



The Wet-Nurse: An Eternal Story of Female Subjugation in a Capitalist Society

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was born in Dhaka in the undivided Bengal and was educated in the different parts of Bengal including Santiniketan. She completed her Master Degree in English literature at the Calcutta University and could easily enjoy her life in peace with the security of a job. But, perhaps, due to her experiences of watching people under several oppressions she chose the life of struggle- the struggle for the empowerment of the historically, politically, anthropologically, economically, socially, and sexually underprivileged and downtrodden people. Her pen did not stop for a moment till the end of her life to uphold the demands of the human rights for the segregated sections of the so called 'civilised' society. She was an internationally acclaimed writer though wrote mainly in Bengali, and a social activist. Her works are often translated in several other languages including English. Civilisation had a different meaning for her. To establish the equality in life in every respect was a vital challenge for her rather a motivational reason to live in this world. As a common prey or soft target of any and every kind of oppression women have always achieved to draw the attention of Mahasweta Devi in her writings. She has always protested against the stereotypical oppressive representations of women in reality or in the mythical or literary worlds. In this paper I would like to unfold the patriarchal politics of exploiting the womanhood through the 'hegemonic' tools of deification and mythological association under the shadow of extreme economic suppression as expressed by Mahasweta Devi through the life and suffering of Jashoda in one of her seminal short stories, *The Wet-Nurse*.

Key words: female exploitation, women emancipation, economic isolation, social corruption, capitalist subversion, patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

The story is an English translation of the original Bengali short story, *Stanadayini* written by Mahasweta Devi in 1977. Jashoda, the wife of Kangalicharan and the mother of twenty children is the central character of the story. She adopts the task of professional mother and becomes the wet-nurse of the rich Halder family for several years. The women of the Halder family started to breed children in regular intervals with the assurance of Jashoda's breast milk, to please their husbands and mother-in-law. On the other hand Jashoda took it as a favourable condition for her to nourish her children carefully and to replace her handicapped husband as the only earning member of the family. Kangalicharan loses his feet in an accident caused by the reckless driving of Halder's son. Due to this he loses his job also. But Jashoda comes at this moment as a true saviour to her family with her natural quality of producing huge amount of milk. She saves not only her own family from starvation but also protects the women of the Halder family from losing their physical beauty due to regular pregnancy. She retains the reputation of the Halder family in other way as the



men are now not involving in extra marital, illicit relationships. So she becomes, alternatively, the goddess who rears and preserves the whole humanity though in microcosmic level.

Main body

This deification of Jashoda involves a game of politics and represents a cruel and inhuman picture of female exploitation. Mahasweta Devi presents a realistic picture of the early 20th century Bengal in terms of poverty, corruption, hypocrisy and exploitation of every kind. Old Halder in his story is a corrupt businessman who has made illegal money by 'selling scrap iron' during the Second World War. Since his son was directly responsible for the loss of Kanganalicharan's feet he had promised him of financial support but he passed away suddenly. Then Jashoda goes to his house in search of job and the wife of old Halder is astonished with the view of the free flow of Jashoda's breast milk. The milk which is a natural product in a female body to feed a nascent baby becomes the blessing for Jashoda's family. The children of Halder family start to live and grow by Jashoda's milk and to retain the free flow of milk she starts to be pregnant every year. This is a miracle that she is able to feed sufficiently both her biological children and the children in Halder household. Everyone starts to believe that she is an incarnation of *Simhavahini*, the popular goddess of the local temple. *Halder Ginni* (the female head of the Halder household) regards her as *Kamdhenu*, a mythological cow who could produce an endless amount of milk with the blessing of the God. The mythological association is there also in the name of 'Jashoda' which is the name of the foster-mother of Lord Krishna in Mahabharata.

Mahasweta Devi's short story is full of vindictive irony and she does not even hesitate to criticise the mythological stories and characters for the injustice done there to the deprived one. Lord Krishna at one time left the house of Jashoda forever without any consideration of her service and dedication to bring him up. Likewise here the 'milk mother of the world' Jashoda is left to die a painful death in isolation in a Govt. hospital of breast cancer. Neither her biological children nor the one for whom she was only a wet-nurse cared to be present at the time of her final departure. No one cared to burn her dead body even sympathetically with proper rituals. But Jashoda expected that, at least someone would be there to hold her hands at the last time to pay back their debts of Jashoda's milk. But Jashoda's death is the death of a goddess and of a belief that selfless sacrifice wins the bliss of everlasting joy.

