

Strengthening of Self through Language: *Breast Stories* by Mahasweta Devi

Vibha Bhoot

Language is a man made approach. It is a device to establish rapport and communication at all levels in man's life. It is very difficult to put the saddle on to the horse of life without language. As Shakespeare also said that empty or hollow words without significant thoughts "never to heaven go". Language is essential to connect as well as to remain within the limited circle of fringes of humanity also, language is mandatory. So it precisely becomes a tool for strengthening and empowerment of one's own social arena. Mahasweta Devi, although writes in Bengali, yet when her works were translated by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, we are exposed to a new world where women stand not only as an emblem of success but true to themselves. *Breast Stories* is a collection of three short stories. It talks about the abuse of women in the most violent ways possible. Women, who have not attended any school, are considered only as a chattel to be used and who are bodies but not souls. They are used in multiple ways and when the muddled image of a woman is provided, we feel that it is more catastrophically wounded than ever. Here, language has a power to inform us but on the second hand, the emotions have been translated by Gayatri Spivak so aptly, that it unwinds the mysteries and the secrets of the heart. It is a sense of achieving "power over" and "power to be".

Developing a sense of belonging and denying all disagreements also make a meaningful difference. Here "Draupadi" a tribal rebel is raped by the authorities of the village. Her reactions are unexpectedly different. Her language, her pauses, aggression and the venom that she pukes out, thicken the plot. The bodies that we worship, the ideal to which a woman should be dynamic, active both physically and verbally, assertive and independent, is shattered. Her expressions are not foreign to the purpose but rare. After her rape "she wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that's terrifying, sky spitting and as sharp as here ululation. What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (37) "She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, there isn't a man here that I should be ashamed." (37) She is presented as a woman of strong character from within. Here acerbic accusations are suggestive of the frustrations that she carries as a scar on her soul. The language is pithy. Short sentences show strong feelings. The biting remark "Are you a man?" is piercing.

The post assault behavior by Dopdi is all about anger and aggression. She does not get involved in self blame as most of the women do. She is revengeful and at the same time manages to do so through her words. She does not provoke anyone nor is she vulnerable now. She walks with her "head up". Dopdi makes it sure that the people who are guilty should not glamorize the shameful act. She, through her body language as well as the words, makes it very clear that who is to blame and for what. Why should she feel guilty of what the Senanayak's men have done? "Devi's Draupadi hits all the marks—it has a lower-caste protagonist actively subverting the Hindu/Colonial regime, is extremely empathetic to not just its

protagonist but also the communities it talks about, and it still manages to portray exclusion from the 'mainstream' as a privilege. Celebrations of resistance, congratulations on portraying diversity 'correctly' serve an extremely limited purpose at best, and actively engender a frame of seeing the 'always resisting marginalized body' (in a warped way, justifying the marginalization because the 'strong Dalit women can handle it anyway'). 'Good representations' harm too, and it's quite imperative we remember that as we congratulate ourselves on 'resisting the Empire.' Resistance isn't a medal one can flash—not when one's survival depends on it." (<http://bitchmagazine.org/post/resisting-resistance-on-mahashveta-devi%E2%80%99s-draupadi-feminist-magazine-colonialism-india-literature>). Their condition is so pitiable after the rape that many succumb to the injuries of this conspicuous consumption. "However, the real problem is why is this crime creating such a lot of outrage is because it plays into the idea of the criminal poor, like the vegetable vendor, gym instructor or bus driver actually assaulting a middle class girl. Whereas when rape is used as a means of domination by upper castes, the army or the police it is not even punished," said the feted author, Arundhati Roy. When asked if there was any chance that these huge protests are going to ring in some genuine change, Roy said, "I think it will lead to some new laws perhaps, an increased surveillance, but all of that will protect middle class women. But in cases of the army and the police as perpetrators, we are not looking for laws. What do you do when the police themselves burn down villages, gang-rape women? I have personally listened to so many testimonies of women to whom this has been done" (<http://womenagainstrape.net/content/statement-rural-women-india-recent-events-delhi>). No one listens; no one feels so here Dopdi's reaction is justified when she manages to at least blame the Senanayak and finds a vent for her anger.

