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Research Article

“A Mother”! Myths And Realities Pertaining To “Motherhood” In Mahasweta Devi’s “Breast-Giver”

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ABSTRACT

In Indian culture, Vedas and Upanishads take a prominent place and are considered as ancient literature. These ancient scriptures teach us the concept of “MATRI DEVO BHAVA” (Mother as God) and consider Mothers as the source of power and ought to be given utmost respect. This concept is theoretically believed and idealized in Indian religion but when it comes to reality and lived experiences and especially in Indian context we are made to rethink and believe the real scene behind it. Similarly, in Devi’s *Breast-Giver* (1997) the absurdity behind this myth seems prominent. The common myth related to motherhood in our society is that it’s a mother duty to raise her child in best possible manner, for her child and family it’s her duty to sacrifice her career and thought but when she needs her family no one is there for her. A mother who takes rebirth during the delivery of her child, and also bears lots of pain to raise her child but as the child becomes independent she is excluded from her family and no one is there for her to support her or to look after her. It’s a great myth of all Indian woman life that in words they are considered as God but in reality they are the excluded member of a family. In her writings, subaltern predicaments occupy a central position in general and the women in the particular. “Breast-Giver” is originally written in Bengali (1977) and has been translated into English (1997) by a feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak. In the present story, the writer brings in the predicament of a woman who sacrifices her life for bringing up the family as the bread winner and was left alone by her family at her last stage of life. “*Breast-Giver*” displays how female body part can be used to fulfill the existential demand at the cost of life of Jashoda. It needs an understanding of how one becomes a mother and the cruel realities behind the becoming. The present paper interprets the myth related to motherhood and women in our culture. It focuses on the contrast relation of women position to the actual situation in our society. It shows that how the life of a woman differs from the ancient literature and in words a mother and a woman is given the highest respect but in reality they are just a feminine object of this patriarchal society.

Keywords- *Feminine object, mother, motherhood, myth, patriarchal, realities*

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Introduction

“Ya Devi sarva bhuteshu
Shakti rupena samstitha
Namastasye Namastasye
Namastasye Namamah.
Ya Devi sarva bhuteshu
Matri rupena samstitha
Namastasye Namastasye

Namastasye Namamah.”(Shri Durga stotam chandi path)

To that Devi who is all being is an abiding in the form of mother, salutation to her. To that Devi who in all being is abiding in the form of original cause of everything, salutation to her. To that Devi who in all being is abiding in the form of power, salutation to her. With this beautiful idea I would like to state that, in

India, motherhood is a subject of apotheosis (Bhattacharya, 1990). The idea *Matri Devo Bhavo*, meaning mother is a goddess (Taitariya Upanishad) shows high adoration for mothers. A woman as a mother in Indian society is a subject of great respect. The mother is considered an embodiment of the divine mother goddess, but in Indian social structure, a woman has less value outside of marriage and motherhood. It is clearly mentioned by Devi in *Breast- Giver* (pg, 34). "She (Jashoda) was Kalicharan's wife from birth, the mother of 20 children, living or dead, counted on her fingers".

In this story Jashoda is known as Kalicharan's wife, mother and a wet nurse. She doesn't have her identity. The question arises here – as a personified Goddess, is she equally valued in her real life and free to make her procreative choices as an independent self? If we talk about Jashoda she is a mother, a personified goddess in the view of scriptures but in reality she is just an ordinary woman who blindly obey her husband, without knowing whether he is right or wrong. She doesn't have her own identity in the society she is known as Kalicharan's wife, not by her name Jashoda. As it is mentioned in Chandi path that a woman is the source of all power and energy she is the creator of everything but in reality if we take an example of Jashoda, her situation is completely different she is not a respected member of her family, she is just a second option of her family who has to earn for her family. It's the point to consider that how mythology perpetuates the idea and influences her life even today. Simon de Beauvoir declares in her seminal text, *The second sex*, that "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth" (pg. 143) represents the uneven power relationship between men and women in a patriarchal society. Indian society is not an exception to it! In India, the ideal woman is portrayed as the mother in popular culture. In many ancient religious scriptures, literature, mythologies, folk art, and, culture, women are highly adorned and glorified as the personification of the divine mother goddess who facilitates man in the sacred act of procreation. Goddess are regarded as the utmost source of power and energy, they are the cause of everything present in the nature. All the personification and respect of women are myth for them because in reality they are just an object for the men. In the religious texts women are considered as the source of power and energy but in the society they are considered to be "a helpless woman", a woman who can't stand alone, and a woman who can't survive her life alone, she needs the hands of a powerful man who can protect her. In the story "*Breast- Giver*", Jashoda, a Brahmin woman starts to work as a wet nurse at the house of her husband's master when her husband lost his leg and became unable to work and earn for his family. Here Jashoda is second option in the family who can earn for the family not first. Jashoda is not treated as goddess but as an object of her husband. "Jashoda doesn't remember at all when there was no child in her womb, when she doesn't faint in the

