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## A STUDY OF FEMALE BODY AS AN OBJECT OF PATRIARCHAL GAZE AND RESISTANCE TO IT IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S BREAST STORIES

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**Abstract:** Mahasweta Devi, one of the most prominent writer in India, always talked about Indian women and their struggles in various layers they face as the women of the third world. Devi was a preacher of humanity and liberation and her writings always reflected these thoughts. Three of her famous stories in Bengali titles as “Draupadi”, “Stanadayini” and “Choli ke Pichhe”, which were taken and translated by famous scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak into a collection titled Breast Stories (the stories are titled “Draupadi”, “Breast-giver” and “Behind the Bodice” in English respectively) are taken as source texts for this paper. In this paper, the various forms and aspects of exploitation of the female body, as presented by the author as a contemporary socio-political and socio-economic issue and how under certain circumstances they are also found to the resistance, will be discussed.

The first story, “Draupadi”, talks about the protagonist Draupadi or Daupdi, who throughout her life fighting against the oppression over her community and land, got arrested and as a spectacle of punishment for the transgression of acting against the authority is stripped off all her clothes and raped multiple times. As patriarchal agents find this the ultimate weapon against the second sex (a patriarchal term for female), it turns out to be the boomerang when Draupadi denies her clothes and uses her raped bare body with pride and fearlessness to mute the Senanayak. The second story, “Breast-giver” displays how female body part can be used to fulfill the existential demand at the cost of the life of Jashoda. The demand of patriarchal aspects towards the female body is also found to be served at the same time. The third story, “Behind the Bodice”, talks about the aesthetics of the female body and the need to preserve them but at the same time, very paradoxically, it fails to address the way of securing the female herself. The protagonist, Gangor, keeps making her living using her body (specially her breasts which are mentioned as the aesthetical part which were chopped off by the police after rape) finally turns violent and shouts out her vengeance against the society which did this to her. The photographer who used to praise her breasts couldn't bear her rage and died while running from her on learning about her condition.

This paper discusses about the various tropes of female body used by the author in the abovementioned stories and how these tropes succeed and fails to create the resistance at various level of the society.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Docile, Resistance, Body, Suppression.

### Introduction

Mahasweta Devi was not only a prominent Bengali author but also a devoted activist of equal right. Her works successfully speak for the marginalised tribes, showcase their struggle for freedom. Through her literary creations, she has been vocal about the poor condition of third world women and the aggressive oppression of patriarchal norms over them. Throughout all her life she remained with them, fought for their equality and thus her writings share her firsthand experience regarding the marginalised tribes, especially the women.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the eminent Indian scholar and feminist critic, has translated three of Devi's famous and critically acclaimed stories "Draupadi", "Stanadayini" and "Choli ke Pichhe" into English titled "Draupadi", "Breast-giver" and "Behind the Bodice" respectively under the collection titled Breast Stories. Breast Stories, takes up the breast as the device as the title suggests, to demystify the patriarchal practices to subvert women. Devi has been blunt about the patriarchal standpoint and the drills her protagonists have to face in the story. As Spivak goes on to say:

The breast is not a symbol in these stories. In 'Draupadi', what is represented is an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between (hetero)sexuality and gender-violence begins to waver. In 'Breast-giver', it is a survival object transformed into a commodity, making visible the indeterminacy between filial piety and gender-violence, between house and temple, between domination and exploitation... In 'Behind the Bodice', she bitterly decries the supposed 'normality' of sexuality as male violence... If 'the girl doesn't understand the police are men too, they will craze if you tease them.' (vii)

In the three stories, though talking about patriarchal clutches women had to face irrespective of their class or caste, the situational outcomes can be divided into two sections. In one scenario the women submit to these patriarchal pressures and in another scenario, they come out resistant if not victorious against the patriarchal super forces.



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Though Draupadi or Dopdi in the first story of the collection called "Draupadi" (titled "Draupadi" in Bengali as well) and Gangor in the third one called "Behind the Bodice" (originally titled as "Choli ke Pichhe"), were successful in resisting the patriarchal pressures upon them; Jashoda, the wet nurse in "Breast-giver" (titled as "Stanadayini" in Bengali) on the other hand succumbs to the patriarchal web of the existential power play.

