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Breast-giver: The Essence of a Woman

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The present paper attempts to examine the story, 'Breast-giver' by Mahasweta Devi from the existentialist point of view. The different qualities and stereotypical roles a woman is generally associated with in the Indian context are portrayed through the various female characters in the story. The paper analyses how the forces of religion, history, myth and patriarchy conspire together in the socio-economic sphere to attribute meaning and essence to the existence of a woman. It also presents a critical study of the women in the story and how they practice patriarchy unconsciously and intensify their marginalization.

Introduction

"Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards.", says Jean Paul Sartre in his famous lecture, 'Existentialism is a humanism', delivered primarily to defend existentialism against a number of charges put forward by critics who called it to be a philosophy of inaction. (28) 'Existence precedes essence', this is the main contention of Sartre's philosophy of existentialism. Existence implies the state of being while essence defines and qualifies the existence.

Breast-Giver opens with the narrator introducing Jashoda, the protagonist:

'Jashoda doesn't remember if her aunt was kind or unkind. It was as if she were Kangalicharan's wife from birth, the mother of 20 children, living or dead, counted on her fingers.'" (Devi: 39)

Jashoda in the story is described as a typical Indian mother and wife who knows nothing except her husband and children. She does not realize that she is an individual: a woman; what she knows is that she is the Divine Mother whose capacious bosoms become her way of life. Being a woman who is unaware of her existence and independence, she is throughout her life exploited and oppressed by different people at different points of time. She is exploited by her husband Kangalicharan at home who seeks pleasure out of her. Her ability to reproduce turns her into a machine, "a divine engine" which continuously makes babies, rears them, nurtures them and manages the household. After her husband's accident, Devi brings in the story the twist of the reversal of the stereotypical gendered roles in a society. The domestic mother now becomes the producer and reproducer simultaneously while the husband reduces into a domestic cook. She becomes a professional mother and a mid-wife in the big and affluent Haldar family. There, her job is to feed the numerous infants of the Haldar house with her never-exhausting milk, "like a cow". (Devi: 52)

Time passes by. 30 years and 17 pregnancies- the essence of motherhood negates her existence, her being, and her individuality. She is never an individual, always pregnant. She is never alone, always accompanied by a baby at breasts. But with decades, the air of Haldar family shows change. The newer generations split, refuse to give birth to so many children and the value of the perpetual Mother sinks down. She is no more required. The way an un-demanded commodity has to vacate the market, a non-profit bearing shop has to shut-down; Jashoda also is turned down by the Haldars. At the same time, her husband also does not require her as she is no more of any use to him, nor do her children need her. She is left alone, after being sucked for around 35 years; her breasts develop cancer and betray her. Finally, her existence betrays her.

Mahasweta Devi pens down the tragic tale of Jashoda and brings out the marginalized state of women in the society. Feminism is one of the dominant underlying themes of the story and Devi sketches the story with other female characters like the other servants of the Haldar home, the Mistress, the Haldar wives and Golapi all of whom exploit and marginalize Jashoda and act as agents of patriarchy in society.

The image of the Goddess- the Lionseated and the dreams of the people play a major role in intensifying the essence and identity of Jashoda. Along with it Devi also brings in class issues, poverty, illiteracy, and patriarchy which all contribute in giving a meaning to Jashoda's death but not to her existence.

The paper explores the diverse issues underpinned in the story and attempts to outline the journey of an individual from a woman to becoming a breast-giver.

Patriarchy and Women

Jashoda is characterized as “fully Indian woman, whose unreasonable, unreasoning and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness, have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati-Savitri-Sita through Nirupa roy and Chand Osmani.” (Devi 45).

Devi takes a flight from the Indian mythological and religious texts to the world of cinema and establishes the protagonist as the ideal woman. She is further-more qualified as an Indian woman owing to the Indian tradition and myth. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, however, identifies a post-colonial angle to it and proposes India a parallel of Jashoda. She writes, “Like all protagonists, India is a mother-by-hire. All classes of people, the post-war rich, the ideologues, the indigenous bureaucracy, the diasporics, the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her.” (77) The Europeans gazed at India and reproduced orientalized portrayals of the country in order to justify their project enlightenment and modernization. In the story, Jashoda like India is constantly gazed by different people and an enchanting narrative is circulated concerning Jashoda and her magical, mystic, and divine bosoms.

The Mistress of the Haldar house refers to Jashoda as the “legendary cow of fulfillment”, while the second son calls her the “divine engine” (Devi 49). She is the cow which can milk the innumerable Haldar sons and she is the divine engine which can preserve the health and beauty of the Haldar daughter-in-laws while preventing their husbands to get attracted to female servants and other ladies. All the ladies of the Haldar house utilize the Brahman lady for their profit and exploit her.

Jashoda gives pleasure to her husband, bears his children and rears the multiple infants of the big house. And she is proud of her breasts which run her house. She compares a woman to a tree and questions, “Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit?” (Devi 50). This is her way of giving meaning to her existence and she is undoubtedly responsible for her oppression and her tragic fate.

