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## Women's Quest for Identity: Represented in the stories of Mahasweta Devi

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**Priyanka Patle<sup>1</sup>** (Research Scholar)

**Prof. Kalpana Paul<sup>2</sup>**(Professor),  
Govt. D.B Girl's P.G College, Raipur (C.G)

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**Abstract:** Women are born free, but in every place, they are bound in chains in our society. Sometimes, they are also considered as an inferior and not as free and secure as a man. The female has been a victim of both physical and psychological tribulation. My paper dwells upon the psyche of women, which should be judged as human and not from the point of view of gender, race, caste, and class. Mahasweta Devi also portrays the true face of a female's asseveration, whereas *Draupadi* uses her wholeness of mind and body to fight against her marginalized ideality. Her stories depict the unspeakable truth of women's misery and their power for enduring and resistance. Devi also gives voice to every character in her stories. In my paper, I am going to discuss some of her stories, namely, '*Draupadi*,' '*Breast Giver*,' and '*Behind the Bodice*'. Here, she wants to explain that her women are very strong and that, they have a tremendous sense of self-respect, and they are sometimes also prepared to fight all their battles to the end, even if the end is death. In our society, women suffer a lot in every situation; sometimes, they are suppressed and repressed. We also observe that a wide range of women, from tribal to upper caste women, from rich to poor, are

dealing with the hypocritical behavior of the family. Devi also dealt with the plight of women and their subordination.

**Keywords:** Breast Giver, Draupadi, Female Psyche, Suppression, Repression, Behind the Bodice, Psychological Tribulation, etc.

The present study is a modest attempt in this direction. The research work broadly comes with the study of women's condition through an attempt to examine the individual and collective suffering of women. It is widely acknowledged that literature is the reflection of the perceptions and posture of society. It is not wrong to say that literature is evidence of the evolution of women through many ages. In literature, there are many roles played by women; mainly, they didn't have voices; they suppressed a lot in every condition. Sometimes, women were also considered less worthy than men and were still objects used for the pleasure of men. They are especially used as '*objects*' and '*toys*'

played by the patriarchal society. There are many writers, not only female writers but also male writer, who expresses their views; for example, Jai Shankar Prasad depicted women as strong and glorified. He was also famous for his strong portrayals of women and his popular verse from one of his most widely read poems.

*'Nari! Tum kewal shraddha ho, vishwas-rajat-nag-pal-tal mein, piyush strot si baha karo. Jeevan ki sundar samtal mein, .....here which means, Oh woman! You are honor personified under the silver mountain of faith. Flow you, like a river of ambrosia, on this beautiful earth...*

It is, in fact, impossible to separate the writer Mahasweta Devi from the socio-political-economic milieu of India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She was born at that time when she witnessed the drastic political fluctuations and changes that transformed the face of the Indian subcontinent. Devi was one such woman writer who dealt with these forms of suppression in her works. She also gives voice to the voiceless by exposing different forms of suppression and oppression inherent in Indian society and also fights for their rights. Her approach to oppression and suppression is unique because most of the women writers deal with the gender suppression of middle-class or upper-class women. Devi's works do not present a glorified picture of the downtrodden, but they certainly present their lives amidst misadventure and exposition of their spirit and strength to resist any form of social suppression, oppression, and repression. Devi was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Devi's prime concern is with the

underprivileged castes and tribes of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Orissa. The Sabars, Santhals, Ganjus, and Mundas, the low castes people living in the above regions, are the most marginalized.

*"I often say that my world is divided between two things- the needful and the needless. I am interested only in the former. I don't have much use for the needless"* – Mahasweta Devi.

We also came to know that women and literature are closely related to each other because it requires a lot of artistic creativity to be good at literature, and women are too good when it comes to artistic creativity.

In Mahasweta Devi's stories, we observe a vast range of women, from tribal to upper caste women, from rich to poor family, who always deals with hypocritical behavior. The double standard or dualist society never ruined their lives but always shows their dictatorship in the physical attributions of women and is also considered as a product to 'consume.' Devi's *Breast Stories* is a most refreshing book for those who want to plunge into Indian feminist fiction. It was originally written in Bengali, *Breast Stories*, and was translated into English by the feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1997. In these stories there were three stories titled *Draupadi*, *Breast Giver*, and *Behind the Bodice*. They have a connecting thread, the breast, a metaphor that shows the exploitation of women from marginalized communities. There are many countries in which Rape has been used as a weapon of war, mostly in Columbia, Sudan, Nepal, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Women are

constantly and automatically harassed on the streets, like in the cities of Delhi or Kerala. It is very true stories that our bodies are controlled and objectified not only by rich people or monsters but also by well-educated and intentioned men.

