

EX UMBRA IN SOLEM: UNDERSTANDING THE BREAST IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S BREAST STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast Stories', an anthology of three powerful female narratives, traces the river of female subjugation and social insecurity down the mountains of subaltern neglect and socio-political discord across various lifestyles. The paper courses battlefields of the Naxalite movement of the 1970s, the dingy streets of Harishal and the nefarious kilns of Jharoa and Seopura. Mahasweta presents the hypocritical society and authoritative abuse behind the 'choli' and beyond the femininity of the breasts to the patriarchal cesspools. The paper analyses the three 'breast stories' along cross-cultural influences, mythological infusion and subaltern narratives. Through critical analysis, an exploration of the menial position of women and the commercialisation of their bodies is discussed. The paper also explores abuse of power and authority by the supposed protectors through inhuman rape and torture. 'Stanadayini' is the story of a professional wet-nurse who is abandoned when there are no more mouths to suckle her tired breasts. 'Draupadi' is the tale of tribal Naxalite Dopdi Mejhen who fights against zamindari corruption and subjugation in subaltern narratives and is 'apprehended' - bestially raped, tortured and her breasts mangled by the military. 'Choli ke Picche' is a tale of the photographer who is captivated by the voluptuous breasts of Gangor but fails to see beyond the physical, into the inhuman gang rape and police brutality. The breast acts as a symbol of not just femininity but of protest, of abuse and of sexualisation of the common woman, as discussed by her translator and critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Keywords: Breast, Subaltern, Women, Brutality, Abuse, Cross-Cultural, Mythology, Socio-Political

“Breasts are a scandal because they shatter the border between motherhood and sexuality”

-Iris Marion Young,

Political theorist, Socialist Feminist

The scientific definition of the breast is nothing more than “two prominences located on the upper ventral region of the torso of primates”. It is no more than a part of the human body and a crucial part of the female body with respect to procreative sustenance and sexuality. In literature, the breast has always been a powerful symbol of femininity and an intricate representative of motherhood and womanhood. The breast has nourished and fed countless canons of literature and throngs of Nobel Laureates. Whether the flourishing corsets in the Victorian age, or the mysterious choli in India, the breast has always been a point of keen interest in this androcentric socio-political structure of the society. Famous Indian painter Jamini Roy also portrays the social concept of the Santhals and the subalterns in two of his famous paintings, ‘Santhal woman’ and ‘Santhal woman and child’. But in Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Breast Stories’, these same breasts of sustenance, nourishment and motherhood stand for feminine defiance and stand testament to the intolerable objectification of the female body. Devi’s representation of the female body and sexuality stands as a direct contrast to the overtly sexualised depiction by other contemporary authors. While the other authors womanized their women even more, Devi weaponized them. In her tales, the woman stood as the centre of disruption, change and revolutions. However, it must also be mentioned that Devi never intended her women to be exemplary or representatives of the heroic feats of women. They stood as red, glowing markers of police brutality, abuse of power by men in authority and the short-sightedness of the privileged. ‘Draupadi’ is a tale of a single woman who stood against patriarchy and police brutality without flinching and the breast, which has historically been an erotic symbol, acts as a mark of rebellion. In ‘Stanadayini’ (Breast Giver), a source of motherhood, nourishment and survival object is transformed into a commodity and Jashoda was nothing more than a spent resource once her breasts were of no use. In the case of Gangor in ‘Choli Ke Picche’, Upin failed to see beyond Gangor’s “mammal projections” behind her “dirty choli”. This paper studies the impact and relevance the breasts have on the stories and how these physical attributes leave deep mental scars in the minds of the readers. Rather than study the role of women in the stories, as the title ‘Breast Stories’ suggests, this paper studies

the breast as an extension of the role, significance and standing of women in Mahasweta Devi's world. The paper also analyses the three stories on the basis of H  l  ne Cixous' 1975 theory of   criture f  minine¹, or "women's writing" that she coined in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa". The theory posits a genre of literary writing that deviates from traditional masculine styles of writing, one which examines the relationship between the cultural and psychological inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text.

Draupadi is a name that is historically famous throughout Indian mythology and Vedic literature. The unrelenting woman who did not tie her hair for thirteen long years until she washed it in the blood of the same people who had humiliated her and been a part of her helplessness. Before Mahasweta Devi's 'Dopdi' is analysed, it is crucial to set the story of her namesake and draw the parallels as well as stark contrasts. Draupadi is the female protagonist of one of Indian mythologies founding pieces of literature, the Mahabharata. The story of Draupadi is chilling yet rebelliously powerful. Through a technicality, Draupadi is married to five men, the Pandavas and yet she holds her head high and carries out her familial duties. One of Mahabharata's most significant incidents is the disrobing of Draupadi or the 'Vastraharana' that is one of the key reasons behind the ultimate war, 'Kurukshetra'. Duryodhan, son of blind king Dritarashtra conspires and invites the Pandavas to a game of gambling, known popularly as Pasha. As is the custom, it is a grave insult to turn down the invitation of the game. Unbeknownst to Yudhishtira, the game was a trap to take away all of his material and personal belongings. A weak player and an addicted gambler, he puts his own brothers at stake and loses. He keeps losing his armies, his wealth and eventually ends up gambling himself and losing. Duryodhan's ultimate objective was the humiliation of the king of Indraprastha and he achieves that successfully when he suggests Yudhishtira to put his own wife on the stake. When Yudhishtira eventually loses, Duryodhan asks Draupadi to be brought to the court. Draupadi questions this very move as she logically points out that Yudhishtira himself had lost and he was in no position to stake her, being a slave. Throughout this pathetic ordeal, Draupadi keeps praying to Lord Krishna for his divine intervention and when Dushashana attempts to disrobe her, it is seen that her sari does not end, despite Dushashana Herculean efforts to degrade her dignity. Upon realisation of Lord Krishna's divine intervention, the King

