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Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*: "Draupadi," "Breast-giver," and "Behind the Bodice": A Trilogy of Gendered Simulacrum with Subaltern Consciousness.

Abstract

The aim of the researcher is to identify the gendered subaltern consciousness in GayatriChakravorty Spivak's translation of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*: "Draupadi," "Breast-giver," and "Behind the Bodice" to indicatedifferent aesthetic standards. With the nexus of theory and politics of Spivak's 'gendered subalternity,' Sue Tolleson Rinehart's 'gendered consciousness,' Antonio Gramsci's 'cultural hegemony,' and Michael Foucault's 'power dynamics,' the breast trilogy is examined.

Key Words: Gendered Subaltern, Gender Consciousness, Gender-Violence, Patriarchal Domination, Female Victimization.

"Equality of capacity but difference in ends" (28).

-Eleanor Roosevelt

Eleanor Roosevelt's gendered consciousness paradox evokes in Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Trilogy*, pitch-forked into an international limelight by GayatriChakravorty Spivak through her translation entitled *Breast Stories*. 'The BreastTrilogy' portrays the horror stories of male voyeurism and chauvinism that triggers for a national debate of gendered subalternity. In Spivak's view, woman's body (source of nourishment, deprivation, and

sensuality) becomes an instrument of vicious denunciation of patriarchy and hegemony which areironical, counter-canonical,anti-literary, and contradictory. Gendered subalternity for Spivak: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernisation. There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak" (*Can the Subaltern Speak?,*102-3). She asserts that, "The subaltern [as woman] cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious. Representation has not withered away" (104). "Draupadi," "Breast-Giver," and "Behind the Bodice" embody'hegemonic masculinity,' 'female emancipation,' 'double colonization,' 'societal power relations,' 'centre-periphery articulation,' 'master-slave dialectics,' and 'gender-bender dynamics.' In "Draupadi," the erotic object transforms into an object of torture and revenge where the line between hetero-sexuality and gender-violence conjures. In "Breast-giver," the survival object changes into a commodity object where the indeterminacy between fictional piety and gender exploitation projects. In "Behind the Bodice," the natural object migrates into a destructive object where the concept-metaphor between aesthetics and politics violate. These different contextual factors account for the *quantity* of women's politicization and the *quality* of women's political life.

As "customs and traditions" are viewed as "barbaric," then "barbaric" became "violence against women," and finally "violence against women" became "rights violation"(28). These three shifts offer a poignant illustration of the complexities of standard-setting in the *Breast Stories*. The five stages of Rinehart's "passive acceptance,""revelation,""embeddedness,""synthesis," and"active commitment" contribute to the gendered subaltern consciousness (214). For Reid and Nuala, the characteristics of gendered subaltern consciousness are "sense of interdependence and shared fate with other women," "recognition of women's low status and power with men," "attribution of power differentials to institutionalized sexism," and "improvement of women's position in society" (760).According to Gurin, "the problems women face demand collective, political solutions and cannot be solved through individual efforts" which is evident in Devi's stories (328).

"…whose critiques do we especially try to understand and respond to; whom do we read; where do we look for ways of thinking that might wake us up?" (196). The cluster of short fiction becomes the means of harsh indictment of an exploitative socio-cultural system. Dopdi in "Draupadi" is a tribal revolutionary, arrested and gang-raped in custody, she shackles the false notion of shame, and turns counter-offensive. Jashoda in "Breast-giver"

becomes a professional wet-nurse, uses her body as chief identity, and commoditizes motherhood. Gangor in "Behind theBodice" is a migrant labourer, excites and triggers off a train of violence, rape, and murder. The stories evoke the mythic and cultural memories with 'secret encounters with singular figures,' but its 'subject- representation and constitution is deliberately palimpsest and contrary" (199).

Devi's narrative focuses on characters that exemplify the twin problems of caste and gender; and explores a stinging indictment of destruction of tribal insurgents. "The recognition of caste as not just a retrograde past but an oppressive past reproduced as forms of inequality in modern society requires that we integrate questions of caste with those of class and gender"(6).She presents politics of domination, caste oppression, material violence, inhuman torture, repressive discourse, overarching hegemony, historical marginalization, and engineered exclusion; and liberates conventional epistemological bind. She serves to 'sterilize' the master narrative of nation's past off the rural class/ gender/ subaltern presence. Her narrative comprises ideological/ nationalist, and colonizing/ decolonizing frames. Spivak comments, "Mahaswetareleases that heterogeneity, restoring some of its historical and geographical nomenclature" (79).