In all these three stories, the usage of the female body as an object of the patriarchal gaze is recurrent. There is a continuous process on part of the patriarchal masters to enslave the female protagonists using their own body against them with the help of the apparatuses like dominance, torture, shame and pain. And this suppression doesn't only occur in the tribal society, this is a well-practised notion in the upper caste Hindu society as well. Thus, tribal women like Draupadi or Gangor is not only the victim of this patriarchal gazing and fights against it but Jashoda, a Brahmin woman also finds herself in this gazing trajectory and cannot stand against this and eventually becomes a tool.

### Docility

In the story "Breast-giver", Jashoda, a Brahmin woman starts to work as a wet nurse at the house of her husband's master when her husband lost his leg and became unable to work and earn for his family. Jashoda started to breastfeed the children of her mistress's house. In return, she used to get food for her family. But to do so, she has to get impregnated continuously or otherwise she cannot produce breast milk.

Jashoda becomes very conscious of her breasts as these are now the tools for her to support her family. She washes her breasts with soap and oil every day as she has to feed the children of her mistress and also cautions her husband to handle her breasts carefully and says, "Look. I'm going to pull our weight with these. Take good care how you use them." (46)

The situation created here, is deceiving for Jashoda. She has been placed very carefully by society in such a place where she finds herself exceptional and godly. She has no clue of the folly she has been tricked into. For her husband, it became the most welcoming opportunity to fulfil his bodily satisfaction in the name of helping in Jashoda's profession. The mistress found the situation beneficial as her daughters-in-law will be mothers without hampering their health, thus their physical beauty will not be ruined and her sons will not look outside or harass the maidservants as they will remain faithful to their beautiful wives. Mrs. Haldar, the mistress justifies the thing and thinks in her mind, "Going out because they can't get it at home- this is just." (45) For the sons, the second son, who was "...also interested in that the wife remains beautiful at the same time." (45) besides impregnating the wives, found out the way "...hearing from his wife about Jashoda's surplus milk..." (45) It was beneficial for the wives as well as, "They can keep their figures. They can wear blouses and bras of 'European cut'." (48)

In this story, people of two families are dependent and connected by the body (the breasts specifically) of Jashoda. Everyone finds the use of her breasts effective in terms of profit and pleasure one way or another. Her populous body, her envious "mammary projections" become the object of the gaze for her husband and the people of the Haldar family, a target to feast upon. Jashoda's body is like a text which constantly interpreted in various ways by her husband and the members of the Haldar family. She is ensnared eventually into the condition. She has eyes of the people around her fixed on her body, the docile one.

According to Foucault, "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved." (Foucault, 5, 1995) Thus, Jashoda's body is subjected by the people around her, is has been used for their benefit and transformed into a source of that benefit, at least for a time being. It is noteworthy to notice how the entire stage is set for a woman to step into the patriarchal snare of body politics where she has no hint of the exploitation she has agreed to go through with pride. And thus, Jashoda becomes the Goddess of the giver and finds illumination by saying "Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit?" (46)

Jashoda's body eventually becomes the currency of fulfilment for many in exchange for her body itself. With the death of the mistress, Mrs Haldar, Jashoda's position in the house comes down. She has been asked to earn her meal being a cook in the Haldar house, provided she has to live with other house servants in the same manner. Her husband, Kandalicharan shook off all the responsibilities and stayed away from Jashoda. "Jashoda understood that her usefulness had ended not only in the Haldar house but also for Kangali." (53)

Though she never found the trajectory to resist the exploitation she went through, her body eventually started the revolt. After rearing thirty children with her breast milk, the extreme labour caused breast-cancer. People of the Haldar family ignored the thing and Jashoda washed her breasts again with soap and oil as she thought it was all that was needed to mend her tools. Haldar family called for a doctor for they have the fear of having a death of Brahmin woman in the house may bring a curse upon them.



