

# A Story of the Breast Giver

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**Abstract:** *“The Breast Giver,” from her collection of short stories called, “Breast Stories,” the indigenous bureaucracy, the Diasporas, and the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her. If nothing is done to Mahasweta Devi outlines women’s identity as body, worker and object. Breast-Giver is the story of Jashoda, a Brahmin woman character, whose husband loses his legs in an accident and she has to take up the job of a nurse in a rich family. Jashoda’s revolting and cancerous maternal body offers a powerful and situated counterpoint to the universal valorization of women’s embodied resistance and political struggle. It could be calculated as per formative mode of female existence in her own context that no male and social phenomena.*

**Keywords:** Characters, Victimization and Exploitation of Motherhood, Decisive Moment, Male Desire and Castration, Role of Women, Imaginary and Symbolic Order

## 1. Introduction

Mahasweta Devi is one of India’s foremost writers. Mahasweta Devi has her unique pattern to represent stories from the side of those ignored group of people. Her powerful fiction has won her recognition in the form of the different national awards. Mahasweta Devi believes in writing for the tribal, downtrodden, and underprivileged. In Devi’s writing is the condition of India’s indigenous people and of other economically marginalized people were envisaged. She puts female within them with their strength and modes of existence.

### Characters of the Story

- 1) **Jashoda:** She is a middle class Brahmin woman. She is very good and attractive woman. She is the protagonist of this story. Her role in this story as a Breast Giver.
- 2) **Mr.Kangalicharan:** He is a husband of Jashoda who is incapable of maintaining his family because he lost his two legs in accident.
- 3) **HaldarFamily:** Mr.Haldar and Mrs. Haldar, they are belonging to very rich and big family and having children and grand children.
- 4) **Nabin:** He is a pilgrim guide.

### ‘Victimization and Exploitation of Motherhood’

In “BREAST GIVER” (“Stanadayini”, 1980) Mahasweta focuses not so much on the resistance of the oppressed as on the dynamics of oppression itself. Theoretically a member of the highest of the Hindu castes, the Brahmin Kangalicharan is a helpless victim of the rich patriarch Haldarbabu’s clan. Forced to become the wage earner of the household, Kangalicharan’s wife, Jashoda, becomes a wet nurse for the Haldar family, who retain her services until she becomes useless to them. Mahasweta’s narrative is aimed at exposing the relentless collusion of patriarchal and capitalist ideologies in the exploitation of the disadvantaged. Themselves victims, the women of the Haldar household are Jashoda’s chief exploiters. The status of wage earner not only fails to release Jashoda from the expectations of wifehood and motherhood but saddles her with the ultimately self destructive task of being “mother of the world”. Nevertheless, neither victimization nor its awareness fully robs Jashoda and Kangalicharan of their sense of agency and power.

Like the funeral wailer and the medicine woman in Mahasweta’s short story “Dhowli” or the landless tribal laborer in “Draupadi”, Jashoda, the principal character in “Breast – Giver”, is a working woman or, as the narrator puts it, “professional mother”. As translator Gayatri Spivak has pointed out, in the story’s title the author deliberately foregrounds the centrality of the female body in Jashoda’s transactions with her clients – she is not just a “wet nurse” a provider of milk, but a “breast giver”, a distinction further underscored by the grim ironies that unfold in the narrative of her career. The story offers new avenues for examining the points at which gender and class oppression intersects.

“Breast –Giver” is representative of Mahasweta’s fiction, in which the deceptive surface of linear, seemingly realistic narrative is constantly undercut by mythic and satirical inflections. Not only is Jashoda the breast – giver named for Yashoda, the mother of the beloved cowherd–child–god Krishna, but in the course of the narrative the professional mother merges with other Indian icons of motherhood – sacred cows, the Lion –seated goddess, “mother India” herself. The story is open to competing, yet not mutually exclusive, analyses, in terms of Marxist and feminist economic and social theory, myth or political allegory, while the many layers of meaning in “Breast Giver” are accessible even in translation, much of the power of the original derives from Mahasweta’s distinctive style and voice. In this story, as in the author’s other works, classical Hindu myths connect with quotations from Shakespeare and Marx, and slang, dialect, literary Bengali, and English blend together. The result is a powerful language that in many respects resembles modern Bengali usage, yet remains a unique creation of the author. In her book, “Breast stories,” Mahasweta Devi, as an India intellectual known for her feminist, deconstructionist, and subaltern criticism in cultural texts, literature and her own radical writings, tells the stories of the women of India who are caught endlessly in the cycles of holiness and self- abnegation.

