

Commodification of 'Motherhood': A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver*

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Abstract: This paper focuses on how the motherhood turns into a profession and the relationships are subjected to consumerism. The motherly love and the support are made-up into simple products which can be available in exchange of money. This monetary value revolved into only thing to measure each and every thing in human life. Such phenomenon is depicted vividly in the short story, "Breast-giver" by Mahasweta Devi. So, this paper takes its primary elements from this short story. It also studies the postcolonial issues in this text with the help of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In addition to postcolonial theories, it focuses on how those issues are indicating towards the degraded position of a female of a society, in this case ours. In order to study this paper from a feminist point of view, the waves of feminist theory are incorporated in this analysis. Thus this paper aims at analyzing the phenomenon behind commodifying of human relationship and emotion comprising the Marxist-feminist approaches and the postcolonial studies.

Keywords: Feminism, womanhood, patriarchy.

The blissful feeling of breast feeding of a baby can never be measured with any riches. Still this graceful task is professionalized. Such type of phenomenon is delineated in the short story *Breast-giver* authored by Mahasweta Devi. This story is a distinct example of Marxist-feminist issues. The cruelty bestowed upon the breast-giver despite of her service, actually indicates the harsh treatment of patriarchy and through unveiling the mask of patriarchy along with the social system, feminism attempts to bring out that female body is not merely 'body' to counter patriarchy. These Marxist-feminist approaches are incorporated to bring out distinct situations prevailing in our society, to show that women, motherhood is not a product, not a commodity. Moreover, postcolonial terms have been comprised to study the postcolonial issues in the text. These issues will cover subaltern, doubly/triply colonized minds and bodies, neocolonialism, hegemonic situation and so on. Thus the paper will focus on analyzing the vibrant phenomenon through Postcolonial and Marxist-feminist point of view. In this short story Mahasweta Devi delineates the striking images of a neo-colonial society. The female protagonist Jashoda accidentally gets the opportunity to income and run her family. She works for the Halдар family; who are Kayasthas in caste division. Her job requires the selling of her body 'part' which means she serves as a wet nurse. The very beginning of the story divulges, "Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings. Jashoda was a mother by profession, professional

mother”(Devi 38). Another striking inscription states, “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”(Devi 38). Through this strong imagery, the position of woman in the society is illustrated which reveals how woman are separated from own body and turned into commodity of getting pleasure. They are treasured only for their 'body'. These few words disclose the treatment of women of India in 1960s.

In addition to these, Jashoda's motherhood can be compared with that of the Goddess Durga who is regarded as the mother of all living being as per Hindu religion. After Kangalicharan's accident Jashoda saw a dream about motherhood and midwife and Haldar Babu argues, “I say, she creates as mother, and preserves as midwife”(Devi 42). Here, 'she' is the Goddess Durga and through this statement the strong position of religious ideology is revealed, just as the hypocritical attitude towards women of the society, which happens to be totally opposite to the devotion to the deity. Moreover, Jashoda's motherly emotion for all her children and also her crippled husband is expressed through the statement, “Her mother-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”(Devi 46). It suggests the dedication of Jashoda as a mother and how she appraises motherhood. Still she accepts her job as a professional mother and serves the Haldar family. This family needs wet nurse because the daughter-in-laws have to breed every year and for that they needs to be “in shape”. Otherwise the men will lose interest in them and “look outside”.

Again, a subtle reference of envy is noticeable in the story, “The good lord sent you down as the legendary Cow of Fulfillment. Pull the teat and milk flows! The ones I've brought to my house, haven't a quarter of this milk in their nipples!” (Devi 48). That is why the Mistress appointed Jashoda as wet nurse. The later part of the story reveals how Jashoda's suckling motherhood is commodified. “Jashoda's place in the house is now above the Mother Cows. The Mistress's sons become incarnate Brahma and create progeny. Jashoda preserves the progeny”(Devi 51). She serves there as the preserver, similar to Goddess Durga but her place is above the 'Mother Cows' because she supplies breast-milk in exchange of food and cloth. This job of Jashoda apparently brought admiration to her and she was respected as the 'chief fruitful woman'. On the other hand when Jashoda's last child weaned and her 'divine' flow of milk stopped, she was thrown away from her respectful position. In her words, “You've saved everything and eaten the food that sucked my body”(Devi 57). She could finally realize that she has lost her intermediary value.

