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Articulating the Unheard: “Rethinking Subjectivity” through a Selective Study of Mahasweta Devi’s Short Stories

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Abstract:

Mahasweta Devi’s works have always projected her as a writer for the marginalised community or the subalterns. This marginalised group consists of tribal or the so-called ‘untouchable’. She protested against their plight amongst the whole human race. But, Devi’s projection of marginalisation of the tribes in India, particularly in Bengal, has somehow eclipsed the feminist aspects in her works. This paper shall focus on that very face of her writing. To do so, I shall take under consideration her three short stories namely *Draupadi*, *Breast-Giver*, and *Behind the Bodice*, which are translated into English by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak in her collected book *Breast Stories*; along with that, I would relate her own words regarding feminism as a theory, and herself being called a feminist in her exclusive interview in a YouTube channel named Global Feminisms Project U-Mich, interviewed by Anjum Katyal. Thus, finding the similar and symbolic incidents which lead her write for the society to the society.

Keywords: Feminist, Feminism, Breast, Articulating, Unheard.

Introduction

Feminism is a broad and diverse movement that seeks to protect and promote the interests of women; it is a radical notion that implies women to be human beings rather than a machinery slave. The rights of women are an integral part of human rights. Feminism works hand in hand with egalitarianism (human sexuality) to achieve the equality of the sexes in a perfect utopian state. In a patriarchal society many voiceless women abound and many have gone uncelebrated. Here, “voicelessness” denotes “articulation” that goes “unheard” and voicing means emitting light to those voices. These feminine voices can belong to the upper caste or lower caste, but their plight is more or less the same in this patriarchal society.

Now, coming to Mahasweta Devi, she is a notable Bengali writer disgusted by the modes of humiliation that the subalterns, especially the women folk, are subjected to and the cause of this ‘untouchability’ can be traced to an evil game of politics that tries to break the spirit of these men and women who fight for emancipation from slavery on behalf of their caste and clan. Hence, she embarks on a project of presenting the shocking realities that happen behind the socio-economic and political curtains, through her most powerful work *Draupadi*, although, all the three stories contain the theme of exploitation. Spivak by naming her collection *Breast Stories* hints on the fact that how a delicate organ, the beauty of a female body is ruined by the harsh blows of patriarchal society.

Draupadi tells the story of the great Bengal famine of 1943, starving people died in front of fully stocked food shops. The migrants like “Dopdi” and her husband Dulna Majhi are forced to work for wages that are below the government fixed rates of minimum wages. The target of these movements was the long-established oppression of the landless peasants and itinerant farm workers. The Indian government was able to knock down the rebellion with exceptional brutality on the Naxalites. Naxalites are the groups of people who adopted violent strategies against the feudal landlords. Draupadi or “Dopdi” and her husband became Naxalites, and their demand was to possess sufficient amount of food and access to drink water from the well of the upper class land lord which they were not allowed to touch earlier. They wanted that water not because they were fighting against racism, but, because the other water bodies were dry. Hence, we see that they revolted only for the things they needed for their mere survival. “Dopdi” was arrested and was raped brutally in police custody. Unlike other passive rape victims, Devi does not let her heroine suffer in silence. With unconquerable spirit, the naked and bleeding Draupadi faces all her rapists defiantly, in her ultimate denial of clothing herself after rape, she not only exposes the ugly face of political repression of government and feudal masters, but also the callousness of the officer called Senanayak. Thus, Devi herself narrates the following significant lines from the text in her interview:

Draupadi tar samne ese darae, ulongo, uru o jonikeshe chap chap rokto, stan duti khoto bikhoto. “E ki!” tini dhomkate jan. Draupadi aro kache ashe, komore haat rekhe darae, hashe o bole, “tor shadhaner manush Dopdi Mejhen. Banie ante bolechili ta kamon banieche dekhbi na?” “Kapor koi or kapor?” “Porche na sir. Chire feleche.” Draupadir kalo sorir aro kache ashe. Draupadi durboddho, Senanayak er kache ekebare durboddho. Ak odommo hashi te kape, haste gie or bikhoto thont theke rokto jhore ebong se rokto hater chetoe mucche fele

Draupadi kulkuli dewar moton bhishon akash chera tikhno golae bole- “Kapor ki hobe kapor? Lengta korte paris, kapor porabi kamon kore? Morod tu?” Char dike cheye Draupadi Rokto makha thutu felte Senanayaker sada bush shirt ti beche nae, ebong sekhane thutu fele bole-heta keu purush nai je laaj korbo. “Kapor more porate dibo na, ar ki korbi? Le counter kor, Le counter kor.” Draupadi dui mordito stane Senanayak ke thelte thake, ebong ei Prothom Senanayak nirastra targeter samne darate voe pae. Vison voe... (Devi1:29:56-1:31:25) (Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breast, two wounds. What is this? He is about to bark. Draupadi comes closer. Stands with hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don’t you want to see how they made me? Where are her clothes? Won’t put them on sir. Tearing them. Draupadi’s black body comes closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes blood on her palm and says in a voice that is terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation. What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak’s white shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, there isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my clothes on me. What more can you do? Come on, ‘kounter’ me come on, ‘kounter’ me? Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid.) (translation in original from the interview.)