In another story of a Dalit woman, who is seen as an object by the jaundiced eye of men and society, is Jashoda, a wet nurse. She is a destitute and so her body is used to breast feed the children of the Haldars. Munshi Premchand wrote a story on the same theme *Doodh ka Dum*. The motive is that the body of the woman is treated as a machine to produce milk when some coins are put into it. Jashoda's body is trivialized here. The narrative sequence opens with the dealings with the cook. She loses her job because of the clandestine activities of the youngest of the Haldar's son. "He stole his mother's ring, slipped it into the look's pillowcase, raised a hue and cry, and got the cook kicked out." (39) Before this, one day driven by lust, he had sex with the cook and asked her not to tell it to anyone. The son of Haldar is also guilty for rolling over the car on the legs of Kanglicharan (Jashoda's husband) and thus destroying a family under the wheels of a car as he had been the only breadwinner. When Haldar's son is accused, Haldar assures his victim, "Don't worry, son! You won't suffer as long as I am around". (41) But the survival of the poor family is jeopardized and feudalism fails to understand the pain of sleeping hungry at nights.

Feeding kids over the years consumes her body and she is detected of breast cancer. Maltreatment starts at the hands of Haldars and she is discarded like some old piece of furniture. In ancient Rome, well-to-do households would have had wet-nurses among their slaves and freedwomen. She is also hired by a well-off family so that the women who gave birth to children could keep their figures and get ready for conceiving

again as soon as possible. "The wives are happy. They can keep their figures. They can wear blouses and bras of 'European cut'. After keeping the fast of Shiva's night by watching all-night picture shows they are no longer obliged to breast-feed their babies." (52) The basis of women's oppression lies in her defenselessness during pregnancy and childbirth. She is unable to work, except for the work of childbearing; she is able to work at partial strength only and feels both mentally and physically fragile. This varies from woman to woman, and pregnancy to pregnancy, but is however universal to some degree. In a class society, this creates a major contradiction between classes. The capitalist class requires the next generation of workers and therefore needs women to perform this reproductive role, the so-called reproduction of labour power. However, at the same time, the very existence of the capitalist class depends on being able to take out profit of working class men and women as workers. This helplessness and this challenge are resolved by different societies in different ways. Under capitalism, it is a contradiction on which the whole variety of women's subjugation has been built, with the collusion in working class men at some stages, and with the establishment of male power and male profit.

One theme constantly raised among our breastfeeding mothers was their acknowledgment that the breastfeeding experience allowed an increase in self-recognition and self-respect. This was often an unexpected profit that had a major impact on the way in which they conceptualized their motherhood experiences. Here it was totally a contradiction to all that has been said for years. Jashoda fed the kids of Haldars for a very long time in her life. She was expecting a lifetime relation with the kids whom she had fed. But once, when she was detected of breast cancer, she was discarded, as her purpose of being in the Halдар house had ended. Her dilemma is that she is rejected by her family too. She dies a painful death. "She was cremated by an untouchable". (73) According to Lois Tyson, in every area where patriarchy is in control, "woman is *other*: she is objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have" (Tyson 9).

The language here harmonizes with her plight. "'Language is a weapon; it's not for shaving your armpits.' So says eminent Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi in this documentary about her life and work." (Shashwati Talukdar, *A Study Guide for the Film: "Mahasweta Devi: Witness, Advocate, Writer"* by color, 27 min, 2001 <http://www.der.org/films/mahasweta-devi.html2>). We are compelled to feel the insipidness of the world and it seems that all is hollow. The fact that the women that employ Jashoda are in fact playing a role in oppressing her contradicts the feminist notion of "sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy" (Tyson 119) There is just an appearance that we are living as human. We are animals from within, actually. The last short story in the book is of a Rajasthan's tribal woman, Gangor. Once, while breast feeding, and was photographed by a journalist. She somehow knew that the photograph would be misused. He offered her some money. Upin, the journalist, gets her photograph published on the front page of a newspaper. Gangor had asked him for some descent work. "...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)