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Jashoda starts to realize her situation. She understood that "...good fortune was her ability to bear children. All this misfortune happened to her as soon as that vanished." (56) Her days of services were over, thus her importance ended as well. But a docile one is always hopeful of the mercy of its oppressor. Though she had no expectation from her husband who had a 'belly-centred consciousness' (61), lying in the death bed:

Jashoda couldn't open her eyes, but she understood that some people were looking at her hand. a needle pricked her arm. Painful breathing inside. Has to be. Who is looking? Are these her own people? The people whom she suckled because she carried them, or those she suckled for a living? Jashoda thought, after all, she had suckled the world, could she then die alone? (68)

Jashoda was used by the people around her in a blindfold consciousness. Her body, her breasts were the objects. Objects of control for society. As Foucault says:

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

The exploitation Jashoda undertook proudly, maybe was to support her existential battle against poverty and hunger for her and her family, still, there was multilayered exploitation where patriarchy set its claws and prospered over the docile body of Jashoda until it was completely utilised. She has been constantly used as a source of pleasure of bodily fulfilment by her husband and a point of emancipation from all the trouble without disturbing the production of progeny for her mistress Mrs. Haldar. And she has done all these things with a sense of pride and responsibility. Maybe she was unable to recognise the folly of this patriarchal pattern or she submitted herself before this superstructure even if it has caused her life.

### Resistance

The first story of this collection is "Draupadi". Draupadi, who calls herself Dopdi, is a Naxalite leader and is being chased by the authority for quite a long time. Dopdi Mejen is a tribal woman. Every one of her team is dead, including her husband. The dead body of her husband has been used as bait to catch her but she remained out of their ambush. She remains a silent vigilante and fights for the freedom of her tribe tirelessly.

On the other hand, Senanayak is determined to catch her at any cost. He has all the skills and knowledge of such operations as he has been doing such things successfully over the years. He has his mantra regarding his works as he says, "In order to destroy the enemy, become one." (19) He plays by his own rules. And in his rules, all the rules of his prey are included as well.

But the process gets elongated and complicated. Senanayak becomes doubtful whether the people of the tribe still remember the code they were taught. Otherwise, it will be almost impossible for the Senanayak to trace and arrest Draupadi alias Dopdi for code of conduct is the basic criteria for the patriarchal authority for its subjects to follow. The code of conduct that is launched by them and taught to its subjects so that the authority can oppress them easily. Through the code of conduct, they set the pattern in the psyche of their subjects using which they can suppress them without much hitch.

Eventually, Draupadi alias Dopdi gets arrested for the betrayal of the people of her tribe. She has been taken to the camp of Senanayak and after an hour of questioning the Senanayak commands, "Make her. Do the needful." (31) Thus, she is made and the needful is done. She gets raped multiple times by the soldiers until she becomes senseless.

Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nailheads shift from her brain. 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? (31)

Draupadi alia Dopdi understands the meaning of making now. A sense of shaming in the form of tears comes down of her eyes and she faints again. After some time when she gets her sense back, she is taken to a tent and, a pot of water and her clothes are given to her. Draupadi pours the water down on the ground and tears the cloth into pieces. Draupadi alias Dopdi starts to break the conventional code of patriarchy. She doesn't play by the rule. "Seeing such strange behaviour, the guard says, she's gone crazy, and runs for orders." (32)



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Any patriarchal structure has always its own web of orders and the order flows like the blood of the structure where the hierarchy provides those orders and the lower part works to make those orders fulfil. And the entire structure works together. In "Draupadi", Devi has successfully created this patriarchal structure where the guards are the lower part of the structure and Senanayak is the head of the snake, at least one head of the many, one of the hierarchical agents. Thus, the guards seek his orders. But, before any order is conveyed Draupadi alias Dopdi goes to Senanayak by herself and stands before him. "Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds." (33) Senanayak facing such a strange situation loses his words. "Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhnen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?" (33)

Devi very bluntly used the word 'object' as Draupadi is an object of gaze for the Senanayak, as a female for male, a tribal for higher class society, a docile object for the patriarchal masters. But the equation gets topsy-turvy as Draupadi denounces the outcome forced upon her. She denounces the shame forced upon her naked body. She denounces the pain and sense of losing forced upon her with repeated rape. She announces her revolt against the patriarchal agency by tearing her clothes.