morning, when kangali's body didn't drill her body like a geologist in a darkness lit only by an oil lamp."(Pg-34) Here Jashoda body is used as an object of the patriarchal society. It is the harsh reality of the women in our society that it's the dharma of a wife to fulfill all her husband's desire whether willingly or unwillingly. They are made for men's pleasure. Devi has also mentioned this issue in her work as "coming home in the afternoon, kangalicharan was thinking of his imminent pleasure and tasting paradise at the thought of his wife's large round breasts".(pg-36). For haldar's son motherhood was not a gift of god or the divine process of a woman for creating a new creation it's just a way to get imminent pleasure. "The almanac approves of the taking of a wife almost every month of the year; the birth rooms in a row on the ground floor of the Mistress's house are hardly ever empty. The Lady Doctor and Sarala the midwife never leave house. The Mistress has six daughters. They too breed every year and a half. So there is a constant epidemic of blanket-quilt-feeding spoon-bottle-oilcloth-Johnson's baby powder-bathing basin. (Pg-43)." Devi has clearly portrays an image of a common woman of our Indian society, in our society giving birth to a child is not a big deal , mothers are not appreciated for this painful period rather it is said that after becoming a mother their life is being completed. To bear a child in their womb is their one and only one responsibility. It's a biggest myth of our society that a woman life worthless if she is not able to give birth to a child. In reality mothers are not the divine goddess, they are just an ordinary human being who are oppressed by the patriarchal society.

As Simone de Beauvoir said, "one is not born a woman, but becomes one". It's a perfect quote for all Indian women as Devi has also mentioned that- such is the power of the Indian soil that all women turn into mothers (pg-42). If some people deny the thought that woman are just Divine mother and wish to slap current posters to the effect of the ' eternal she' –' Monalisa'- 'La passioaria'- ' Simone de Beauvoir' ,etc.' over the old ones and look at women that they are , after all, Indian cubs. It is notable that the educated babus desire all this from women outside the home. When they cross the threshold they want the Divine Mothers in the words and conduct of the revolutionary ladies.

Devi has described the image of an ordinary woman in the form of Jashoda as- Jashoda is fully an 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 Osman. The creeps of the world understand by seeing such women that the old Indian tradition is still flowing free- they understand that it was with such women in mind that the following aphorisms have been composed- '

A female's life hangs on like turtle's '- ' her heart breaks but no words is uttered'- ' the woman will burn, her ashes will fly/only then will we sing her/ praise on high(pg-42). Some myth includes that motherhood is

easy and natural, mothers should be perfect and have all the answers, mothers can do everything alone and being a mother means sacrificing one's needs but the reality is that motherhood is not easy and doesn't come naturally to everyone. As Devi has mentioned-

"You are a faithful wife, a goddess. You will yourself be pregnant, be filled with a child, rear it your breast, isn't this why Mother came to you as a midwife"? It shows the thought of our society are woman are born to rear child. God has created woman to be a mother and a care taker of her family. They also think that it's a painless process to give birth to a child. As Jashoda was asked- "Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit?"

In the chapter a song is sung wholeheartedly, Is a Mother so cheaply made? Not just by dropping a babe! (46)

This song gives the description of Indian woman's significance in term of motherhood. Indeed, from childhood woman is repeatedly told she is made to bear children, and the praises of motherhood are sung (Beauvoir 605). It is the greatest joy for the woman to possess motherhood. How much ever joyful but it is painful too. Motherhood is a phase where lots of change takes place in a woman body both physically and emotionally. Lots of hormonal changes take place. It's a phase where a woman takes a new birth and becomes a mother. It's a transitional period of their life, a phase where they need the full support of their family and loved ones but in reality all the pros and cons of being a mother is endured by her alone. It's a common myth that bearing a child is the easiest deed for a woman. It's a harsh destiny for a woman that she take all the trouble to bear a child for nine month in her womb , she goes through all the favorable and adverse condition for her child. She nurtures her child with her own blood. As an image of a mother is created in our society is shown in the story by Devi-

"Mother meant hair in a huge topknot, blindingly white clothes, and a strong personality."(Pg-67)