proceeds to undo the wrongdoings of his sons. This is the story of Draupadi as far as her modern namesake is concerned.

The present day **Dopdi Mejhen** in Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' is quite different from her namesake. Apart from the obvious difference in era and situation, there is the difference in the marital setting. However, what remains the same is the patriarchal dominance, abuse of authority by those in power and rampant degradation of a woman's body and her dignity. Times might change, the mentality does not. Set in the Naxalite movement of the 1970's, the story revolves around the two Naxal rebels Dopdi Mejhen and Dulna Majhi who stand up against authorial abuse of the zamindars and eventually gather enough heat for the army to mercilessly hunt them down. A Naxal or Naxalite is a member of a militant political organisation that claimed the legacy of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), founded in Calcutta in 1969. The term Naxal derives from the name of the village Naxalbari in West Bengal, where the Naxalite peasant revolt took place in 1967. Naxalites are considered far-left communists, supportive of Maoismⁱⁱ. Their origin can be traced to the split in 1967 of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) following the Naxalbari peasant uprising, leading to the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) two years later. Tribal communities participated in Naxalism to push back against structural violence by the state, including land theft for purposes of mineral extraction. Impoverished areas with no electricity, running water, or healthcare provided by the state may accept social services from Naxalite groups, and give their support to the Naxal cause in return. Some critics also argue that the state's absence allowed Naxalites to become the legitimate authority in these areas by performing state-like functions, including enacting policies of redistribution and building infrastructure for irrigation, one of the primary reasons why Dopdi attacked Surja Sahu - to redistribute water for drinking and irrigation. Dopdi is a woman who does not conform to the societal standard or the agrarian/tribal concept that the zamindari overlords would have them moulded in. From the very beginning, Dopdi stands out against normative practices when the two officers comment on how Dopdi's name goes against the list of tribal names that they had. Thus, from the very onset, Mahasweta Devi presents a feeling of a chokehold that the authoritative figures had on the tribal people and the tribal women. The discussion over her name also hints at upper class snobbishness and a hollow sense of self-imposed superiority. How could a mere tribal woman,

from the jungles, bear the name of Draupadi, the most beautiful woman of the Dwapara Yuga in Mahabharata? How could she dare to hold such a name? Devi brilliantly portrays the subaltern narratives through small incidents such as these. Her struggles and fights against the corrupt upper-class landowners who restrict water from the lower caste and class people brings out the subaltern aspects of Mahasweta Devi's writing. Ironically, the wheels of the plot are set in motion when Dopdi kills the zamindar, the husband of the woman who had given her this name. The couple, having slipped Operation Bakuli, had a nationwide arrest warrant out for them and had thus taken refuge in the wilderness of Jharkhani forests, a formidable natural foe for the untrained eyes. When Arjan Singh fails to capture the duo and their band of revolutionary Robin Hoods, the army specialist Mr. Senanayak is called to consult and take over the operation. Senanayak is an important **man** in the unfolding and development of the plot. With his band of mercenaries who wear the colours of the army, they begin scouring and surrounding springs and other sources of water. When army informant Dukhram Gharari informs the army about a Santhal man at the spring, they hunt him down and shoot him dead. They soon realise that the man who screamed "Ma-ho" before he died was none other than the most wanted Dulna Majhi. Despite the death of her husband, Dopdi continues to help the fugitives, the Naxals as both of them had given up the dreams of a family and children in favour of ridding the world of zamindars and corrupt policemen. When her own men Shomai and Budhna betray her, she is eventually apprehended.

A police/army apprehension protocol dictates that the criminal is put under armed guard and then stored in a secure holding facility until a legal order is obtained from the chain of command. But what can be done if the chain of command is a food chain instead, with Senanayak hungrily waiting to devour his prize. When Dopdi is brought to camp, Senanayak is too hungry and at 8:57 PM he says: "ওকে বানিয়ে নিয়ে এস। ডু দি নীদফুল (Make her. Do the needful)". Now, it is essential to mention a very important point. From the very beginning, Mahasweta Devi portrayed Dopdi as a rebel, a fighter and never really put a gender-based description on her. Until her apprehension, Dopdi was a Naxal, a rebel who was fighting against the corrupt system. As soon as she is captured, Dopdi Mejhen is a woman under the authority of a corrupt, patriarchal system. She is a woman from a marginalized sector of the unfair society at the hands of the lecherous, murderous and inhumane men who vowed to

protect the country. When Senanayak, a commander, openly instructs his men to gang rape the apprehended woman, he reduces her to nothing more than flesh. Senanayak makes her a woman just to strip her of her womanhood and her dignity. Mahasweta Devi's chilling description leaves the readers uncomfortable and yet it serves its purpose:

Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says "water", she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her?

Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight, she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she's been made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven-then Draupadi had passed out.

She turns her eyes and sees something white. Her own cloth. Nothing else. Suddenly she hopes against hope. Perhaps they have abandoned her. For the foxes to devour. But she hears the scrape of feet. She turns her head, the guard leans on his bayonet and leers at her. Draupadi closes her eyes. She doesn't have to wait long. Again, the process of making her begins. Goes on. The moon vomits a bit of light and goes to sleep. Only the dark remains. A compelled spread-eagled still body. Active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it. (Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*, 31)

In just three haunting and painful paragraphs, Devi represents aeons of abuse against women, abuse of power and abuse of authority. The woman who was supposed to be captured and apprehended is mercilessly gang raped throughout the night. In and out of consciousness, the animals thrust themselves upon her and exerted their social and moral superiority and

supremacy. The breast, often a symbol of nurturing, motherhood and blatant eroticism, is reduced to nothing more than flesh as her “breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn”. The very men who suckled on their mother’s breasts as children ravage the body of a woman, stealing away her motherhood, her rights and her consent. The very men who had taken an oath to protect the country strip Draupadi naked, gang rape her throughout the night and bite off her breasts. The same men who were supposed to protect the citizen mercilessly tie her up and “make her” as “active pistons of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it”. Unlike her namesake, this Draupadi did not have any divine intervention to save her from this excruciation. Only the moon watched silently as her light illuminated the unspeakable acts of savagery that continued throughout the night as the **men** who called themselves soldiers took turns to debase and desecrate her womanhood, her dignity. The actions of a single night stand as a torch to thousands of unreported cases of abuse against women and abuse of authority. Throughout the night, she wishes for the torture to end, for them to kill her but the pain does not end. How do you report a crime when the authority is the criminal? The next morning, after the animals had their rounds of sadistic pleasure, Dopdi Mejhen was ordered to be brought in. When she is asked to move to the Burra Sahib’s tent, she gets up and pours the pot of water she is offered and rips apart the rest of her cloth into pieces and walks towards Senanayak, naked and unafraid. There she stood, her body desecrated but her mind stronger than ever. There stood a woman who had seen the face of Hades and come back. “Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds”. In one night, Draupadi was just a mere woman no more. She was a force to be reckoned with. She was all those women who stood up against their attackers. In one woman, Mahasweta Devi depicted the abusive history of men against women. Draupadi stands in front of all, her bloodied and wounded body laid bare for all to see and she looks up at Senanayak and says the chilling words “The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?” Senanayak was shocked. Last night he had captured a woman and had hoped to tame her but all that remained was the black blood of Champabhumi and a daughter proud of her native lands. Senanayak desperately asks where her clothes are. A man who was so eager to tear apart Draupadi’s womanhood was now scared of facing the naked consequences of his actions, much like Frankenstein who was afraid to face the consequences of his immoral actions. Draupadi walks closer while Senanayak walks further. Bleeding all over, she keeps

walking towards him, laughing maniacally while he desperately tries to make sense of the unexpected reaction. In a voice that silenced the abuse of countless men, she spoke.

“কাপড় কী হবে, কাপড়? লেংটা করতে পারিস, কাপড় পরাবি কেমন করে? মরদ তু? (What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?)”.

(মহাশ্বেতা দেবী, মহাশ্বেতা দেবী গল্পসমগ্র, পৃ.১৮৯)

This is where the namesakes unite and differ. Both women were stripped off their clothing and degraded - one woman in the royal court surrounded by officials who were supposed to protect the royals while the other woman in an army camp, surrounded by men who were supposed to protect the rights of the woman they abused without a single thought. The eras might differ but the pain, the suffering, the humiliation remains the same. The difference lies in the assistance. While Draupadi of Indraprastha received divine help from Lord Krishna and later had his sons to take revenge for her humiliation, Dopdi of Jharkhani was the weapon herself. She received no help, no deliverance. She endured and stood strong, undefeated. As she walks closer with her two mangled breasts and pushes the horrified coward who called himself a **man**, Dopdi kept asking him whether he would encounter her and kill her:

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*, 33)