Spivak contextualizes "the conflictual topos of language and the problematic role of the translator trying to engender the Ur text" (102). She fills the space between the original and her translation with her commentary. "Her intension is to effect an epistemic transformation of the concept of the monolithic 'third-world woman' by drawing attention to the mechanics of investigating the subaltern consciousness" (103). 'The Breast Trilogy' narrative insists that the failure of condemnation is a way of refusing challenge systems of power and complicity: "My condemnation… may be a way of grappling with, of confronting, additional elements of the contexts of address, elements that involve power, hierarchy, and responsibility for other futures, other contexts, other beings. Failure to condemn, then, risks disavowing relations of power and confronting one's complicity in them" (173).

"Draupadi"is a tribalized revision and reincarnation of Draupadi in *Mahabharat*, and the story of 'rape-murder-*lockup* torture.'It captures the torturing experience of the Santhal tribe DraupadiMejhen with multi-faced personality. "Draupadi is the name of the central character. She is introduced to the reader between two uniforms and between two versions of her name. Dopdi and Draupadi. It is either that as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name Draupadi, or the ancient Draupadi …They have no right to heroic Sanskrit names" (10). The name Draupadi is political and ironical. Dopdi and Dulna are married couple, active workers in Naxalbari movement, skilled in the art of disguise, who claim their

prime bounty which are only possessed by the upper castes. After Dulna's demise, Draupadi is brutally raped and molested by the policemen in their attempts to extract information about the fugitives. Senanayak, the army chief, with'full of a Keatsian negative capability' crushes and torments Dopdi. As a counter-offense, she tears her clothes and makes herself naked, displaying her battered and mangled body. Her confidence and courage dare to look at the public without any hesitation. She laughs weirdly with the blind acceptance of humiliation, corruption, molestation, and disentangled chain of patriarchal shame. Her stubborn refusal to cover herself humiliates the male officers. She is defiant with self protest, charms with counter-resistance and retaliation, and celebrates the 'woman-power' with honour, diversity and resolution. "Draupadi" captures the experiences of a subaltern woman within the context of historical juncture of 'interregnum' where woman are concerned with its connotation of violation, imposition of force, destruction of psyche, and alignment of victimization. As Draupadi's revenge excerpts: "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (37)Her legitimized pluralization (victimized person), in singularity (subaltern woman) is used to demonstrate male glory. Spivak says, "Mahasweta's story questions this 'singularity' by placing Dopdi first in a comradely, activist, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape" (11). The story culminates into Draupadi's postscript area of lunar flux and sexual difference in challenging man to (en)counter as un/ mis- recorded objective historical monument. Here, female nudity acts as a weapon for questioning the enemy: 'negation for negation.' She acts as an 'unarmed *target*' with her terrifying gestures: "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed… What more can you do?" (37) "Draupadi" serves an exemplum for the dictum: "your sex is a terrible wound" (29).

"Breast-Giver" highlights the commoditization and politicization of motherhood through Jashoda Devi. She prophesies the economic revolution of domestic chores, and miscalculated assumption about childrearing as an unwaged domestic labour. Spivak states that Jashoda is a parable for India after colonization and a metaphoric implication to decolonized India as being mother-by-hire. Devi asserts that, "As long as there is this hegemonic cultural self-representation of India as a goddess-mother (dissimulating the possibility that this mother is a slave), she will collapse under the burden of the immense expectations that such a self-representation permits" (78). Her narrative focuses on hypocrisy, superstition, selfish greed, and callousness that are the causes of gendered violence. Spivak categorizes lactation of Jashoda as 'use-value' and lactating ability as 'exchange value' whereby she earns money by production. Her body becomes the source of pride, self-worth,