The second story *Breast-Giver* in the collection of *Breast Stories* is the story that builds itself on the cruel ironies of caste, class and patriarchy. The protagonist Jashoda, a poor Brahmin woman became a professional wet-nurse to support her family. Jashoda’s husband met with an accident and got crippled. She started breast feeding the whole Haldar family’s grandchildren in order to earn money. She had to breed every year to make breast yield milk so that she could earn more money and make both ends meet; this means that she had to suffer endlessly. Jashoda is utilised as wet-nurse simply because she is a Brahmin. Having her amidst the family involves incredible prestige, and furthermore gives the Haldar family a strange sense of authority and strengthening. It all has started accidentally, when Jashoda is asked by the Haldar Mistress to breast feed a grandchild whose mother is sick. The lady observes that Jashoda has such full breasts and is a Kamdhenu, the legendary cow of the heaven herself while her daughters-in-law do not have quarter of that matriarch’s arrangement like Jashoda. This feeding helps the young Haldar wives remain slim and attractive, without diminishing their urge to give birth to armies of children. But, after the

demise of the Haldar Mistress, her grandchildren are swept off by the evil winds of family planning. Jashoda becomes useless not only for the Haldar family but also for her own husband Kangali. He has shifted his love to another woman named Gopali and Jashoda is reduced to the state of a mere servant. She also begins to feel something strange in her breast which is often painful, the top of her left breast has grown red and hard like a stone. The nipple has shrunk, her armpit is swollen; she is suffering from breast cancer, this is probably because she gave birth to twenty children and suckled almost fifty. After she dies, her body lies in the hospital morgue for a night because there is no one to claim it. Next day, it is cremated by an untouchable. Devi narrates in her interview a segment from the last part of the text where Jashoda was at her death bed:

Abar injection o abar nidrachonno osharota, jontrona, vison jontrona, at the expense of the human host cancer chokrabrito hochhe. Krome Joshodar bam stan fete agneogirir crater sodrisyo holo puthi gandhe kache jete kosto hoe. Sheshe ak rate Jashoda bujhlo tar pa o haat thanda hoe ashche. O bujhlo ebar mrityu ashche. Chokh khulte parlo na joshoda, kintu bujhlo keu tar haat dekhche. Chuch bidhlo bahu te. Vetore saaser kosto. Hotei hobe; kara dekhche? Tara ki tar apon keu? Jader pete dhorechilo bole dudh dae, bhaater jonno jader dudh dae, Jashodar mone holo seto bisso sangsar ke dudh dieche. Tobe ki she aeka morte pare? Je daktar roj dekhche. Je or mukhe chador tene debe, je oke trolley te tulbe, je oke shoshane namabe she, je oke chulli te debe sei dom, sobai tar dudh chele. Bishhyo songsar ke dudhe palle Jashoda hote hoe, nirbandhabe akla morte hoe, mukhe jol dite keu thake na. othocho shesh samay ta karor thakar kotha chilo. she ke? Ke she? She ke? (Devi 1:31:30-1:32:56) (Again injection and sleepy numbness. Pain, tremendous pain, the cancer is spreading at the expense of the human host. Gradually Jashoda's left breast bursts and becomes like the crater of a volcano. The smell of makes approach difficult. Finally, one night, Jashoda understood that her feet and hands were getting cold. She understood that death was coming. Jashoda couldn't open her eyes, but understood that some people were looking at her hand. A needle pricked her arm. Painful breathing inside. Has to be. Who is looking? Are these her own people? The people whom she suckled because she carried them, or those she sucked for a living? Jashoda thought, after all, she had suckled the world, could she then die alone? The doctor who sees her every day, the person who will cover her face with a sheet, will put her in a cart, will lower her at the burning ghat, the untouchable who will put her in the furnace are all milk sons. One must become Jashoda if one suckles the world. One has to die friendless, with no one left to put a bit of water in the mouth. Yet someone was supposed to

be there at the end. Who was it? It was who? Who was it?) (Translation in original from the interview)

Behind the Bodice is about a Dalit migrant labour Gangor's wrath and resistance against her exploiters. One day when she was breast-feeding her baby, a professional photographer Upin took a photo of her stunning breasts and sold the photos. From the cash he earned he gave some to Gangor as he took her photos. By observing the photographs numerous men like a police man, a worker contractor, and others start coming to her and demolished her. When Upin felt that Gangor was not safe he came for her rescue, only to find that she has already become a whore. Upin glorified her breasts by taking a photo as a tribute to its beauty, but people after seeing it ravished it through the process of its possession; just like some people take pictures of flowers, while others pluck it to possess it and, in the process, speeds up its process of decay. Devi demonstrates the process along with the shock of Upin in such beautiful lines below:

Gangor nishyash fele ghana ghana, krode khan khane golae bole "sunte pachho? Sob samay bajachhe, gaiche, pechone lelie dichhe cheleder choli ka piche choli ka piche". "Na Gangor." "Tumi o bohut harami babu... amar chatir photok uthate na? Besh dekhachhi. Kintu pocket e ja ache sob nebo." Lonthoner siluete, godamer dewale, duti chayar violent achoron. Gangor choli khule fele seta Upin ke chure mare. Dekho dekho khor, vushi, nekra dekho ki ache. Stan nei. Duti sukno vag, kuchkano chamra, akebare samatal. Agneo girir kruddyo crater duti Gangor er golae Upin ke gorom kuchobarlava churte thake. "Gang rape, kamre, chire, Gang rape... police Adalat e case abar lockup e gang rape". Upin berie ashe, tokhono Gangor chanchachhe, kotha bolche, domadom laat marche corogater tin er dewale. Upin chut te thake. Cholir pechone kono non-issue noe, pichone gang rape thake. Kono non-issue noe gang rape thake. Upin jante chaile jante parto, jante parto. (Devi 1:32:57-1:34:13)... Gangor breathes hard. Says in a voice ragged with anger, don't you hear? Constantly playing it, singing it, setting boys on me... Behind the bodice... behind the bodice... Choli ke piche... No Gangor. You are a bastard too. Sir... you took 'photoks' [photos] of my chest, eh? Ok I'll show... But I'll take everything from your pocket, In the silhouette cast by the hurricane lantern two shadows act violently. Gangor takes off her choli and throws it at Upin. Look, look, look, straw chaff, rags- look what's there. No breasts. Two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava at Upin—gang rape... biting and tearing gang rape... police... a court case... again a gang rape in the lockup... Upin comes out, Gangor is still screaming, talking, kicking the corrugated tin walls with abandon. Upin

runs. There is no non-issue behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it, Upin would have known if he had wanted to, could have known...

Theoretical Overview

Now if we listen to her interview, we will be able to relate her personal experiences and thought processes with her narratives. She starts her interview by describing her own childhood days:

Childhood was extremely happy. The family was very different, and I was the first child, I was a girl and was greatly welcomed by everyone... My father and mother never stopped me for doing anything I liked. (Devi 03:12-03:52)

So, here she starts her description calling her family “very different” or unusual, because they welcomed a girl child who is the first born in the family; moreover, they never stopped her from doing anything. Devi finds this behaviour uncommon because in this patriarchal society girl child is not welcomed. The usual thing is the boy must be the first born in the family, and girls born after him must obey strict rules and customs throughout their life. If the first born in a family is not a boy, it becomes shame to that family. In Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* Sofia Zenobia is an example of this very “shame”. Referring to the discrimination done to the female child she gave an example of a news in the paper that “a girl child was born and the new born child was left on the roads of Howrah, things like that” (Devi 1:06:42-1:06:51).

Now, if talking against the whipping norms of the patriarchal society is what we call feminism, definitely Devi is a feminist, who when asked about her life in childhood too she starts with the difference between her family with the patriarchal society. This society want girls to be polite, and submissive and always at the second place to men.

One of the most important characteristics a woman must have is to become a good mother and a devoted wife. Devi’s Jashoda is such a woman, she becomes a wet-nurse for which she had to breed every year just to keep her breasts fertile to earn money for her husband and children, but, when Jashoda suffers she suffers alone. Devi depicts in this story that women like Jashoda dies a miserable death after sacrificing her whole life for others. This is what this society pays as a tribute to these women.

During her childhood she had to live in different places due to her father’s transferable job. In the interview she said that in Midnapur she first met tribal people:

At that what we found you know that the Santals, generally people were not very friendly to them. Santals are not de-notified tribes, actually they are most sophisticated and very advanced, all the time I said. Somehow, police would stump cases on them and then they would have to go and report at the police station every evening. It was difficult for them. And they worked on day wage in the government quarters they serve there. That also policy insists. (Devi 07:50-08:28)

Hence, we see that from the very beginning of her life she had experienced the pains of the lower caste people. She also belonged to the upper class, but she found her family being supportive and protective towards those helpless people and she continued to do so later through her writings, her picturization of their struggle in her fictional works. She not only empathises with them but also respects them to be more civilised than the upper classes. She said that her mother and grandmother wrote for the cause of women and hence, “whatever I do now is very natural. Had I not done, it would be very unusual and rather betraying them.” In this interview, at a particular point she talked about her maternal family. She said:

Also, on our ancestral village atleast on our mother’s side was very patriotic. There was one Rajen Raini who worked with Bhagat Singh and Kakori conspiracy case he was hanged. Then Mohit Moitro another cousin of my mother, he died in Andaman jails, because they were on hunger strike, they tried to force feed them... he died because of that. (Devi 05:47- 06:30)

During the national freedom struggle, before the independence, long before that, women have been participants, they came out, they broke all the barriers, and came out. One remembers clearly they Bengal partition, in which Tagore and everyone, when Curzon wanted to participation Bengal, not only women came out, all the sex workers as we call them today, might call them prostitutes, they are not ashamed for the word prostitutes, all of them came out, supported, did so much that it was very very encouraging. (Devi 1:24:43-1:25:15)

Right from the childhood she has found her family fighting for the cause of the right, this struggle for the nation has become the struggle for the community, the triple marginalised women in terms of caste, class and gender. Hence, Draupadi’s struggle becomes the main theme accompanied by a hint of her husband’s too. By voicing Draupadi both the struggles- one against classism and the other against patriarchy are objectified. She not only

empathises them, but also respects them to be more civilised than the upper class. She says, in the tribal people have great respect to their women which to so-called reputed society cannot give to their women. There is no discrimination of man and women in the lower caste people, the girl child is very much welcomed there. Their houses were cleaner than ours. Moreover, they use a slow roasting no oil cooking process using bamboo sticks, which is very scientific and most healthy way of cooking. Once, a child was caught on fire and her grandfather cuts a fowl and put the blood onto her. Though primarily it seems weird and pathetic but later it was found the girl not only survived but also there was not a single scar on her whole body. So, the activity though seems to be primitive must have strong scientific reason behind that.

Gradually she comes to a point when she talked about her experience as a writer. She said:

I was instantly known as a writer, don’t think there was no resistance, plenty of resistance... It is nothing, just romanticism, no truth in it... established Bengali writers tell me “you see her entries through the backdoor with her father’s influence.” ... “I will see how you will write, you will not able to write... (Devi 33:34-33:48)

So, these kinds of resistances, bantering remarks made her more fertile towards her feminist writings. Now coming directly to the question of being called herself a feminist or not it was asked-“Some people think that you write about women more. What do you think about that?”(Devi 1:05:58-1:06:00). Devi answered:

I tried to write about the entire class... Women suffer most because they have a body. But also, women suffering peculiarly is continuing for thousands of years. It starts from home it starts from outside when she is an adolescence, she is just growing up... it’s a continuous process. You remember the story *Chinta*? Chinta had to pay such a price, she had to sell both her daughters. She had to pay such a price because after being widowed she lived with another man, that’s why. These things happen even in their society- a man goes and marries another girl, brings her home nothing... (Devi 1:06:04-1:07:35)

Conclusion

When she is asked about her idea on feminism, she simply avoids any theoretical title to be added to her identity, but at the same time she says a lot of things which hints that she just don’t acknowledge the title because nobody can hold it properly, but she do acknowledge the theory. What she says is:

Might I answer like this... In my life time I have not read Marx or Lenin or Marxism anyone, but from my writings people bring out Mao... If from my writing feminism oozes out, I have nothing to do with it. Consciously I wrote about the entire society and of course women... wrote about such women about whom no one writes... There are many acts so that women can be redressed but they are not within their grasp... When I say women, I don't mean the tribal alone, I don't mean the middleclass and upper-class alone though abusement goes there also... These days where are the feminists? These days there are the advertisements women are again shown as their soul existence is "chulha-chakki-bartan" there she is limited. She may be a doctor; she may belong to a corporate sector; but ultimately cooking vegetable khana for the entire family. She has to be a "bahu" ... or life-giving mother... women who are holding seminars and things, I might go and ask them, I should I think, that what do you actually, have you ever tried to help any woman in distress... After that comes feminism. What is feminism? I don't know anything about it, as I don't know anything about the theories. I write what I feel like, there it begins and there it ends. It's for the readers to judge it. (Devi 1:20:19-1:23:59)

Now, I being a reader, I would like to call her as the pioneer of "classified feminism" (self- coined term) or feminism based on social classification. Devi has clearly picturised that a woman belonging to whatever class, be it upper class, or middle class, or lower class; she has to suffer indistinctively for being a woman. Hence, Jashoda suffers for being a Brahmin, Draupadi was victimised for being a Dalit woman, and Gangor for being a migrant labour. And of course, she suffers in terms of her body, her soul is victimised only through torturing her body. As she always states that it is the duty of a writer to write about his or her own history, or history of the time they belonged to, she very clearly portrayed history of women from ages till the day and the history is more or less the same throughout time.

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