The breast is a powerful symbol in literature. However, in Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Draupadi’, the breast is power itself. Unlike Draupadi of Indraprastha, Dopdi was both the victim and the Avenger. Just like Yudhishtira gambled Draupadi away, the corruption and hypocrisy of the state and of the authorities gambled away Dopdi's life in the hands of animals and monsters disguised as men. Unlike most contemporary writers, Devi does not romanticize the tribal woman or the struggles of the Naxal wars. She presents a raw, unadulterated side of reality and does not shirk away from pointing her fingers at the wrongdoers, whoever they might be. Devi’s Dopdi is seen as a woman, a sexualised object by the army just to degrade her womanhood and strip her of her dignity. The breast, a symbol of serenity, nurturing and the degradingly erotic object of the previous night is transformed into a weapon, one that renders

the Army Handbook reading Senanayak terribly afraid. Her husband's "Ma-ho", the raging battle cry, resonates in the severity of her actions and the resilience of her mangled breasts. A single woman stood up against the abuse of authority, power and police brutality of a legion of 'men'. Draupadi's haunting words on Senanayak's actions render the story as more than just a literary piece - it represents countless suppressed atrocities against women and questions the patriarchal symbols and manhood. Two mangled breasts put in question the malfunctions of the national machinery, corruption in positions of power, the blatant abuse of authority and act as a symbol of independence and liberation until the very end.

The second story in the trilogy, 'Stanadayini' is a story about the breast and incidentally, the woman to whom the breasts belong. Mahasweta Devi is an author who names her characters with much thought and irony. So is the case of **Jashoda**, representative of Yashoda, the foster mother of Lord Krishna and wife of Nanda. In the Bengali language, 'Stanadayini' stands for one who lends her 'stan' or breasts - professionally known as a wet nurse. Now, in this story the breast is the central symbol and matter of concern. Jashoda and her husband Kangali were a Bengali-Brahmin couple struggling with money and their three children. Kangali worked at a sweet shop as an assistant while his wife stayed at home. Kangali was a husband who dedicatedly loved his wife, or more accurately her body. He thrust himself upon her whenever his manhood dictated his actions. "...when Kangali's body didn't drill her body like a geologist in a darkness lit only by an oil lamp". The Haldars of Harisal are the other characters in play in this story of the breast. The young son of the mighty Haldar household was a restless boy who just had to satisfy the "whim in mind or body". He often took advantage of the cook and her body and had her fired when he was done with her. So was another whim of his to drive the new Studebaker car in the family. Drive he did, running over the "feet and shins" of poor Kangalicharan who was lost in the dreams of fondling his wife's "large round breasts". While the others were concerned over the life of the poor man, the Haldar chief was concerned over the 'Brahman' his son had run over, as if his only crime was running over a Brahman. An untouchable man or woman would have been fine but sadly, it was a Brahman. It was out of religious duty rather than human compassion that the Haldars took responsibility for Kangalicharan's treatment. Having lost his feet, Kangalicharan was unable to work and thus he relied on Mr. Haldar's promise of setting up a shop for him and the family sustained on the

food sent to them by the Halдар household. But all those promises were up in flames when Mr. Halдар died and the couple were left high and dry. In an effort to get gainful employment as a cook at the Halдар household, Jashoda set off. At this very point, Devi depicts gradually how a woman in search of commercial employment is commercialized herself. After a selfish and self-serving discussion, the Halдар household decide to employ Jashoda as the family's wet nurse for the basket full of children born in Halдар household annually, by the grace of the auspicious astrological charts, regardless of familial emotions.

The transition and unfolding of the plot that follows this decision is a tale of commercialization, objectification and desecration of the sanctity of motherhood. It must be noticed that throughout 'Breast Stories', Mahasweta Devi brings to light the struggles of the repressed subaltern women and their families. Throughout, she becomes the mouthpiece of the downtrodden, repressed communities. With nothing more left than her own body, Jashoda readily agrees because she knows it would allow her husband and her children to sleep without going hungry. In an instant, she trades her body for her family. Although it was not said, the unspoken subtext was clear: Jashoda was not employed. Her breasts were. All they saw in her were two breasts full of milk, ready to be suckled by the throngs of children that graced the Halдар household. Jashoda was to be a professional mother from that day while Kanganicharan was to be a professional father at home, looking after the children and cooking. Through a subtle reference, Devi presents the sexist mentality and base degradation of commodification of Jashoda:

Around the paved courtyard on the ground floor of the Halдар house over a dozen auspicious milch cows live in some state in large rooms. Two Biharis look after them as Mother Cows. There are mountains of rind-bran-hay-grass-molasses. Mrs. Halдар believes that the more the cow eats, the more milk she gives. Jashoda's place in the house is now above the Mother Cows. The Mistress's sons become incarnate Brahma and create progeny. Jashoda preserves the progeny (Mahasweta Devi, Breast Stories, 46)