social self-indulgence, apathy, and means of fate-fortune. Her husband Kangalicharan manipulates Jashoda's reservation towards maintaining sexual relations, committing her to continuous pregnancies, and establishing professional mothering. For Spivak, "Mahasweta introduces exploitation/ domination into that detail in the mythic story which tells us that Jashoda is a foster-mother. By turning fostering into a profession, she sees mothering in its materiality beyond its socialisation as affect, beyond psychologisation as abjection, or yet transcendentalisation as the vehicle of the divine" (264). As Jashoda's scepticism sings: "Is a Mother so cheaply made? Not just by dropping a babe!" (50) "Breast Giver" reveals the patriarchal axioms towards Jashoda, the Divine Mother (Lord Krishna's foster mother) with forgiveness and selfless love, or the 'legendary cow of fulfilment' (*Kamadhenu*). Jashoda represents a metaphor for patriarchal oppression, cultural marginalization,hegemonic domination, and ironical 'motherhood'/ 'mothering.'For Devi, "Such is the power of the Indian soil that all women turn into mothers here and all men remain immersed in the spirit of holy childhood" (249). "Breast-giver" is a flotsam piece susceptible to both the subaltern-position as gendered subject, and as class-subject. The tale thematizes as, "The milk that is produced in one's own body for one's own children is a use-value. When there is a superfluity of use-values, exchange values arise. That which cannot be used is exchanged. As soon as the (exchange) value of Jashoda's milk emerges, it is appropriated. Good food and constant sexual servicing are provided so that she can be kept in prime condition for optimum lactation. The milk she produces for her children is presumably through 'necessary labour.' The milk that she produces for the children of her master's family is through 'surplus labour.'" (88)

"Behind the Bodice" describes the tragedy of Gangor, whose picture is taken by Upin (photographer) while she nurses her child. The physical exposure makes her the object of disgust in rural community and sexual object in 'Ganadharshan' ('the rape of the people'). Upin's photography is of an investigative nature as he explores the misfortunes experienced by people. He is intrigued by Gangor's statuesque, natural semi-covered, mammal projections since they are in contrast to his wife Shital's silicone-enhanced, artificial implanted body. Gangor's poster projects: "The half-naked ample-breasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped. Save them! Save the breast!"(139) The picture of her naked chest becomes the cause of her victimization and the target of patriarchal voyeuristic gaze. Her identity highlights the harsh reality, mystery, and horror behind the bodice. Devi conceptualizes Gangor as a metaphor of custodial violence in democratic India. The rape of aboriginal Gangor by policemen signify the violation, manipulation, and exploitation carried out by the

institutions and protectors of law and order who are the perpetrators of violence.The original title "Behind the Bodice: *Choli kePichhe*" itself symbolizes the perversion, obsession, eroticism and vulgarism due to the '*norm of the day*' (*media, censor-board,* anti-*bra girls*) (135). "There is no *non-issue* behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it" (155). The dominant tradition of patriarchal power relation and female nudity are symbolized by binary relation of active male role of 'looking subject' and passive female role of 'looking object.' The naked female image is a sexual objectification that articulates masculine hegemony and dominance over the representation. The name Gangor is ironical since it symbolizes the river Ganges (the sister of mother earth which replenishes the earth). As Guy-Sheftal points, being an Adivasi and a female "is characterised by the private part being made public, which subverts conventional notions about the need to hide and render invisible women's sexuality and private parts" (18). Her body is considered "off-limits, untouchable, or unseeable" (18). The truth of Gangor's life is disclosed, "Tell the Camera—Sir, why not take me away? A cloth to wear … a bite to eat … a place to sleep for mother and child…. What to do Sir … no field, no land, living is very hard … pots and pans … stove and knife … cleaning rooms … laundry … I'll do anything Sir …" (144). As Ketu H. Katrak states, "it is important to recognize the strategic use of those female bodies" as they are the only "available avenue for resistance" (3). "Women resist patriarchal power through survival, … Her tortured and raped breasts become the text, the voice—that tells of unprecedented oppression" (57).

Spivak's 'gendered subalternity,' Rinehart's 'gendered consciousness,' Gramsci's 'cultural hegemony,' and Foucault's 'power dynamics' are circumstantial in "Draupadi," "Breast-giver," and "Behind the Bodice." Spivak endorses Foucault's stand that "knowledge is always loaded with power and that …getting to know (or 'discursively framing') the Third World is also about getting to discipline and monitor it, to have a more manageable Other: and helping the subaltern is often a reaffirmation of the social Darwinism implicit in 'development', in which 'help' is framed as 'the burden of the fittest'" (57).Rinehart defines gendered consciousness in relationship and connectedness with the political world and its association. "If women require special resources to overcome the lack of welcome they may find as they try to become political, gender consciousness can provide them. Gender identification and gender role ideology furnish these means by providing an intrinsic belief system: I can and should participate; and a sense of extrinsic support: I do this with and for others like me" (139).