In her story, “The Breast Giver, “from her collection of short stories called,” “Breast Stories,” Mahasweta Devi outlines women’s identity as body, worker and object. In a tale of a Bengali wet-nurse, Devi shows female protagonist, Jashoda, living in 1960’s India as she is compelled to take up’ professional motherhood’ when her Brahman husband loses both his feet. With her only ability held in her ‘always full

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'breasts and her desperate economic destitution-She is swiftly utilized and praised for her expert weaning of wealthy offspring, which she does for 25 years, before losing her usefulness and consequentially dying from breast cancer. Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytic criticism could be used to support the claim that the central theme of this story involves a conversation between the spiritual significance of woman and her place in the imaginary order. The desires of man as they become dominant in the symbolic order and the law of the father originate in a foreign language, setting and cultural context given to maintain a clarity and relevance of symbolism.

### **The Decisive Moment: Male Desire and Castration**

The confrontation, which serves to alter Jashoda's life, comes when the youngest son of the wealthy landowner Haldar takes a Studebaker for a drive and proceeds to roll over her husband, marring his feet. The incident 'is first built up with a divulging of what lead the young son to, in essence, castrate the man, Kangali – a Brahman and priest of the highest caste who's feet act as totem, or phallus, for his sacred livelihood.

### **The Role of Women: a Gynocentric Perspective on the Meaning of Maternal Plenitude**

When Kangali is rushed to the hospital, the elder Haldar is mortified at the thought of having a Brahmin killed from his namesake's hand. Haldar assures his victim "Don't worry, son! You won't suffer as long as I'm around".

Thought this promise comes as a relief to the now mangled priest, it is not him whose survival is truly threatened – he is after all of the highest caste in what Devi calls in her story",.....independent India, the India that makes no distinctions among people.... Varieties of Brahmin..." Even though Haldarbabu makes his fortune in the British era of "divide and rule" he exclaims, "There's no East or West for a Brahmin".

Without his feet Kangali's security is mostly assured by his spiritual standing. Though times become desperate after his wealthy benefactor dies, he could just as easily move on to another temple where he is unencumbered by his family, as he goes on to do so later in the story. It is Jashoda whose survival is seriously jeopardized by the castration of her husband's feet and then the death of their patron, lacking as she is of anything monetarily or spiritually relevant to a patriarchal culture – save for her prophetic lactation, her ever flowing supply of breast milk.

In producing heirs, husbands of the house wish to preserve their bride's beauty – and this becomes the 'deal-sealing' point for Jashoda's induction into professional motherhood. The mistress of the house decides that this proposal of employment is "worth a million rupees" because daughter-in-laws will be mothers. And most importantly, will be mothers for as long as possible Even though progressive suckling will "ruin a mother's shape". If sons look outside there is no voice to object. "Going outside because they can't get it at home, this is just", the mistresses proclaim. As the wife, through her gift of reproduction becomes objectified in the market as commodities, and her husband as consumer expects an endless supply to satisfy his insatiable

almost childlike desire for both 'trophy and tool', the wife knows, as a woman she must take on the subordinate role of simultaneously pleasing and producing for her masters.

"Such is the power of the Indian soil that all women turn into mothers here and all men remain immersed in the spirit of holy childhood", writes Devi. This theme of oppressive hegemony, built into both spiritual practice and economic belief, resonates in all of the narratives of the women in, "Breast Stories".

In the "Breast Giver", as Jashoda becomes more and more revered for her body's other worldly tolerance, it seems as though the binary is moving towards free play – from man/woman to a hierarchy closer to woman/man. Both Brahmans in their own right, Kangali shares home tasks as he takes on the cooking at home and cares for their three children as Jashoda is heralded as wet-nurse and, "the mother of the world".

Jashoda's only usefulness in the male dominated cultural setting is her maternal plenitude, her duty of raising children out of an imaginary order as she dives into the symbolic law of the father. This 'usefulness' is the responsibility of all mothers of patriarchy. As she extends her task to countless children, other than her own, Jashoda becomes 'Martyr' – a role that suggests both significance and sub-ordinance, and even worship, while she simultaneously secures her 'never ending' lack of milk and nourishment. That she willingly keeps emptying herself for the 'good of man' makes it possible to revere her without ultimately revising her under privileged charge.