Feminism celebrates womanhood and protests the hegemonic influence of patriarchy. Throughout its journey it has undergone remarkable changes and attempted to establish the right of women. The first wave of

feminism discusses about the equal right of male and female in terms of social and economic position. The second wave celebrates the writing of women. The female authors and their writings in comparison to the male authors are celebrated here. It embodies the unheard voices of subjugated women and celebrates it through the liberation of writing. The later part, third wave of feminism signifies black feminism, woman's position in postcolonial society. It discusses the suppressed situation of woman in postcolonial times, when they were doubly colonized by colonizers and also patriarchy. The oppression of gender discrimination and the colonization of the colonizers are the focal aspect of this wave. Jashoda's situation is obviously pertinent with the waves of feminism. The deconstruction of patriarchal outlook and the propaganda of equality of male and female can be sensed through Jashoda's earning capabilities. But the irony of her situation is that, Jashoda's motherhood becomes her capital for a living. She has to breast-feed the children of the Haldar family, and her breasts have to be 'always full'. She, therefore, as per the demands of her 'job', has to be impregnated every year. And finally, this quest for her living causes her to bear the deadly disease, cancer. From Marxist perspective the position of Jashoda resembles to a 'machine', an object which runs on money. She turns into an intermediary good which is thrown away after her production of 'milk' product is gone. Though the early phases of Marxism are not intensively concerned regarding feminine issues, the second wave of Feminism brings Marxist agenda in relation with women perspective. Women have always been subjugated by the domination of patriarchy. It has been normalized in such a way so that women estimate their domestic labor as something inborn. Even the work distribution is very discriminating and accordingly the economic value of it. Although the tough job of women has great value, it is deprived of being estimated for financial value. These complicated relations of gender and economy are discussed in the Marxist Feminist theory. It also reveals that not only the domestic workers but also the working class women are being deprived and are oppressed in terms of Gender and Economy. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* reveals,

Marxism's analysis of class into a women's history of their material and economic oppression, and especially of how the family and women's domestic labour are constructed by and reproduce the sexual division of labour(125).

Thereby, this earning capability is turning Jashoda into a tool of reproduction, a mere tool which feeds the mouth of around fifty children. The natural task of breastfeeding is commodified through feeding numerous babies. The duty of feeding a baby is now substituted through monetary value. The duty which ties the emotional bond between mother and child is now made in to a product, a commodity which is very common and available. The capitalistic vision, commodification turns every single thing into a product with financial

value tagged to it. Commodity is a product or thing with use value, and commodification is attributing use value to something. It might be intellect and also emotion. The commodification of a concept turns it into a mere item for consumption which can be valued in terms of money. It is the most necessary function of capitalism. Commodification does not even refrain from commodifying human relationships. Each and every single social aspect can be given sign-exchange value and it is not merely a capitalistic approach it is also psychological. Tyson argues, "Commodification, then, is the act of relating to persons or things in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value to the exclusion of other considerations" (69). So it can be regarded as a profit making concept, which can do business with any sort of material or abstract idea. Thus Jashoda's motherhood, breast milk and the task of breastfeeding are all traded and tagged as products with exchange value. The emotional essence of mother-child relationship is crushed and substitutes it with financial value. Even the Haldar family later disgraces Jashoda when she lost her capital: breast milk. This suggests though Jashoda is not an object she is a rational human being; she is treated like an intermediary product which lost its regenerative feature and thrown as trash.

Moreover, capitalism has tough connection with neocolonialism. "Literally 'new colonialism'...the term has since been widely used to refer to any and all forms of control of the ex-colonies" (Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, and Tiffin, Helen 162-163). Neo-colonization is the aftermath of colonization. In most of the cases, the aftermath is more devastating than colonization itself. What can no longer be done in the form of direct colonization, has now taken the form of an indirect domination, which we term as neocolonialism. Colonization can be identified, and thereby, protested, but neocolonialism extends influences through ideology and hegemonic exercise of power. Under the mask of globalization, it works through capitalism and continues its exploitation with the consent of the people. It is the most significant medium of neocolonialism which enables colonization behind the mask of economy. The impact of hegemony is developed through the implication of colonization. The decolonization process and its loop holes brought back colonialism through hegemony. As it is not forcefully dominating, it took the veil of Neocolonialism and left the name 'colonialism'. Therefore, it is practicing power in the form of hegemony. In this story the Eurocentric mindset of Haldars wives is revealed through their urge to wear "European cut" bras. In order to do so they need to be 'in shape' and Jashoda is the helping hand who will be keeping them 'in shape'. This ideology is making way for neocolonialism through the hegemonic practice of capitalism. In the same way, Haldar family exercise power over Jashoda with her consent to practice their Eurocentric ideology and thus colonizing her through commodifying. Another important aspect in this short story is the hegemonic domination. The word hegemony was

coined and formulated in the 1930s by Italian Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci. He was the one who investigated the reason of circulating the philosophy of the ruling class. Hegemony is domination by consent. It is actually using ideology and discourses to establish domination of the power holding class over the common people. These power holders are usually those who hold the economic power and practice influence over education, media and also religion. According to the *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*,

