

Dalit Concerns in Mahasweta Devi's "Breast Stories"

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Abstract:

In her collection of short stories titled "Breast Stories," renowned Indian author and social activist Mahasweta Devi delves deeply into the lives and sufferings of underprivileged populations, especially Dalits. This study examines the ways in which Devi tackles issues related to Dalits in her stories, looking at the sociopolitical settings, how Dalit identities are portrayed, and how the stories' thematic explorations of oppression, resistance, and empowerment relate to one another.

Keywords:

Caste dominance, social injustice, women exploitation, and prejudice against gender.

Introduction:

Mahasweta Devi was an Indian Bengali fiction writer and socio-political activist who lived from 14 January 1926 to 28 July 2016. Her works include more than 100 novels and 20 collections of short stories, most of which were translated into other languages but were originally written in Bengali. Devi passed away at the age of 90, from multiple organ failure. She has won the prestigious notable awards which include: Padma Vibhushan, Padma Shri, Sahitya Akademi Award, Ramon Magsaysay Award, and Jnanpith Award.

In Dacca, British India which is currently now called Dhaka, Bangladesh, Mahasweta Devi was born into a Brahmin family. Under the pen name Jubanashwa, her father Manish Ghatak wrote novels and poetry as part of the Kallol movement. Devi's mother, Dharitri Devi, worked as a social worker and writer as well.

The "Breast Stories" is a trilogy of short story by Mahasweta Devi is evidence of her dedication to elevating the perspectives and realities of underrepresented groups in India, especially the

Dalits. Its English translation was provided by postcolonial theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Devi sheds light on the struggles of Dalit women and men for identity, dignity, and social justice by revealing the harsh reality and systemic injustices they confront via her compelling stories.

The complex challenges of Dalits are depicted clearly in Mahasweta Devi's "Breast Stories" through a variety of prisms, including economic exploitation, social exclusion, gender discrimination, and cultural erasure. The narratives highlight the connections between gender inequality and caste, showing how Dalit women are frequently subjected to double marginalization and have their bodies used as commodities.

Discussion:

The "Breast Stories" unravels about the women's exploitation, marginalization of the caste, and gender inequality. Jashoda, a protagonist of the story has suffered to its extremist level by the society. Jashoda belonged to a marginalized brahmin community. She has a husband Kangalicharan and has children too. One day Kangalicharan met with an accident and Haldar family was responsible for it. In an accident he lost his legs. The family went in extreme starvation because Kangalicharan was the only breadwinner of the family. This condition made Jashoda to be provider of the family. Hence, she visits to Haldar's house for requesting for a job in their family.

The Mistress of the Haldar family accepts her request and gave her the job of a breast feeder. She hires Jashoda for breast feeding the babies of her daughters- in-law. Hence, Jashoda consents to it and becomes professionally a milk mother. But for feeding the babies, Jashoda too had to conceive the baby, so, she does it as there was no other option to feed her own family. And side by side Kangalicharan was offered a job of a cook from the Mistress. But when the Mistress died and Jashoda's time of breast feeding the daughter's-in-law babies was over, the Haldar family mover her out of the house and she too was getting aged. Nobody was there when Jashoda was in need. Neither the Haldar's nor her own family members.

One day Jashoda was informed by the second daughter-in-law that her breast was swollen and she asked her to consult to a doctor but Jashoda denied and gradually she was suffering and enduring

the pain. At the last stage she was taken to the hospital but unfortunately the doctors couldn't save her life because she had a breast cancer. And even after her death, nobody was there. Hence, an untouchable person cremates her body.

The society has just used her for their own benefit. Jashoda has become the victim of the society. Her body was exploited till she was young but gradually as she was getting aged, the society took her back from her. Jashoda has sacrificed her life to feed her family including her husband and children. In this story, breast has not only become a symbol of nurturing the babies but also a symbol of exploitation and violence by the patriarchy and matriarchy too because the Mistress and the daughters-in-law too have used her.

The hard reality of survival for underprivileged women is depicted in this story and they have gone through a great deal of pain and adversity. Acquiring motherhood is a beautiful gift from God but here in this story motherhood has become a source of income professionally. Jashoda instead of gaining an immense reverence, she was treated as an object for the Haldar family and a source of income for her own family. The story emphasizes on the relationship between caste and gender, showing how discrimination based on caste worsens the plight of women. The stories draw attention to the terrible realities that Dalit and tribal women must face since they are marginalized in many ways.

Conclusion:

The "Breast Stories" by Mahasweta Devi is a potent critique of caste-based injustice and a monument to the tenacity of Dalit people. Devi not only captures the terrible reality that Dalits must endure through her compassionate storytelling and astute criticism, but she also advocates for social change and justice. In conclusion, this research article affirms Devi's work's ongoing importance in today's Indian discussions on caste, gender, and social justice.

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