### **Living in the Liminal Space between the Imaginary and Symbolic Order**

The story that plays out on Jashoda's body, from prophetic 'nourisher' of the world to, at last a cancer ridden and abandoned 'server' of those who once exalted her as holy, is essentially the conversation and struggle between the imaginary order and the symbolic law of the father.

An imaginary order, symbolized by the spiritual image of the lion-seated goddess, comes to Jashoda in a dream when she, as midwife, whose presence encourages all members of her dream to at once revere her as sacred wet-nurse and then to cast her aside. Jashoda dreams she is caste aside once the spiritual image of the lion-seated goddess will has changed. Though the characters in, "The Breast Giver", would have you believe that the divine will is always done, Devi suggests the divine is in many ways just another phallus for the 'law of the father'. Jashoda is not seen as inherently sacred as Kangali. She only becomes so when she has a service to offer or when the last child is weaned and her supporting mistress dead. In the end she is left to weep at the lion-seated feet with a pained and cracked bosom.

In the end, no prophetic dream comes to guide her; no benefactor gasps at her state and runs to aid her sacred grace. Her body is revealed as a mere vessel that man through his religious symbols spurs on. Once used for her will and now left empty and lacking, Jashoda suffers a painful and sickened death. Her plentiful breasts now become a gaping wound. Jashoda thinks and asks in her delirium how she

suckled the world; only to die alone? With “meaning in the process at an end” she leaves a life of sacrifices for all, forsaken by all.

### **Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Standayini’ (Breast Giver) with Subaltern Female Figure**

In her story, “The Breast Giver,” from her collection of short stories called, “Breast Stories,” the indigenous bureaucracy, the Diasporas, and the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her. If nothing is done to Mahasweta Devi outlines women’s identity as body, worker and object. Breast-Giver is the story of Jashoda, a Brahmin woman character, whose husband loses his legs in an accident and she has to take up the job of a nurse in a rich family. Devi shows female protagonist, Jashoda, living in a 1960’s India as she is compelled to take up ‘professional motherhood’ when her Brahmin husband loses both his feet. Her role as a wife and as a mother of the owner’s family is the key female possessiveness in the context. The concept of motherhood is far more complex than mere female reproductively. It takes on much larger dimensions where it translates into the determining factor of a woman’s position in society. The concepts, motherhood and mothering, are also discussed widely into the emerging feminist rubric of the third world nations. The mother enjoys a privileged social position particularly if she is the mother of sons. Though discriminated against both as a daughter and a wife, as a mother she gains a certain privileging and therefore motherhood becomes as rational. Devi, Ganesh N. mentions Mahasweta Devi’s own response towards the story as: “Breast-Giver is a parable of India after decolonization.” He takes the story as a representation of India and the valued mother India. It is very much concerned issue in regard to mother India as well as the character Jashoda who lives the life of sacrifice for husband and owner’s family. Devi, Ganesh N. includes Mahasweta Devi’s concern as: Like the protagonist Jashoda, India is a mother-by-hire. All classes of people, the post-war rich, the ideologues, sustain her, nothing given back to her, and if scientific help comes too late, she will die of a consuming cancer. I suppose if one extended this parable the end of the story might come to “mean” something like this: the ideological construct “India” is to deeply inform by the goddess-infested reverse sexism of the Hindu majority. As long as there is this hegemonic cultural self-representation of India as a goddess-mother (Dissimulating the possibility that this mother is a slave), she will collapse under the burden of the immense expectations that such a self representation permits. Devi shows female protagonist, Jashoda, living in a 1960’s India as she is compelled to take up ‘professional motherhood’ when her Brahmin husband loses both his feet. With her only ability held in her ‘always full’ breasts and her desperate economic destitution she is compelled to give her breast upon the condition of owner’s provision, which she does for 25 years, before losing her usefulness and consequentially dying from breast cancer. Morton, Stephen critically examines the role of Jashoda and her female position, quoting Spivak’s comment as “The gradual decay and disease of Jashoda’s exploited maternal body challenges the bourgeois nationalist myth of Mother India from the standpoint of a subaltern woman”. In the story of Mahasweta Devi’s Standayini (Breast giver), the main character, Jashoda, plays the role of those common females who maintains their position with