Being poor in a capitalist society is a curse but being a poor woman is to face a 'double jeopardy' in that society which is absolutely patriarchal by nature. Jashoda's service is won by only a mere help of two times meal, dress in some occasions and some money at the end of every month. Mahasweta Devi attacks the scriptural books and religion as a 'discourse' utilised by the upper strata of the society to control and institutionalise the lower class people. Jashoda suffers from a rootless entity where her memory is erased and thereby becomes only the wife of Kanganalicharan and faces the cruel exploitation of the rich and male-dominated society due to her femininity and poverty:

"...right from her birth she has been just Kanganalicharan's wife and the mother of twenty children..." Her existence is now only a 'body without organ'. She cannot feel, think and choose.

Her body is the symbol of desire. Her husband is always in a mood to 'fondle her full breast'. Nabin Panda, a friend of Kanganalicharan dreams 'full-breasted, heavy-hipped Jashoda', son of 'Halder baby' watches her closely while she feeds the baby, *Halder Ginni* envies her 'mammary projections'. Such is the power of the domination of patriarchal forces that Jashoda starts to believe that she is the 'avatar' of the goddess and has the legacy to serve and preserve the whole humanity. She dreams of the goddess *Simhavahini* dressed as a mid-wife and thereby dedicates herself in the service of her family and husband. Kanganalicharan, in spite of all her services sometimes suspects her of adultery. She weeps and surrenders at the feet of her 'lord' and says "you are my lord and master as well as my teacher, my guru." Nabin panda, an acute opium eater is suffering from a kind of 'Oedipus complexity' as he gets occasional glimpses of mother *Simhavahini* under the shadow of highly erotic body of Jashoda. His attraction to the sexual appeal of Jashoda's body wanes at the advancement



of time and when he finds no hope to get her he aggravates her life by making an arrangement of separation between her and Kanganalicharan. His 'envy' and 'revenge' is due to the lack of fulfilment of filial desire dominated by incestuous love and sex. Kanganalicharan is often attracted to his wife as the children are to their mother. He "induced a feeling of filial love and rubbed his face against Jashoda's breasts like a little Gopal (another name of Lord Krishna)." Jashoda's body becomes a dream of a farmer or a geologist and to make it more fertile or maximum productive they 'plough' or 'drill' it severely.

Jashoda lives to fulfil the desire and desires to live a life of fulfilment and significance. She serves with a hope of salvation. But irony of her fate prevents her dream to be fulfilled. She becomes the symbol of betrayed motherhood. Not only as a mother but also as a wife or 'servant' she is not given proper respect and honour. But hope does not die before the death of Jashoda. She expected till the end that someone would hold her hand. The tragic feeling is less forceful than the suffering she tolerated both physically and emotionally. Mahasweta Devi at some point rejected to be considered as a feminist in this context of the story of 'Jashoda'. She perhaps tried to show her beyond sex, gender and class. The hypocrisy and domination of a capitalist society is probably the main concern for her where the person like Jashoda suffers as a 'proletariat' in the hands of patriarchal 'bourgeois' forces. Jashoda is a milk producing machine, who only produces for her benefit of its master and thereby, after losing efficiency rejected as a useless scrap. Religious beliefs and mythological concepts are used as only a hegemonic tool to control and exploit the innocence self of Jashoda. She is conceptualised as merely to expect from and provide, never to be returned in any term. Rather she is represented not worthy to be compensated at all. This condition of jashoda reminds us of a famous short story, *The Ox* by H.E.Bates where Mrs.Thurlow serves her family, husband and children like a 'beast of burden'. At the end she is also betrayed and brutally left in this lonely world to suffer. So the patriarchal and capitalist domination in this materialistic world over the women has become a pattern through the Ages. Mahasweta Devi has furthermore extended the ambit of exploitation and treachery of this hypocritical world centered only around money and power. The prolific exploitation of the political system is also a matter of concern for Mahasweta Devi who says in connection to express the condition of Kanganalicharan in the Post-death era of 'Halder babu':

"All the wishes of the Goddess uttered around Kanganali, with Halder babu as a via media, now disappeared into thin air like the blazing pre-election promises made by political parties".

Conclusion

So the gloomy and pessimistic world of exploitation in the early 20th century Bengal gets a vivid and realistic representation in this short story of Mahasweta Devi. She wrote this story in the latter half of the nineteen seventies but chose the background of the early 20th century Bengal. And she relates this background to the mythological past present the theme of eternal female subjugation in any of the patriarchal societies. So the intension is to show that the emancipation of women in the 'history' of this patriarchal, subversive, capitalist society is a mirage- an illusion.

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