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation. What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? (33)

Draupadi or Dopdi rejects being an object of the patriarchal agency. Her action upon being stripped off and molested is alien towards the patriarchal agents like Senanayak and his guards. She becomes unfathomable by them as she rejects the idea of being ashamed of her naked body in front of the Senanayak and the soldiers. She rejects them as a man. She violates the patriarchal rules by not being dominated by pain and shame. On the contrary, her resistance against those patriarchal policies pushes the soldiers and the Senanayak back as: "Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid." (33)

This fear is the fear of loss. Loss of the code of conduct. Senanayak is an agent of patriarchy who rules by the code. Senanayak tirelessly works to keep this code intact and a guidebook for everyone to follow. "In fact, he knows that, as in the old popular song, turn by turn the world will change. And in every world, he must have the credentials to survive with honour. if necessary, he will show the future to what extent he alone understands the matter in its proper perspective." (19)

**As Foucault observes:**

...the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit; (Foucault, 5, 1995)

Thus, Senanayak is a soldier, made by the patriarchal methods to cater to the patriarchal authorities. And after torturing Draupadi alias Dopdi, he wanted to create a spectacle as an example for anyone who tries to violate the rules to follow. But Draupadi alias Dopdi became the rebel. Like she has rejected the Sanskrit pronunciation of her name as Sanskrit was the language of the Aryan masters, she has rejected the code of conduct regarding her body set by the authority under the patriarchal norms.

In "Behind the Bodice", Devi introduces us to Gangor, the labourer woman, who gets the attention of a well-to-do photographer Upin. Upin finds Gangor's breasts unique as the breasts are natural and great in shape. Upin takes photographs of Gangor and in exchange, she doesn't forget to ask for money. Upin understands Gangor is no dull. She has a sense of reality. But eventually, Gangor and her breasts enter into Upin's mind. He talks about the aesthetical value of the breasts and the need to preserve such natural creation. "He felt that Gangor and her chest were endangered." (130)

But, as he returns to Jharoa after some time, he finds Gangor missing and no one in the area is ready to talk about her in any way. The silence bothers Upin. In his next visit, he gets the information from the Caretaker who says to Upin, "...You ruined her with your picture Sir, otherwise, how would she dare?" (132)

Gangor gets arrested and taken in custody in Seopura. The Caretaker continues to narrate the sins Gangor has committed by tempting police: "The police came here because of the girl so many times...so many times...when the girl doesn't understand the police are men too, they will craze if you tease them." (133) The Caretaker informs Upin that Gangor is not a good woman. "She will smear



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the police, and the police will let her go? Have they ever? She could have run off on the train [train]... but she pressed charges... she has to show up, and the police will..." (133)

Gangor like Draupadi doesn't agree with the code of conduct pressed upon her by the people of her village. She continuously struggles her way into society. Her body as the Caretaker states has become the source of all the sins and thus to give her proper lessons she has been arrested by the complaint of the villagers. She is a transgressor, and patriarchy never welcomes transgression. Thus, she has to be punished.

Upin finds Gangor at the chullu (an indigenous liquor) store and then he follows her back to her room where she works as a prostitute now. She treats Upin as one of her regular customers when she says: "You snapped many many times my chest, Sir. But I knew your plan. Otherwise, would you have given so much cash?" (137) Gangor is aware of the gaze her body is put under by the people around her. She finds Upin no exception. Though she accepts the fact, she doesn't accept the verdict of being a transgressor that is put upon her by the patriarchal society. She uses her body to snatch her existence away from the patriarchal society itself. She rejects the sense of sin and shame. She continues to instruct Upin, "Will Gangor unwind her cloth, or just lift it? Do you stuff, 20 rupees. Spend the night, 50, tell me quick." (137)

But as Upin struggles to believe that Gangor is using her body to earn her living, thus neglecting the aesthetics of her body and eventually ruining it, he hesitantly asks, "You are doing whore work, Gangor?" (137) Upin fails to recognize what is there at stake for Gangor. Gangor gets infuriated. "Gangor breathes hard. Says in a voice ragged with anger, don't you hear? Constantly playing it, singing it, setting the boys on me... behind the bodice...the bodice...choli ke piche...chole ke..." (137)

Gangor drags down Upin on the surface of reality with a thud. Gangor unfolds the notions of patriarchal conventions without fail. She uncovers her chest and shows Upin the residue of what his aesthetical senses projected as unique and needed to be preserved. 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... (137)

Upin gets the thunder of what he has done. Just like a push that makes things fall towards the ground due to gravity, to Gangor, Upin's sensation regarding her breasts is like that push, which aroused the patriarchal practices to consume her completely with all its apparatuses like gravity.