Thus, in a single paragraph, Mahasweta Devi depicts how the household degrades her to commercialized cattle and sees her as an addition to their breeding farm, as an additional resource to alleviate the fears of sagging breasts of the wives of Haldar household. She is nothing more than cattle, fed and fattened on the food the Haldars provided. Jashoda might be above the Mother Cows, but she was still treated as cattle, a steady source of breastmilk for the household. She is not Jashoda the wet nurse. She is Jashoda the commodity. Jashoda - the body attached to the breasts that raise the children of the Haldar household. Devi repeatedly emphasizes on the subaltern terrors and the societal subjugation. She throws in a subtle dig when the very people who worshipped Jashoda and her husband for being devout upper caste Brahmins, end up using her as cattle. Not even the high and mighty Brahmins can escape the capitalist greed and classist mentalities of days gone by. As Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak rightly points out, Mahasweta Devi also uses Jashoda and her breasts as a depiction of India after decolonization, calling India a “mother-by hire”, just like Jashoda. Devi draws reference to two parallel situations - the first wherein the British colonizers took the place of the Haldars, milking India like Jashoda for their own growth and benefit. Secondly, she talks of the people of the country itself. She states how the nation feeds thousands of mouths and yet they abuse her and treat her like a commodity. India is represented in a subaltern, marginalized viewpoint and thus provides crucial insights into the struggles of the downtrodden that the media and the papers conveniently forget to highlight. Rather than support them or help them, media and journalism romanticized their struggles and their wars, much like Jesse Pope during Wilfred Owen’s times. Further on, Mrs. Haldar takes special care of Jashoda and her household because she was now a ‘common utility’. In their own form of twisted Communist ideology, Jashoda’s body, her breasts and her nourishing milk was for all to share. She was just a machine in the house, waiting to be milked for the self-imposed ‘greater good’ of the great state of the Haldars. Spivak points out the situation aptly when she says:

*As soon as the 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 (Mahasweta
Devi, Breast Stories, 88)*

Everyone in the Halidar household was satisfied with the arrangement. The wives were extremely pleased that motherhood did not ruin the perfectness of their breasts and they could wear “blouses and bras of ‘European cut’” Throngs of children were reared by Jashoda for the next thirty years wherein she bore many children of her own and suckled 20 younglings. Throughout those years, Jashoda never had to worry about food, clothing or care for herself and her family. Then, Mrs. Halidar died too, leaving Jashoda in a predicament she never expected. From being invited to ceremonies as a divine symbol, she was reduced to begging for a job as a cook and was forced to live in the servant’s quarters with the very servants that used to worship her. Stanadayini was nothing without her ‘stan’ in the four corners of the Halidar household. She was an extension of her breasts. She was nothing more than a vessel for the “mammal projections” that nurtured generations of children into men and women, those same men, and their wives rendered her useless when there were no more mouths to suckle, no more to feed. Over these 30 years, the Haldars held allegiance to her breasts and the incessant supply of milk they provided and once that utility had dried up, she was nothing more than a spent woman, a shadow of its nurturing self. Living in the basement with the servants, Jashoda questioned her role in the family. Her position as the ‘Milk-mother’, the wet nurse was nothing more than a distant memory. Even her own husband had found a younger woman to enjoy. Jashoda and her weary breasts did not excite Kangalicharan anymore. He could never accept the reversal of role as it indirectly questioned his patriarchal stances and his manhood. Now that he was financially sufficient and had a younger woman to enjoy in his “prime”, Jashoda was a spent resource. Thus, she was alienated from both of her shelters, destined to live as an outcast since her body was of no use anymore. “Now is the downward time for Jashoda the milk-filled faithful wife”. As the days passed, a strange sickness grasped her mind and body. It was as if she was entrenched in a form of postpartum depression - a syndrome that is “a complex mix of physical, emotional and behavioural changes after giving birth and removal of a child from the mother”. Jashoda, who spent decades with children suckling on her breasts felt alone and useless - without a sense of purpose. Her empty breasts were like a rudderless ship. She could not believe that her body - the body that earned her so much money, accolades and respect was of no use anymore. “Her breasts feel empty, as if wasted. She had never thought she wouldn’t have a child’s mouth at her nipple” Decades of commercialization and commodification of her body had rendered her as an object, a machine who now lay defunct

and derelict. The sons of the eldest daughter-in law finally noticed her physical sickness and the only reason they pursued that line of thinking was the fear of sin if the Brahmin woman died in their Kayastha house. Upon further investigation, a lumpy red lesion was discovered which turned out to be terminal breast cancer. It must be mentioned that even in a story that focused primarily on female objectification and subaltern struggles, Mahasweta Devi raises awareness about breast cancer and its early detection. She raises awareness about a disease that silently kills thousands of women every year.

Here lies a woman betrayed by the very breasts that made her the ‘Milk-mother’. The same breasts that nurtured and provided for so many. As her cancer progressed and the “running sores” across her breast turned more putrid, the visitors and the caretakers vanished. Even his own husband who fondled her breasts lovingly left her on her own. None of the sons and daughters she raised across the decades came to her aid. Disbelief and delusion caught hold of the woman who still refused to believe that her own breasts and her own ‘milk-children’ had betrayed her. She hallucinates as “the sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes”. She could not believe what she had become:

যশোদা চিরকাল, বাবুদের ছেলেরা স্তনবৃত্ত মুখে দেবে বলে কত যত্নে তেলে সাবানে স্তন দুটি
মার্জনা করেছে। সেই স্তন তার এমন বেইমানি করল কেন?
(অজয় গুপ্ত সংকলিত, মহাশ্বেতা দেবী অমনিবাস, পৃ.৪২০)