For Gramsci, cultural hegemony represents "...Dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups" (165).As Foucault defines power dynamics, “power is everywhere’ and ‘comes from everywhere,’ but it is diffused and embodied in scientific discourse, knowledge,“meta-power,”and “regimes of truth” in constant flux and negotiation that pervades in society (63). He challenges “disciplinary power” that detaches “the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (75).Beverley attributes that, “The claim that the subaltern cannot speak means that she cannot speak in a way that would carry authority or meaning for non-subalterns without altering the relations of power/knowledge that constitute the subaltern in the first place” (29).

Kapoor declares that, “If the subaltern is constructed by the hegemony of the dominant (even as an intending subject of resistance), by definition she cannot be autonomous” (71). “Thus, Spivak questions the subaltern’s ability to speak ‘for herself’ (without being a mouthpiece) and suggests that if the subaltern is speaking (given a voice) she is not a subaltern anymore and that the terms determined for her speech (the space opened for her to speak) will affect what is going to be said and how her voice will be heard. Therefore,she is suspicious of attempts to retrieve a pure form of subaltern consciousness and suggests that the effort to produce a transparent or authentic (and heroic) subaltern is a desire of the intellectual to be benevolent or progressive that ends up silencing the subaltern once again”(87).

Spivak describes Devi’s stories as: “Draupadi and Jashoda are explosions of Hindu traditional imagination of the female. In Mahasweta’s stories, Draupadi stands finally fixed and naked, a figure of refusal, in front of the Police Officer, her breasts mangled and her vagina torn and bleeding. She is at a distance from the political activism of the male. Jashoda lies dead, her breast putrefied with cancer, a figure that blasts mothering right out of its affective coding. She is at a distance from the gradual emancipation of the bourgeois female” (167). She declares that, “To an extent, I was writing her to be read, and I was certain not claiming to give her a voice. So if I’m read as giving her a voice, there again this is a sort of transaction of the positionality between the Western feminist listener who listens to me, and myself, signified as a Third World informant. What we do toward the texts of the oppressed is very much dependent upon where we are” (172).

Jonathan Culler's anecdote "difference by differing" with the sexual identity and its privilege [ing] experiences is suggested in the three tales. "Thus "woman" is caught between the interested "normalization" of capital and the regressive "envy" of the colonized male?" (9) The curtailment of women's voice is a consequence of the paternalistic society's discipline and institutionalize female agency. "— 'A female's life hangs on like a turtle's'— 'her heart breaks but no word is uttered' —'the woman will burn, her ashes will fly/ Only then will we sing her/ praise on high'" (46).The *Breast Stories* portrays the 'saviours of marginality' and martyrdom in their gendered subaltern consciousness. The representation of gendered subaltern as an "empty space," a "blank agency," and the "sexed specificity of the female body" leadto the problematic conclusion: colonialism in collusion with (native) patriarchy effects complete erasure of the (subaltern) woman. The subaltern woman is rendered 'as mute as ever' and 'is more deeply in shadow' when the epistemic violence mingles with advanced civilization. The gendered female have to reject 'tolerance' for their empowerment: "To remove the scales from our eyes about the innocence of tolerance in relation to power is not thereby to reject tolerance as useless or worse. Rather, it changes the status of tolerance from a transcendental virtue to a historically protean element of liberal governance, a resituating that casts tolerance as a vehicle for producing and organizing subjects, a framework for state action and state speech, and an respect of liberalism's legitimation" (191). In *Breast* Stories, the gendered subaltern's body is brutally abused with unutterable ugliness since they speak with their bodies, and the biting irony confounds the traditional polarization of cultural (caste and class) and biological (gender) aspects. "If the respect or fear inspired by woman prevents the use of violence towards her, then the muscular superiority of the male is no source of power" (212).The quintessential question of*Can the Subaltern* (as women) *speak?* indoctrinates the female subjectivity and problematizes the lower-caste women through the blind spots of stereotypical texts. Spivak's conviction and confrontationof "speaking about" and "speaking for" the female gender manifests the elite mainstream intrusion thwarted in *Breast Stories*. Judith Butler's words' co-memorizes: "If we believe that to think radically about the formation of the current situation is to exculpate those who committed acts of violence, we will freeze our thinking in the name of a questionable morality. But if we paralyze our thinking in this way, we will fail morality in a different way. We will fail to take collective responsibility for a thorough understanding of the history that brings us to this juncture. We will, as a result, deprive ourselves of the very critical and historical resources we need to imagine and practice another future, one that will move beyond the current cycle of revenge" (190).

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