But Gangor doesn't play by the rules just like Draupadi. She starts to use the patriarchal whims against it. Though she is forced by the Contractor who gets her clients, she continuously strives for her existence without succumbing to it. She plays along with the anticipation just like the song 'choli ke piche kya hai (what is behind the bodice)' and befools the men who attend her room to fulfil their quest to pleasure. And finally, when she got the chance, she confronts Upin. She makes him understand how he also acted under the patriarchal norms and how in the name of the aesthetical senses fulfilled a kind of voyeuristic pleasure.

Upin comes out, Gangor is still screaming, talking, kicking the corrugated tin walls with abandon. Upin runs. There is no non-issue behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it, Upin would have known if he had wanted to, could have known. (138)

Upin never wanted to know indeed. His idea of preservation of Gangor and her breasts is a folly. His sense of aesthetics regarding the natural and unique body part of Gangor behind the bodice is false. Gangor never gets into those pseudo-ideologies of Upin. From the first day, she asks for money for taking her photo. She doesn't hesitate to press charges against the police when they rape her. She remains aware of the gaze, never loses control over her body and never lets her body move over her existence and identity. Her resistance against the patriarchal norms costs her torture, shaming and even tearing apart of her breasts. But she is never subdued. Just like Draupadi, she stands tall, and just like Senanayak, Upin moves back.

### Conclusion

The patriarchal developments started about twelve thousand years ago with agricultural achievements and land ownerships. With this, the notions of foul or unusual regarding the female body come into our thoughts and eventually, the gender line is created. Patriarchy constructs bodies along gender lines. The social theory of the body takes gender and power into account. Gender identity is assumed by many to be natural, but in actual fact, it is a process of socialisation where since birth every individual is made to fit into



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male or female categories adopting masculine or feminine roles, qualities and behaviour at any cost. (SABALA and MEENA GOPAL, 2010)

Thus, Jashoda or Draupadi or Gangor, are all women who have been made to fit into the patriarchy dominated society without raising any query or suggestion. "Women are always under pressure to conform to family, society and community expectations." (SABALA and MEENA GOPAL, 2010) Thus they have to remain docile and submissive. Otherwise, tensions occur. The pivot upon which the patriarchy finds it's balancing gets dislocated.

Devi's creation of these three protagonists speaks about the condition of women in the Third world. As she was active towards the emancipation of marginalised people her writings are more intricate in describing their problem.

In "Breast-giver", Jashoda is taken by patriarchal politics to put her body at stake. Her family and her mistress's family use her through her body and she gets entrapped, thus remains unable to build the resistance which costs her life.

But, in "Draupadi", Draupadi cuts through the patriarchal web and when she gets arrested, Senanayak treats her according to the patriarchal code of conduct, raping her and thus tries to snatch away sense of belonging from her with the tool of shaming. Draupadi violates the code and stands her head held high in front of the patriarchal agent Senanayak, looking into his eyes and questioning him about his failed authority over her and her body. Her own body which supposed to be the spectre of shame haunting her down turns out to be the sceptre of resistance with leaves Senanayak speechless and confused as this became an uncharted territory for him.

In "Behind the Bodice", Gangor also terrifies Upin with her sense of authority over her body. She never fails to challenge the patriarchal gaze and their behaviour towards her and her body even though she has to live under constant torture and pain. She does not submit and Upin cannot bear the sight of her resistance. He runs away.

In terms of resistance, Jashoda being a Brahmin housewife remains entrapped and lost her life being a victim of patriarchal body politics; but Draupadi and Gangor, the illiterate, marginalised and tribal women, counter-challenge the patriarchal authority with their tortured bodies. Thus, a female body that is considered to be the docile object of social, political and economic control inside the patriarchal power play can be a baton of resistance in time that can question and stop the patriarchal authority, at least for a time being if not upside down it completely. As Spivak declares:

Of course, this voice of male authority also fades. Once Dopdi enters, in the final section of the story, the postscript area of lunar flux and sexual difference, she is in a place where she will finally act for herself in not 'acting', in challenging the man to (en)counter her as unrecorded or misrecorded objective historical monument. The army officer is shown as unable to ask the authoritative ontological question, what is this? (11-12)

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