their own effort. Spivak claims that such stories are the modes of history which creates their essence as great as “the effect of the real”. Spivak has focused upon such subaltern historians as an individual like Mahasweta Devi who has made us to look as historical grounding “within shadowy named characters”. Mahasweta Devi has also presented Jashoda’s maternal body as “professional mother.” She presents Jashoda’s motherhood as “her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings. Jashoda was a mother by profession, professional mother”. She searched a job for the survival of her family after her husband’s lamed body. But, Mr. Haldar’s wife assigned her for breastfeeding her son-in-law’s children. Morton, Stephen presents Spivak’s argument about the experiences of Devi’s subaltern female protagonist, Jashoda, “challenge the assumption prevalent in western feminism that childbirth is unwaged domestic labour. In ‘Breast Giver’, Jashoda is employed as a professional mother in an upper class Brahmin household to support her crippled husband, Kangali”. The argument is about existence with own body which takes care husband and gets a professionalized identity. Mahasweta Devi wants to value Jashoda with her strength of self that “she wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest” in this way Jashoda is also presented as the figure of mother India, “such is the power of soil”. Jashoda is localized in terms of her needs and existence. It is the fact that Jashoda’s reproductive body which turns out to be the source of earning livelihood not for her but for her husband and her children. The breast milk is valuable part of existence which nourishes the upper-class Haldar household. Her bodily performance becomes the major source of income for Jashoda’s crippled husband. Morton, Stephen quotes Spivak, “Jashoda’s experiences as a professional mother and wet nurse thus challenge the universal claims of western feminism to speak for all women”. Breast Giver’ dramatizes the exploitation and gruesome death of Jashoda, a subaltern woman character in Devi’s historical fiction, who is employed as a professional mother, She became a wet nurse in the upper-class household of the Haldar family in part of land where everything was dependent to male. Morton, Stephen explains Spivak’s careful observation of Devi’s descriptions about “Jashoda’s cancerous body in the closing sequence of the story, especially the phrase, ‘The sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes’”. It is the stage of forbearance and the power of motherhood in professional context. Morton, Stephen. Argues it as, “what is more, Jashoda’s revolting and cancerous maternal body offers a powerful and situated counterpoint to the universal valorization of women’s embodied resistance and political struggle”. It could be calculated as per formative mode of female existence in her own context that no male and social phenomena could defy.

## **2. Conclusion**

In this way this story will float over feminisms to come across the female resistance and the different mode of female struggle to identifying the female position in their location and situation. It is the part of subaltern context where female identity is rarely counted. The main focus will be to justify subaltern female identity with the referential text of Mahasweta Devi’s story, ‘Standayani (Breast Giver)’ as a



representational art. It will locate the localized values of female essences rather than the modes of feminisms for political and social equality. It will try to examine whether the power bodily performance and professional mode of bodily act could define difference of female resistance or not. I will be trying to explore the various frameworks of female struggle and modes identity formation with Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast Giver' which I will be interchangeably using for 'Standayani.' It is a localized version of female study with subaltern references and female study. Subaltern Female study could lead a different mode for study where rather than looking at binary positions of male/female, we study them with their own narratives. In this paper, it will be attempted that the growth of those people who are conscious on their ways of living without being compared to higher class of people. I will be looking at the position of other marginalized females and their attempt to hold the position to compare and contrast subaltern females and their collectiveness. I will be referring the subaltern female of Mahasweta Devi's 'Standayani' as my primary source. Whereas theoretical modes will be taken from Spivak, Gramsci.

Here is mode of feminist study will be re-reading female identity with reference to subaltern female position. Subalternity could be analyzed as marginalized or 'other' figure as their essence is under shadow. They are not visible in the space of center or mainstream. In this context they grow with their own stories and narratives which collaborate build their values. I have tried to explore the power of resistance and bodily acts of those shadowed females. It is reflected in their manner of acceptance and the collective consciousness in regard to their social position. Mahasweta Devi's 'Standayani' and "The Five Women" are the text to refer and justify the mode of subaltern female identity.

