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SOCIO-POLITICAL AND FEMINIST ISSUES IN THE SELECT WORKS OF  
MAHASWETA DEVI

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to bring out the social and political issues faced by women in the collection of short stories by the eminent feminist writer – Mahasweta Devi. The primary text for this project is *Breast Stories* which is composed of three short stories *Draupadi*, *Breast Giver* and *Behind the Bodice* that deals with the same issues. The project contains chapter – 1 Introduction about the subaltern studies and the author Mahasweta Devi. The chapter 2 deals with study of short story *Draupadi* that traces then life of tribes and how Devi has strongly emphasized on the feminist issue, having Indian mythology as a medium of narration. The chapter 3 *Breast Giver* focuses the decolonization of India and expands the thematic of the women's physical organ breast as political body. How women are treated as a commodity in the society is examined in the short story *Behind the bodice* in chapter 4. This project aims to study the socio- political context and gender based violence in the dynamics of caste that signifies the commercialization of breast in order to examine how women are often exploited by men and to utilize themselves in their uncovered life struggles to fight poverty.

**Keywords:** Women, Gender, Violence, Subaltern, Decolonization, Commoditization.

Introduction

Men and women co-exist in this society for the growth and development of the nation and share equal responsibilities in everything they do but at the same time gender difference occurs even in the family. Females play an important role in the reproduction process and still they are labeled as the second sex or the weaker sex. According to De Beauvoir, humanity is man and man defines woman and not by herself. He says "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees: thus she is called the sex. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other" (16).

Subaltern in terms of gender is relevant to deal deep into the roles of women in the society. The Indian cultural scenario, the historiography failed to represent the contribution of women towards the materialization of Indian independence. It would be now difficult to retrieve the voice of the subaltern or trace

the tyrannical process behind the subaltern classes as it is difficult to trace the history of subaltern. Years back women had a very minimal role to play in the society as they were not allowed to think independently. They are pleased to live with their men carry out a lot of household duties that come under the category of unpaid labor.

Sociology, at the same time concerned with and produced by modernity. It is constructed by itself as a discipline and modernity. Women's success was built on work which compliments rather than competes with men.

Across the world, regardless of income, age or education women are subjected to physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence. Experience of violence can lead to long term physical, mental and emotional health problem. The most of the violence against woman lead to death.

Feminism brings many things to philosophy including not only a variety of particular moral and political claims, but ways of asking and answering questions, critiques of mainstream philosophical views and methods, and new topics of inquiry. Feminist contributions to and interventions in mainstream philosophical debates are covered in entries under Feminist interventions. Entries covered under the rubric Feminism, topics concern philosophical issues that arise as feminists articulate accounts of sexism, critique sexist social and cultural practices, and develop alternative visions of a just world. In short, they are philosophical topics that arise within feminism.

Although there are many different and sometimes conflicting approaches to feminist philosophy, it is instructive to begin by asking what, if anything, feminists as a group are committed to. Considering some of the controversies over what feminism are provides a springboard for seeing how feminist commitments generate a host of philosophical topics, especially as those commitments confront the world as we know it.

The term 'feminism' has many different uses and its meanings are often contested. For example, some writers use the term 'feminism' to refer to a historically specific political movement in the US and Europe; other writers use it to refer to the belief that there are injustices against women, though there is no consensus on the exact list of these injustices. The main goal here will be to sketch some of the central uses of the term that are most relevant to those interested in contemporary feminist philosophy.

In the mid-1800's the term 'feminism' was used to refer to the qualities of females and it was not until after the First International Women's Conference in Paris in 1892 that the term, following the French term *féministe*, was used regularly in English for a belief in and advocacy of equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes. Some feminists trace the origins of the term feminism in English as rooted in the movement in Europe and the US beginning with the mobilization for suffrage during the late 19th and early 20th century and refer to this movement as First Wave feminism. Those who employ this history often depict feminist as waning between the two world wars, to be revived in the late 1960's and early 1970's as what they label Second Wave feminism. More recently, transformations of feminism in the past decade have been referred to as Third Wave feminism.

However, other feminist scholars object to identifying feminism with these particular moments of political activism, on the grounds that doing so eclipses the fact that there has been resistance to male domination that should be considered feminist throughout history and across cultures: i.e., feminism is not confined to a few (White) women in the West over the past century or so. Moreover, even considering only relatively recent efforts to resist male domination in Europe and the US, the emphasis on First and Second Wave feminism ignores the ongoing resistance to male domination between the 1920's and 1960's and the resistance outside mainstream politics, particularly by women of color and working-class women.