In *Breast Giver*, the major theme is overcoming the oppression of men and society to gain equality. She also focuses on the experience of motherhood and the exploitation of women, especially throughout her narrative on "Jashoda." Jashoda is a protagonist, and she belongs to a marginalized Brahmin woman. In this story, we see that her husband Kangalicharan gets crippled in an accident, and she is forced to work as a wet nurse for the wealthy 'Haldar' family. Also, to support her family, she feeds twenty children. In the present story, the breast is the source of food and livelihood for Jashoda's family. Though this great and antique employment forces her to be repeatedly pregnant, it gives her social and political significance in the form of a mother of the world. Haldar's family did not support her, but they were only using Jashoda's body. She is the provider for the family and shows the change of time. In the very opening of the story, Jashoda is introduced as :

*"Kangalicharan's wife from birth, the mother of twenty children, living or dead, counted or her fingers- Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings. Jashoda was a mother by profession, a professional mother".*

We have also seen that a working woman needs to continue to be strong for her family; eventually, she may not be present some of the time, and it is known that women can be both nurturing and powerful at the same time. In the *Breast Stories*, 'Jashoda' becomes a 'Milk Mother' for the Haldar family, and after some days, she dies suffering alone in silence due to breast cancer. Mahasweta Devi exposes the hidden feelings and exploitation of a poor woman who suffered a lot in every society.

Mahasweta Devi also discusses politics, which is terrifying, and also tries to break the spirit of men and women who fight for emancipation from slavery on behalf of their caste and clan. Devi also projected the socioeconomic and political curtains through her most powerful work 'Draupadi.' 'Dopdi' is actually a rural or tribal version, a version that is mispronounced of the name 'Draupadi.' She is the main protagonist of the story, who is running away from the police but is unfortunately caught by the armed forces. They torture her for revealing the information, but she doesn't reveal it in front of policemen, and she is brutally gang-raped the whole night and day. Because of this, she is bleeding and wounded. In our society, Indian women are considered to have certain values and honor, and if we want to take revenge, then we never think about society. In this story, also, when she refuses to obey the command of the Senanayak commander, she appears bigger than life. She also walks naked towards a Senanayak in the bright sunlight, very uplifted and sure.

She says:

"..... *What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit the bloody gob at and says. There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of. I will not let you put my clothes on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me, come on, counter me..... Dopdi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time, Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.*"

Dopdi never waits for any other stronger force or some man to take revenge on her behalf because she already decided to take her revenge in her own way. She was born as a new woman who challenged a patriarchy without any movement or sound.

Mahasweta Devi's last story is '*Behind the Bodice*,' which is based on the song of a Bollywood movie, Khalnayak '*Choli ke Pichhe*.' In this story, Devi shows a male protagonist, Upin, a freelance Journalist and photographer, who takes a photograph of Gangor, a poor tribal migrant laborer breastfeeding her baby. Here, he clicks several photographs' of Gangor's breasts and sends them for publication in a popular newspaper. A picture of her breasts is underlined by the message that is "The half naked ample-breasted female figures of Orissa and about to be raped. Save them! Save the breast!" These pictures somehow came to the attention of the local police of Jharoa, and they nab Gangor, put her in lock up, and gang raped her. Upin learns about the

violent fate of Gangor; he takes it upon himself and save her, but they find that she has started to earn her living through prostitution. Then he realizes that his conjuration to people to 'Save the breasts' is utterly futile. The people who are assigned to protect society are the perpetrators of violence. In a state of mental shock, Upin steps on the railway tracks of Jharoa, and he crashes himself under the wheels of a train.

Mahasweta Devi's stories put the female within them with their strength and modes of existence. All of her characters are suffered in the world of suppression and repression. They are also exploited, and their struggle for justice takes on mythological overtones. When we talk about society, they discriminate against people on the basis of caste, class, creed, religion, color, and gender and give a vertical division of society. Sometimes, the ladders of the hierarchy are based on the patriarchal social system where the lower is always dominated by the upper; discrimination provides a platform for oppression and exploitation. In all, these women suffer a lot related to a psyche, in which we can say that discrimination is morally wrong and socially unacceptable because it leads to social injustice.

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