In this subaltern location, females are having their position within the boundary of their family needs and survival forces. The female modes differ for locating the female identity. They grow with their power of resistance as they use their bodily performative acts as means of devaluing the power existence. Spivak uses the 'Breast Stories' of Mahasweta Devi to explain the position and real existence of female in the context of the unheard situation of the group. Jashoda in Mahasweta Devi's story, 'Standayani (Breast Giver),' makes her presence and existence as breast feeder and a source of survival for her paralyzed husband. They grow with the strength of resisting the power politics without revolt. In this mode female struggle and resistance, feminism gets different outlook as for localized female version of identifying themselves. We need to refer the feminisms which raise the issue of gender as the basis for the organization of society; there were various debates and struggle in female movements. The basic component in every mode of female identity formation is heading forth for equality with male or for establishing the differences with men. These trends have brought female right debates rather than exploration of true identity. In a continuum of female movements we get liberal females who searched for equal rights and radical females who insisted the differences as their identity marker. In every steps of female discourse we find the attempt to get political visibility in the world.

Female experience is embodied in the female subject. As said before, women in (post) colonial cultures have been termed 'the twice colonized', both by the imperial and the male social order. As such, women and the colonized are seen as sharing an experience of oppression and subjugation that has constructed their very beings. This mode of female essence makes the way for discussing about the subaltern group. It is not identity formation in terms with cultural, ethnical or any other social marker but their own silent way of gestures, rumors and collective efforts. It could be seen as resisting and reconstructing modes where they either live with a communal mode or as simplemindedness attitude just bothering their own periphery. This paper will justify that subaltern female existence is built with more reverent stature which makes the people in power worthless.

*Breast-Giver* intrigues me because I am Indian and the story involves the Indian culture. I feel I had a better understanding of the story than some of my peers because I could identify and relate to the culture. Even though I grew up in America, my parents have taught me the values and traditions of the Indian culture and religion, and they make sure to take my siblings and me to India almost every two years to visit our relatives. I have witnessed both the traditional and modern lifestyles of the culture, and I believe I have a good understanding of the gender roles. Traditionally, the daughters of a family marry and move into their husband's house, which includes his entire family. Daughter-in-laws help their new family by managing the household and providing heirs to the family. The story says, "Each man the Holy Child and each woman the Divine Mother". The women are mothers and extend their husband's family lineage. In the families I know, in India, the wives are mostly housewives who take care of their children, elder relatives, and parents. Even with the Indian families I grew up with in my hometown, the wives graduated with college degrees and held jobs for a few years, but when they had children many of them quit their jobs and became stay at home mothers.

The class believed that Jashoda was exploited through her profession because she was a woman, and that the Haldar family was using Jashoda's body for their benefit. I, however, believe that Jashoda was exploited because of the class structure. To a certain extent, the Haldar household was using Jashoda's body, but religion and culture also helped others realize that her new profession is a positive milestone in her life. The female body has the reproductive system to nurture and rear children, and Indian women are seen mostly as mothers, by profession. Jashoda is not exploited because she is a woman; instead, she is exploited because of the class structure and the change of time and the circumstances lead to her puzzling fate.

The culture and religion help represent Jashoda's profession positively. Jashoda has a dream where the Lion seated comes to her as a midwife. At first, the interpretation of the dream is confusing; however, when Jashoda accepts her profession at the Haldar household, people in the neighborhood, including Nabin, the pilgrim guide, realize that her dream was a prophesy of her future. Astrology, dreams, and spiritual connections with the gods and goddesses are taken very seriously in the Indian culture;

therefore, the Lion seated entering Jashoda's dream as a midwife helped legitimize and highlight the importance of Jashoda's new profession. It is described in the story, "Thus even the skeptics were persuaded that the Lion seated had appeared to Jashoda as a midwife for this very reason". The Lion seated coming into her dream is a very important sign that shows she is not being subjugated or used by others because she is a woman who can rear children, but that it was her fate chosen by God. The story also mentions that "Faith in the greatness of the Lion seated was rekindled in the area and in the air of the neighborhood blew the electrical fying influence of goddess-glory". Jashoda helped revive the faith in the Lion seated. She represented a living form and the glory of the Lion seated, and because of that "everyone's devotion to Jashoda became so strong that at weddings, showers, naming, and sacred-threading they invited her and gave her the position of chief fruitful woman". Her connection with the Lion seated elevated her status and made her important in the neighborhood. Inviting Jashoda is similar to inviting the Lion seated. The maids praised her by saying, "Joshi! You came as The Goddess! You made the air of this house change". Even the children who were reared on Jashoda's milk were called the Holy Children. This helped the status of the Haldar children and her own because they were seen as the ones who suckled from the Holy Mother.

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