Feminism, as liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, and that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice. (hooks 1989, 22)

On hooks' account, the defining characteristic that distinguishes feminism from other liberation struggles is its concern with sexism. Unlike many feminist comrades, I believe women and men must share a

common understanding--a basic knowledge of what feminism is--if it is ever to be a powerful mass-based political movement. In *Feminist Theory: from margin to center*. Defining feminism broadly as a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression would enable us to have a common political goal. Sharing a common goal does not imply that women and men will not have radically divergent perspectives on how that goal might be reached. (hooks 1989, 23)

What makes a particular form of oppression sexist seems to be not just that it harms women, but that someone is subject to this form of oppression specifically because she is (or at least appears to be) a woman. Racial oppression harms women, but racial oppression (by itself) doesn't harm them because they are women, it harms them because they are (or appear to be) members of a particular race. The suggestion that sexist oppression consists in oppression to which one is subject by virtue of being or appearing to be a woman provides us at least the beginnings of an analytical tool for distinguishing subordinating structures that happen to affect some or even all women from those that are more specifically sexist. But problems and unclarity remain.

Mahasweta Devi (*mahaashbetaa debi*) was born in 1926 at Dhaka, Bangladesh in a family of litterateurs and social workers. Manish Ghatak, her father, was a poet and a novelist and her mother, Dharitri Devi was a social worker and also a writer. Mahasweta started her schooling in Dhaka, but after the partition, she moved with her family into West Bengal in India. She completed her high school and the bachelor's degree (English Hons.) at Visva-Bharati, in Shantiniketan (the school founded by Rabindranath Tagore). Thereafter she earned an M.A. in English from the Calcutta University.

Mahasweta Devi's work uniquely stands out in the sea of popular fiction of this day. Her writing has little to do with the petty everyday idiosyncrasies of the privileged; she shuns the needless or the unnecessary. In her matter-of-fact no-rhetoric writing one sees no romanticism in the plight of women who are most directly and drastically affected by the patriarchy. Her characters are from the bottom of the socio-economic class; they are real, multi-dimensional, and well-formed. To Mahasweta Devi, they are the needful.

Although it was originally written in Bengali, *Breast Stories* was translated into English by feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1997. The three stories are titled: *Draupadi*, *Behind the Bodice*, and *Breast Giver*. They have one connecting thread – the breast, a metaphor for the exploitation of women from marginalized communities.

Devi has brilliantly portrayed the role of Dopdi, Jasodha and Gangor how they were exploited in the social and political context using the Indian mythology as new way of expressing feminism. The characters are portrayed in different ways as in the story *Draupadi*, Dopdi being the victim has shown as a heroine who made her nakedness as a weapon. The irony of the title *Draupadi* is that the character Draupadi in Mahabharatham was saved by Krishna whereas Dopdi was physically tortured by the police to draw the information about the murders. The role of Police in the society is to guard the people. The alienation of untouchables without giving them proper water supply has led Dopdi and her Husband to indulge into criminal activities.

*Breast Giver* traces the decolonization of India, Jashoda, the protagonist after her husband is crippled becomes the wet nurse. She was forced by her husband and her financial circumstances to give birth over and over again to keep the milk flowing. The money she earned by nursing the babies of the rich people helped her to feed her family till she was affected by breast cancer. It focuses on women's labour, domesticity and motherhood, tracked in the colonization underlying cruelty, labour, gender, and power.

In the story *Behind the bodice*, Upin is an ace-photographer who, along with his friend, Ujan, and wife, Shital Mallya, goes to the places, Jharoa and Seopura in between which dwells a migrant labourer, Gangor. His pictures appear in the national press. Devi describes the woman with high breast who feeds the baby. The photograph of the woman is caught and she demands some money from him which shocks the man. Gangor looks dirty and filthy. Her husband is a dweller of jail who collects money from her at night. Gangor's photograph invites a disaster to her life. After some days Gangor is found missing. Gangor was harassed by the police and drinks the country brewed wine. When Upin goes seeking after Gangor, he finds many people dying of adulterated water and the rest of them playing the song, Choli ke piche. When Gangor is discovered at the

end, she is found to be prostitute. The photography of Upin has been instrumental for the spoiled life of Gangor, who was gang raped.

#### **Conclusion**

This project focuses on the socio- political context and gender based violence in the dynamics of caste that signifies the commercialization of breast in order to examine how women are often exploited by men and to utilize themselves in their uncovered life struggles to fight poverty. The natives and the rural people are continuously shown as being the targeted by the violence of the rich upper castes, how women are treated as an object that is used, discarded and forgotten. The motives of these common people are not triggered and driven by power but by the perspective of living their life to its fullest. Hence Devi cleverly makes a shift in the general perspective about the subaltern women. She represents them as strong and self-confident women who do not believe in the ideology of violence, death, and destruction. Devi's characters bounce back at the situation from being a victim to being a heroine though they are marginalized in the society.

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