(Jashoda had forever scrubbed her breasts carefully with soap and oil, for the master’s sons had put the nipples in their mouth. Why did those breasts betray her in the end?) (Mahasweta Devi, Breast Stories, 88)

As her cancer spread deeper, the people she loved and raised went further. Her own husband left her and stripped her of her rights of motherhood and that of a wife. The children she reared and fed left her alone in the cold hospital bed. Wherever she looked, “she sees her milk-sons all over the world”. In the last few moments of her life, all she saw was her milk sons all around while cancer soaked up her strength and her body. A mother with so many children across the years died alone as just a Hindu female. No name, no identity and no memories. She was just

the Brahmin wet-nurse who was destined to die alone. Desperately she hoped for someone to be there at the very end: “yet someone was supposed to be there at the end. Who was it? It was who? Who was it?” A woman so celebrated for her caste, her miracles and most importantly her breasts died in the most ordinary way, another nameless soul lost in the sea of commercialization, commodification and capitalism. Ironically, an untouchable cremated and burnt her. Death does not discriminate. ‘Stanadayini’ is a tale of the breast and incidentally the woman to whom those breasts belong. Mahasweta Devi depicts the objectification of the female body and how a sanctified ritual of birth is desecrated by greed, self-indulgence and selfishness. She was Jashoda, the Stanadayini. Her individual identity as a woman was stripped away from her decades ago and all that remained of the ‘Milk-mother’ were two empty, milk less breasts - one stricken with cancer and the other devoid of a mouth to suckle on.

The third and final story in this trilogy of the breast is ‘Choli Ke Picche’. The title, based on a song from the popular Hindi film ‘Khalnayak’, a 1993 movie starring Sanjay Dutt and Madhuri Dixit, literally translates to ‘Behind the Bodice’ or ‘Behind the blouse’. As the title suggests, this is a story that tries to unravel the mysteries hidden behind the blouse. A story of the male gaze, the social privilege and short-sightedness, it explores the mortifying depths of police brutality, gang rape and abuse of authority by those in power along with the broader spectrums of corruption and conspiracies. The female protagonist of this story - **Gangor** is the ‘object’ of fascination for the investigative journalist and photographer Upin Puri who frequents the dusty towns of Jharoa and Seopura. He visits to report on the migrating elephants, pesticide in the river and the semi famine - articles which gained him a semblance of national traction. On one of his visits to Jharoa in search of migrant workers, a tribal woman named Gangor attracts his attention. More accurately, her “mammal projections” and the “cleavage of her Konarak chest”. A photographer and a lover of artistic beauty, Upin was consumed with a strange obsession over the “resplendent” and perfect breasts of Gangor, behind her “dirty red choli”. He could not get the image of her perfectly oiled breasts out of his mind. Unlike the soldiers in ‘Draupadi’, Upin’s obsession was mostly artistic in nature. Mostly. Tired of his endless work and lack of results from his numerous articles on Jharoa, Gangor’s breasts acted as a beautiful distraction from the death, drought and famine. He could not help but take photographs of those breasts. The first time he took a photograph of her breastfeeding her child, he was surprised

when she asked for money “Sir, rupees? Snap a photo so give me cash!” At that moment, Upin tells Ujan how “they are not dumb beasts Ujan, they understand, that even when the gentlemen distribute relief, they have some hidden agenda”. In this short yet subtle line, Mahasweta Devi presents the pathetic and commercialized nature of subaltern struggles and the fact that even efforts to remediate those struggles are not without personal gains and benefits. Thus, she continues to show how even Upin’s noble tasks of journalism are not without personal financial gains and is evident from Ujan’s words, “Upin’s pictures go at top rates abroad and at home”. It must be understood that Mahasweta Devi clearly regards Upin and his accomplice as a part of the same system that they claim to fight. Despite all this, Upin’s wandering mind could not let go of her “statuesque” breasts. Even when she was not around, he fantasized about her and her resplendent breasts:

Gangor enters Upin’s head. No, those pictures are not here. Gangor at night...Under her dirty red cloth the cleavage of her Konarak chest, resplendent (Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*, 126)

After a few days and some other pictures, Upin proceeds to Delhi to protest with his pictures of breasts and the slogan “The half-naked ample-breasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped. Save them! Save the breast!” Upin gains fame and money from the photographs of Gangor she took. When Gangor and her tribe disappear, Upin senses danger and desperately searches for her, regretting his earlier decision of turning down Gangor’s desperate pleas to save her from the labour and the hands of the contractor and the place where she came from. Upin sends a desperate letter to Ujan stating that Gangor and her group had vanished and Gangor had done something very bad; Instead of heading for Arunachal, he ran for Jharoa. On the other hand, Upin’s wife and Ujan sit in the present, the fate of Upin unknown. Mahasweta Devi uses flashbacks to heighten the actions and to put a strong contrast in the narrative flow. Rather than be worried about her missing husband, Shital was more irked by the natural breasts of Gangor that made her question her “liquid silicone implanted front”. She knew that “Behind Shital’s choli is a silicone chest”. In these few lines, Devi depicts the contrasts between the privileged class and the subalterns. Shital, a woman with an expensive house in Salt Lake and

an even more expensive hobby is jealous of the only possession Gangor the migrant labour has - her body, her breasts. She goes on to say:

Chest, breast. What is the breast? Fat tissue, this that, a lot of bother

(Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*, 130)

Where the subaltern Gangor worries about food and shelter, the privileged upper class Shital worries about her silicone implants and their trifling importance in front of the breasts of a tribal woman miles away, battling for her life and her body. In the next portion of the narrative, Upin is back again to Jharoa, in search of Gangor. He asks all around and ends up in her village where he realises that a “terrible conspiracy is at work”. He realises that something evil had taken hold and vows to return in search of Gangor, the woman with the “resplendent” breasts. In his final visit, Mahasweta Devi provides an extremely powerful and shattering narrative. When Upin meets the caretaker, he gradually unfolds the horrific narrative. “You ruined her with your pictures Sir, otherwise how would she dare?” Upon Upin’s query about her, the caretaker continues brashly:

Shameless country girl, jiggling her body all the time...saying to the market people, didn't snap your photos, snapped mine. See!

(Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*, 132)

Through the caretaker’s narrative, the readers get a sense of what had happened. The police, the charges pressed, the mystery behind the dark choli all bubble like a toxic potion in a cauldron fuelled by the heat of selfishness, greed and a self-imposed control of the consent over a woman’s body. Finally, he meets her at the chullu stand. The accidental victimiser and the desensitized victim. The artist and his subject.

A sharp experienced smile blooms on Gangor’s lips...Says, the Camera-sir has been going around for me for a long time, Contractor. Today he’s my client, eh Sir? (Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*, 136)

Dazed and confused, Upin follows Gangor to a shack where the climax of this twisted narrative takes place. Even though he is an experienced journalist, he fails to see what is directly in front of his privileged, ignorant eyes. Gangor looks at Upin and teases that Upin paid her so much because he wanted to do more than photograph her breast. Without flinching, she says:

*Will Gangor unwind her cloth, or just lift it? Do your stuff, 20
rupees. Spend the night, 50, tell me quick
You are doing whore work, Gangor?
What's it to you, son of a whore"
You...take off...your blouse...
(Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*, 137)*

This particular conversation explicitly portrays the class conflict and depicts the hypocrisy of the upper class to suit their own immoral purposes. A man who was the root of it all shames a woman, reduced to prostitution at no fault of her own. From his moral high horse, he condemns the prostitution and yet in the very next moment, he asks her to take off her blouse. Here stood a 'man'. A man. Nothing more. Nothing less. A man in an androcentric, patriarchal world locked up in a shack with a woman whose life he had ruined remorselessly. Gangor goes on to say that he would take off her choli but she would take everything in his pocket, mocking his earlier offers of giving her money and thus reminding him that no amount of things in his pockets or the money from selling Gangor's body would make up for the humiliation, the abuse, the desecration. Then Gangor showed him what she hid her "Choli ke Picche":

*দুটি শুকনো ঘা, কুঁচকানো চামড়া, একেবারে সমতল। আগ্নেয়গিরি ক্রুদ্ব ক্রেটার দুটি
গাঙ্গোরের গলায় উপীনকে গলন্ত লাভা ছুঁতে থাকে - গ্যাংরেপ.. কামড়ে ছিঁড়ে
গ্যাংরেপ.. পুলিশ.. আদালতে কেস... আবারো লকাপে গ্যাংরেপ... এখন ঝারোয়া থেকে
সেওপুরা... সেওপুরা থেকে ঝারোয়া... ঠেকেদার গাহক ধরে.. পাবলিক সাতায়... গানা বাজায়
গানা।*

(মহাশ্বেতা দেবী, মহাশ্বেতা দেবীর শ্রেষ্ঠ গল্প, পৃ. ২৭৭-২৭৮)

(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...now from Jharoa to Seopura...Seopura to Jharoa...the Contractor catches clients...terrorizes a public...plays the song, the song...)
(Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*, 137)

There stood Upin. The man whose selfish obsession of Gangor's breasts prostituted her and lead to her gang rape. A selfish upper class man who objectified and utilized a marginalized woman for his own gain. Gangor was a regular migrant worker objectified and commodified by a man who saw her body as "art". His artistic fervour led to her body being turned into a baser commodity. Her breasts splashed across papers, stealing her dignity and laying her bare, attracting the sharks. The same sharks who are supposed to protect the people. The 'police', the upholders of law, gang raped Gangor mercilessly, cut off her breasts and gang raped her again, all because they saw what was "Choli ke Picche", all the credit to Upin's photography. The men played the song repeatedly while the boys kept asking, "Gangor, what's behind your bodice, love?" Now he knew. Behind the Bodice was the rape of the woman. The people. Behind the bodice was unspeakable crimes against humanity by the upholders of law itself and all Upin could see was her "mammal projections". His obsession objectified innocent Gangor and stole her dignity, her consent and her breasts. Her body vilified repeatedly - in the name of 'art' and to satisfy the sadistic pleasure of the animals who wore the uniform with the Ashoka Chakra. Choli ke Picche or Behind the Bodice was shame, humiliation and the pain of a million Gangors across the world, prostituted by the upper class and the privileged to satisfy their baser pleasures and their own requirements. Yet again, Mahasweta Devi presents the commodification of the body and breasts of the lower class. Gangor's own neighbours laughed at her condition and her scars, blaming her for posing for the "camera-sir". Upin became a part of the system that he vowed to fight. Upin can rightfully be considered as one of the rapists who laid bare her body for his own baser desires and requirements. On the subject of Upin, Dani Callaro's famous critique on body and perception provides greater understanding. He says:

“The body is shaped by how we see it and represent it, we are culturally trained to perceive the body in organized ways, for certain angles and through certain lenses, vision is always socially groomed” (Dani Callaro, *The Body for beginners*, 100)

Thus, the “resplendent” “Konarak” breasts that once excited Upin are now nothing more than “two raging volcanic craters”, a woman thoroughly destroyed because all Upin wanted to know was “Choli ke Picche kya hai?”

“Choli Ke Pichhe Kya Hai,ⁱⁱⁱ

Choli Ke Pichhe

Chunari Ke Niche Kya Hai,

Chunari Ke Niche

Ho Choli Mein Dil Hai Meraa,

Chunari Mein Dil Hai Meraa”

These are the three stories of the breast and the women to whom they belong. Three stories of subaltern struggles and defiance in the face of political schemes, abuse of authority, police brutality and upper class utilization. Dopdi, Jashoda and Gangor - three exemplary women who are not heroes. Much like Wilfred Owen, Mahasweta Devi does not romanticize the pain and sufferings that the three women underwent. Her writing can be considered as literature of resistance and its purpose, according to French philosopher and critic Jean Paul Sartre, “was not the enjoyment of the reader but his torment. What it presented was not a world to be contemplated, but to be changed”. A vocal activist of the downtrodden voices, Devi herself said:

"আমার লেখার মধ্যে নিশ্চয় বারবার ফিরে আসে সমাজের সেই অংশ, যাকে আমি বলি Voiceless Section of Indian Society। এই অংশ এখনো শুধু নিরক্ষর, স্বল্প সাক্ষর ও অনুন্নতই শুধু নয়, মূল স্রোতের থেকে এরা বড়ই বিচ্ছিন্ন। অথচ ভারতীয় সমাজের এই অংশকে না জানলে ভারতকে জানা যায় না।"

(My writing often has recurrent features of that section of the society whom I call the voiceless section of Indian society. This section is

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still illiterate, little literate and not only underdeveloped, they are extremely diverted from the national mainstream. But, if you do not know this section of the Indian society, you cannot know India)”

(Mahasweta Devi, *Mahasweta Devi: Selected Short Stories*, iv)

Throughout these three stories, she presents a myriad of themes ranging from patriarchal abuse, police brutality, commodification of women and their bodies as well as sexualisation and objectification. This paper presents the breast as a symbol and observes the transition and power these “mammal projections” hold. From a weapon of resistance against the animalistic abuse of Dopdi in ‘Draupadi’ to a natural phenomenon of birth and motherhood being transformed into a commercialized arrangement in ‘Stanadayini’. Again, as an object of artistic and sexual desire turned into scars of selfishness and police brutality in ‘Choli Ke Peeche’, these “fat tissue” had the power to overturn authorial abuse, put to shame the corruption in society and bring to light the animalistic police brutality. This paper studied the female characters in ‘Breast Stories’ but through their breasts and how these “mammal projections” seem to give credibility, resilience and value to the women in the world of ‘Breast Stories’. Although a conclusion provides the ending statements, in reality this paper has no conclusion or an end, as these ‘Breast Stories’ are not mere stories. They are a mirror, a portal to the thousands of unreported cases of crimes against women and act as a firm reminder of abuse of power and the commodification and sexualisation of women. The characters of Dopdi, Jashoda and Gangor are not mere characters. They represent aeons of abuse, utilization and subaltern suffering and thus provide the readers with a stark warning and a grim reminder of the vices that grip society and the marginalized sections of community. Thus, as Dante said in his ‘Inferno’: “The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis”

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VISUAL MEDIA

Exhibit A:



Roy, Jamini. "Santhal Girl." *Google Arts and Culture*, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, n.d., National Gallery of Modern Art, 1987., New Delhi, India, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/santhal-girl-jamini-roy-1887-1972/mwEBG1bNCqUKyg>. Accessed 29 Sept. 2021.

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Exhibit B:



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Roy, Jamini. "Mother and Child." *Google Arts and Culture*, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, n.d., National Gallery of Modern Art, 1987., New Delhi, India, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/mother-and-child-jamini-roy-1887-1972/CwE9ioa83tJFEQ>. Accessed 29 Sept. 2021.

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ENDNOTES

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ⁱⁱⁱ (Laxmikant-Pyarelal/Alka Yagnik & Ila Arun, *Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai*, Zee Music)



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