In our scriptures it is that mother is a divine Goddess, we should respect her, and we cannot repay the debts of our mother. All this ideas and thought are just meant for saying because in reality there is no identity of a mother, in her childhood she is known by her father's name after marriage she becomes someone wife and after giving birth to a child she becomes a mother. Mothers, who sacrifice her interests, career, sleep and even herself but in return she gets nothing. As in case of Jashoda, when her family need the financial support she became a wet nurse to earn bread and butter for her husband and children. To earn she continuously tortured her body by bearing 20 children and feeding 50 children in total. She became the mother of 50 children but when she was suffering from breast cancer no one was there to look after her not even her husband kangali. As kangalichan said, I don't want to see your face again. Buzz off!(pg-53). Jashoda understood that her usefulness has ended not only in the Haldar's house but also for Kangali and her children. (53). Jashoda starts to realize her situation. She understands that ".....good fortune was her ability to bear children. All this misfortune happened to her as soon as that

vanished."(56). It is human nature to feel an inappropriate vanity as one rise, yet not to feel the surrender of 'let me learn to bite the dust since I'm down' as one falls. As a result one makes demand for worthless things in old way and gets kicked by the weak. (56).

Jashoda was used by the people around her in a blindfold consciousness. She was not the divine mother or the source of power and the reason behind everything in the world, as mentioned in our Vedas the reality is that she is just a feminine object for male, her body, and her breasts were the objects of control for society. As Foucault says:

.....the object of the control: it was not or was no longer the signifying elements of behavior or the language of the body, but the economy, the efficiency of movements, their internal organization; constraint bears upon the forces rather than upon the signs; the only truly important ceremony is that of exercise.(Foucault,5,1995)

Jashoda, mother of 20 children and milk mother of 30 children was now lying alone on her death-bed in the hospital. Neither a single child nor her husband was there for her. She was suffering from breast cancer because excessively she has feed the children only to earn for family and children. To earn for her family she became the wet nurse and sacrificed her health for them, but at the last stage of her life she was left all alone. It's the cruel reality of our society that a mother who sacrifices everything for her family doesn't receive anything in return not even the care from her family. As Devi has beautifully depicted

"Jashoda understood that her feet and hands were getting cold. She understood that death was coming. Jashoda couldn't open her, but she understood that some people were looking at her hand. Who is looking? Are they her own people? The people whom she suckled because she carried them, or those she suckled for a living? Jashoda thought, after all, she had suckled the world, could she then die alone? The doctor will cover her face with a sheet, will put her on a cart, will lower her at the burning ghat, the untouchable will put her in the furnace. (68)

In our scriptures it is believed that "Mother is the first god, uske charno me charo daam hai" but this idea is not significant in our society as we can see in the story that Jashoda a mother who is at the last stage of her life, wants to see her family and sons but couldn't as she has become useless for them. She is no longer a mother for them. She has become such a burden for them that when she died in the hospital and they were called on the phone, the phone didn't ring. They had disconnected their phone at night.

"Jashoda died friendless, with no one left to put a bit of water in the mouth. Jashoda Devi, Hindu female, lay in the morgue in the usual way, went to the burning ghat in a van, and was burnt. She was cremated by an untouchable. (69)

This is the harsh reality of a female life which is beautifully presented by Mahasweta Devi in her work. It shows the real situation of woman in our society. In words and ideas mothers are given the highest respect

but in reality they are just a feminine object of the patriarchal society. They are still struggling for their identity.

Conclusion

In her story 'Breast-Giver' Devi has highlighted the myth and realities related to motherhood and woman in our culture. Her character Jashoda has been ruthlessly exploited by all, her husband, her children, children who she has milked and the pitiable of all is that she is exploited by "the other" women. Devi has delicately portrays the protagonist, Jashoda is doubly oppressed firstly for being a woman and secondly for her motherhood. Jashoda ask a rhetoric question why even my "breasts betrayed...in the end". (57) Jashoda question not only raises many queries associated with gendered norms but it also provokes the value system of Indian society. It is explicit that the adoration paid to women as mothers is only confined to the domain of social norms of mothering that further oppressed and marginalized the status of women in society. In the path of searching emancipation for themselves from the unbearable weight of the imaginary glory of forced motherhood, women need proper health care, education, adequate social support for maternity, and a right to have full freedom and control over their bodies, including their procreative choices. Female should get a healthy environment in which they can enjoy the beautiful phase of motherhood; it should not become a burden or a responsibility for her. Undoubtedly, women are biologically different from men, but it does not mean that they are physically and mentally inferior, and thus dependant bodies, only appointed for care work and procreation of sons. They are as much capable of generating equal work for society as men do. They shouldn't be called as 'helpless woman' (Abla Nari). Women should get respect in our society not in our ideas and scriptures. They should be treated equally as men and should be praised for creating a new creature and giving birth to a new life to this world.

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