Jashoda sticks to her traditional ideology. She is confident that the Goddess has made women to continue progeny and she is proud of herself. She scorns all the women of the Haldar family who are not able to feed their own kids. She is aware and fearful of the new wind of civilization and liberalization which might lend voice to the marginalized: “The moment wife, or mother, or sister reads that paper, he would say, She’ll say ‘I’m a woman, not a sister, not a wife.’” (Devi 54)

Jashoda is no more required in the Haldar house, the eldest daughter-in-law after the death of the Mistress asks Jashoda to leave and Kangali also does not require her dried bosoms now. The essence of the Mother in Jashoda loses its grip and she reduces to a servant at whom Basini also shouts.

Golapi also indirectly exploits Jashoda by misusing her absence in Kangali’s life and looting the latter of all his wealth under the guise of pleasure.

The opening sections of the story describe an incident concerning the afternoon-whims of the youngest son of the Haldar house. He attacked the attractive cook driven by lust but the cook enjoyed, let him do what he wanted to and she was happy thinking that she managed to attract the boy. Women not only submit to patriarchy but they dominantly contribute to it and become the cause for their exploitation.

All the women of the Haldar household are marginalized as they are used for their beauty. And all of them further exploit the protagonist. In fact all women in the story show a passive and psychological acceptance of patriarchy. Consciously and unconsciously, all the women in the story marginalize, oppress and exploit other women.

Class and Mythology

Existential philosophy stands on the pillar of freedom and responsibility. Sartre says that in the end, one is always responsible for what one is made of. Existence comes before essence and there is no pre-determined essence to being a male or female. These contentions follow the atheistic tendencies of Nietzsche who said God is dead. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre brings

out the binary distinction between unconscious being (en-soi, being-in-itself) and conscious being (pour soi, being-for-itself). The former is concrete, unaware of itself and lacks the ability to change; while the latter although incomplete, is conscious of its consciousness. For Sartre, this undefined, undetermined nature of “for-itself” is what defines human. Humans lack a predetermined essence and therefore, they are forced to create essence themselves from nothingness. Their freedom is essential and the choice they make is necessary. Therefore, the responsibility of the choice made is also upon the humans.

Devi, however lands the protagonist in the world of superstitions and miracles in the form of dreams. The tragic tale of Jashoda showcases how the illusion of mythology and class imprison her to meet her death. Jashoda is the legendary Cow, the Mother Earth and the Mother Goddess. Jashoda’s existence gets the essence of professional mother following the dream in which the Lionseated comes as a mid-wife. Haldar Babu interprets the dream as, “She creates as mother, and preserves as mid-wife.” (Devi 42). With this dream initiates her journey of exploitation. Nabin dreams of Jashoda appearing in his dream as the Lionseated and Jashoda’s identity is transformed. She becomes the Mother Goddess. Her profession is not her choice, it is attributed as: “All is the Lionseated’s will.” (53)

The death of the Mistress is also attributed to the Lionseated turning her back. Devi breaks the mythological illusion using Jashoda’s voice who confronts Nabin and blames him for all that happened with the Mistress and with her. It is Nabin who turns the image back due to fight over money during Puja. And, it is he who reinstates the idol in the right way after the financial settlement. With this revelation made by the iconic character, it is evident that all that has happened is not to be blamed upon the Goddess.

Abandonment and loneliness

Abandonment, according to Sartre, implies abandonment by God. The metaphorical use of the word stresses the sense of loss caused by the realization that there is no God on whom we can blame upon, or who can provide a guarantee of our moral choices. In the story, after Jashoda realizes the futility of her dream and the manipulation of Nabin in turning the Goddess back, she is forced into a state of mental anguish and agony where she can only blame her own self for her painful destiny. It is not only the Lionseated who abandons her, she is abandoned by everyone. She finally abandons her being which can be seen as a tendency of suicide due to intense existential crisis.

The Death of the Goddess

In the end, Jashoda is not able to believe that she, in whom the Goddess resided, can any disease germinate. She realizes that the essence and the meaning given to her life by the dreams, by her socio-economic condition, by the society and her home were all a façade. She is the one who is responsible for all the choices she made in her life. Her entire existence for which she exploited herself is meaningless and her essence gave meaning to her life is now all undone with her death

making it even more meaningless. Devi ends the story with the most ironic comment which hammers the existential beliefs of abandonment, absurdity and meaninglessness of life:

“Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda’s death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone.” (Devi 74)

Conclusion

Devi brings out the interrelationship between the socio-cultural-religious and economic spheres of the society. The variables of class, power and superstitions together form a complex web which determines the essence of the woman in society. The choice made is individual and subjective but religion plays the role of a shield on which responsibility can be shifted. Women themselves marginalize, suppress and oppress other women and worship patriarchy. Jashoda’s lifeless body highlights the absurdity of life, choices made in life, and echo the absurdity of death which undoes everything Jashoda earned and strove for in her life at the cost of her life. The lifeless body of the Brahmin once worshipped as the Mother Goddess and the Divine Cow is ultimately brought to dust by an untouchable. This is the point where Devi silently thrashes the way of the world and makes a solid statement which deconstructs every meaning and echoes the underlying absurdity of life.

Devi’s protagonist Jashoda is not born a woman, she is made a woman and she essentially chooses to remain an ideal Indian woman reflecting the Divine Goddess and allowing herself to be oppressed; in the end, she pays the price of her choice because, “When a mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone.” (Devi 74)

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