There is a fantasy that enters Upin's head after meeting Gangor. He started viewing her as a sexual object and compares her natural breasts to his wife's silicon implanted breasts. He views Shital's breasts as "plastic flowers" – straight and erect always. "According to Charles Darwin and his *Theory of Evolution*, we subconsciously select partners who are healthy and appear capable of reproduction – According to his research, men are attracted to bosoms (especially the more shapely variety) because they are indicative of a strong constitution and an ability to further propagate the species. Although reproduction is no longer our top priority, this instinct remains despite centuries of evolution" (<http://www.ivillage.com/men-confess-why-theyre-breast-obsessed-0/4-a-283769>). Here we notice a distortion of thought process which is linked to the predicament of a poor woman who is so helpless that she is compelled to sell her photo that may cater to the men's desire for her body. So the breasts lose their significance of mothering and become an arousal object. Media is also responsible to put social conditionings on to women. The body being covered by a *dupatta* and the cultural conditioning of a mother feeding a child inside the *chaardiwaari* are also imposed on a woman. Why can't women feed a baby in public? So the statement that men go in for full bodied women and breasts hold sexual significance only, is proved.

So after Upin is in his town, the newspaper unexpectedly reaches the village where Gangor lived. She was accused for nude modeling by the villagers. Her breasts were removed as a punishment. She was deprived of her beauty as well as the milk for her child. She was ostracized. The gender bias and severity of punishment forces her to live a secluded life of a prostitute outside the limits of the village.

The pretentiousness of the world flashes through the language that is used by Gayatri Spivak. The whole system is filled with clichés is exaggerated through the language that is used in translation. The dull sorrowful conditioning and above all the short and piercing sentences bite into the soul while reading. The high levels of anxiety, self alienation and permanent detachment to any kind of sexual feeling occur after reading the text by Mahasweta Devi. The effects of sexual violence match the words chosen by Spivak. She is able to bring out the pain through her language. The biting cold expression of Dopdi, the trauma of Jashoda and the sense of loss of Gangor have a poignant message that these protagonists use is not of a defeated and helpless woman. It is a discourse of the women with a message to the society. The anger, the embittered view of the world and the upsetting circumstances – all combine to create a picture of oppressed women. Yet the expression and the power of words used is appreciable. It is a communication with self. The statements are ambiguous yet emphatic.

When Dopdi says – "you cannot clothe me", she challenges the masculinity of men. She puts a question mark over male role in the society. Is he born to protect or undress a woman's body? So the entire humanity is under scrutiny. Her laugh is venomous and sarcastic. But here she is the hero and her existence is more powerful than those who raped her. Her powerlessness becomes her power through her dialogues. She stands as a challenge to humanity. Gangor is also one of the characters

who is a challenge to humanity when she removes her clothing and says, “You are a bastard too Sir ... you took photoks of my chest....eh? Okay...I’ll show ... but I’ll take everything from your pocket...” (154)

She has no breasts but two scars, of removed breasts! Alas what a pity and shame to humanity. The brutality ends when her breasts are removed having her to become a prostitute – erotic object turned to an ugly available body speaks out the violence that ends up in a tragedy. Upin, who had photographed her, as a consequence of his own guilt, is dead in the end of the story. Ironically, what caused such a tragedy was an article “Stop Rape” in the newspaper. A poor woman is subject to subalternity owing to her lack of education which limits her access to power. While we speak of a male, even if uneducated, at least has physical strength to fight for himself. She is subjected to the same laws of patriarchy. Virginity and chastity become the characteristics of a good woman. Her short and pithy language shows intensity of emotions. All she has in her is anger, but no fear. Anger about why – what was her fault? Fear of no one, as now no one wants to come to this once very beautiful body. The desire to live life is the basic instinct to a human being, but no one wishes to live a hell. Why must anyone create his happy life on the ashes of someone’s dream? We are forced to ask ourselves that are we appropriately called humans even without the slightest element of humanity in ourselves? The stirred up thoughts and a contemplating soul appreciates the root cause i.e. Mahasweta Devi’s text *Breast Stories*.

Works Cited

- Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*, Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Calcutta: Seagull Books 2010 (All the subsequent notes will appear in parentheses).
- Lois Tyson, “Feminist Criticism” *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006.