Fundamentally, hegemony is the power of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all. Domination is thus exerted not by force, nor even necessarily by active persuasion, but by a more subtle and inclusive power over the economy, and over state apparatuses such as education and the media, by which the ruling class's interest is presented as the common interest and thus comes to be taken for granted. (116)

Hence, those who are economically insolvent such as the day laborers, people who hold no power of influence and are subjected to hegemonic domination can be regarded as subaltern, from the economic point of view. But the status of subalternity can also be determined through the caste division of religion. Religion is also an important channel through which hegemony gets its strength and subaltern issues are strongly related to religious discrimination. "Subaltern, meaning 'of inferior rank', is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes" (Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, and Tiffin, Helen 215). Subaltern means a certain group of people who are not only lower in social status but also deprived of the essential rights of living in a society. The identification of such people are usually done through the scale of economy and religion. On the other hand, subaltern term has been used more often to indicate the class division in postcolonial studies. The lowest rank, social position or the position-less state created by the economic, social and religious distinctions is more vividly recognizable in postcolonial issues. According to Spivak, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow..." (Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, and Tiffin, Helen 28).

The minor group or the 'low' caste people are the subaltern people who deliberately contain this hierarchical ideology and act accordingly. They cannot speak for themselves as they follow the path shown by religion. Even if the subaltern people are victimized by religious distinction, they cannot speak against those religious ideologies because they are unaware about the fact that they can speak for their rights. Still the opposite is found through Jashoda. She is from a higher caste Hindu, wife of a Brahmin, daughter of a Brahmin, but she is in an 'othered' position. "In general terms, the 'other' is anyone who is separate from one's self. The existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating

one's own place in the world" (Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, and Tiffin, Helen 169). 'Other' refers to something and anything beyond 'self'. From postcolonial point of view other stands with a different significance. It is the separated, diverse self or situation in comparison with the known state. The colonized 'other' is associated with primitivism in comparison to modern life leading. It is a distinction between the colonizer and the colonized. It is a binary opposition. 'Other' is a/the separate identity. This separate identity can be implicated to own physical features. 'Othering' own body part may refer to, the nurturing of separate identity within oneself through fragmentation. Though Jashoda got respect and strong attention for a certain time, she is othered at a certain point and is a subaltern for her economic status. The caste which is supposed to be her blessing is actually making her subaltern, the powerless one. She does not even have her own identity. She is identified by either her father or her husband. 'the Brahmin's daughter' is the phrase which continuously keeps her in control of patriarchy. But she is unable to recognize the ideological practice of patriarchy.

Class distinction, one of the basic Marxist notions which indicates certain issues in this short story. Marx successfully identifies the discriminations based on base and superstructure. But in Marxist-Feminist standpoint women's position is superficial than the class distinctions. They are merely tools to produce babies and provide pleasure. Just like the working class which gets exploited. But the positions of women are simply objectified and women are turned into commodity. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* discusses, "The material interests of the dominant social class determine how people see human existence, individual and collective" (Selden, Raman, Widdowson, Peter, and Brooker, Peter 82). The working class people who do not have the privilege of financial support are often colonized by the higher class people. They are doubly colonized by their own people other than the colonizers. Again, if a woman from a subaltern group would be considered, then she is again colonized by patriarchy within own group. Such stages of exploitation reveal the doubly/ triply colonized selves of a colonized land. Colonized people are those who are exploited by the colonizers but double colonized people are those who are not only the victims of discrimination initiated by the colonial but also by gender issues. The victims of double colonization are the outcasts of the society and the subaltern people, but also, very importantly, the women as well. Patriarchy (in both the sides of colonizer and colonized), practices manipulation and domination in such a way that the women of colonized society falls prey to the exploitation and again becomes colonized. According to the *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*, "the 'double colonization' that resulted when women were subject both to general discrimination as colonial subjects and specific discrimination..." (103). Similarly, Jashoda's subaltern position

depends much on the postcolonial attitudes. Though she belongs to a higher caste Hindu position, she is outcaste for her diseases. She was kept in a room separated from all other residents of Haldar family. She is crashed under the oppression of colonization through the Haldars. But she is not oppressed just for once. As she is a woman she is suppressed under the veil of patriarchy also. Thus Jashoda remained subjugated under the domination of multiple forces and doubly colonized.

The theories incorporated to analyze the socio-economic position of a woman reveals the crisis within own self. This can be regarded as identity crisis of a Hindu married woman of Indian subcontinent as the only identity she ever had is related with either with her father or her husband. Though her endeavors to save her family and the employer's family were unimaginable, she did not get proper respect for her sacrifice. Her position demeaned with her loss of reproduction and breastfeeding. She was used as a mere tool, a commodity to feed the mouths of a number of infants. Thus being reduced to a mere product, Jashoda is a 'being' with wounded and battered individuality.

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