrates the terrible miseries of the gendered subaltern by contrasting the breast symbol with the historical names of the protagonists in her short stories. The breast represented is an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between (hetero) sexuality and gender violence begins to waver. This paper looks forward to change the understanding of Subaltern women. It aims to alter the romanticized struggle of these women in the third world countries as seen from the first world perspective. It seeks to promote the study of subaltern women in the trend of Post Colonial Feminist studies.

References

- Devi, Mahasweta. *The Breast Stories*. Seagull Books Private Limited: Calcutta, 1997.
Douglas, Mary. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. Barrie and Rockliff, Cresset Press: 1970.
Sen Nivedita, and Yadav Nikhil. *Mahasweta Devi. An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, Pencraft International, 2006.

Shiva, Vandana, and Marie Mies. *Ecocriticism*, 1993, Kali for Women, 2008. Print Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive*, 2010, Women Unlimited, 2018.
Spivak, G. C. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. Methuen: London, 1987.
Tong, Rosemary, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 1998, Westview Press, 2014.
Tyson, Lois. "Feminist Criticism", *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 2nd ed., 2006. Print.