

## Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini (Breast-giver)* & the Concept of Ideology

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### Structured Abstract:

**Purpose:** Marxism is probably the most practised and discussed theory that changed the way of reading, writing, thinking and interpretation of the world from every perspective. Although Marx and Engels proposed that breaking the way of working through revolution will put an end to this exploitation; the next generation of Marxist thinkers argued about the internalised concepts and ideas which the capitalist leaders use as apparatus among people across the classes, work as the resistance against revolution to put an end to this capitalist and consumerist. One of these next-generation thinkers was Althusser who proposed the concept of Ideology. The article takes the noted story called *Stanadayini (Breast-giver)* by Mahasweta Devi as a reference to how the state uses its ideological apparatus to continue its exploitation among people. Also, the article looks into the fact that how women remain at the bottom layer of this exploitation chain.

**Methodology / Approach:** The paper is an analytical reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini (Breast-giver)* from the Marxist-feminist standpoints which interrogates the woman protagonist's exploited condition under the concept of ideology with the close analysis of the text.

**Findings / Conclusion:** In *Stanadayini (Breast-giver)* Devi has portrayed woman the protagonist Jasoda who is exploited and repressed by everyone till death which she fails to identify as these actions are warped and moulded by the capitalist and patriarchal ideologies and presented as practices and duties before her.

**Originality / Value:** The reading of this article will make us understand how the capitalist and patriarchal concepts are working intricately among us through the ideas and duties we practice in our everyday life without questioning.

**Keywords:** Ideology, Feminism, Exploitation, Marxism, Capitalism.

**Paper Type:** Research Paper.

## Introduction

With the emergence of Marxism as a sociological theory, the conjecture of writing, reading, thinking and interpretation found a new trajectory throughout the world. The concept of labour and class, with the bourgeoisie on the rise, laid out by Marx and Engels, revealed the phenomenon of the capitalist culture that was slowly but steadily tightening its grip over all the societies across the world. The first generation Marxist theorists pointed out that with the industrial revolution in Europe, the concept of Feudalism of the Medieval age evolved into the capitalist notion of exploitation. But, this evolution brought some intricate and complex apparatus with it. The capitalist leaders unlike the feudalists were well aware of these apparatus and they started to promote their idea using these apparatus to be the idea of living for everyone in such a manner that this idea eventually began to be conceived as the way of living. In the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* Marx said, "The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." (1859)

This internal flow of capitalist notions was identified by the second generation school of Marxist theorists such as Althusser, Trotsky and Lukacs, who advocated that the capitalist concepts are not related to the products and productions only anymore but are imbibed inside the socio-cultural norms of every human being of every society. With so much death and loss around after World War II and the emergence of the freedom fights of the subjugated countries against the European colonial masters, people hardly could dissect the way the world was moulding into. They were only looking forward to being free from all the repression and torture and wanted a life of peace and prosperity. The myth of communism eventually started to fade away after the de-Stalinization in Russia around the last quarter of the twentieth century with the establishment of the Third World concept by the countries that

earned freedom from being colonized, the world hoped for a new dawn to usher in. With the failure of the American Dream and Socialism, people started to look forward to a more generous economic world order. They began to believe to witness a new work regime where the concept of slavery or the shadow of feudalism will be absent. The grasp of capitalism along with the equation of consumerism was yet to be perceived by the people of the newly free countries. They were submerged with the dream to build their free homeland, without any repression and dictation.

Louis Pierre Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher, came out with the concept of ideology around 1970. With this concept, he started to argue that, everyone from birth to death is controlled by the capitalist ideological apparatus of the state. Althusser divides these apparatuses into two categories; Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Althusser says the state nurtures and conditions its subjects, the people of the state with ISA (schools, church, family et cetera), which are formally perceived to be functional outside of the state control but they only provide the values of the stated autonomously. Althusser clarifies that the state uses its RSA (the army, the police, the judiciary, the prison system) only when there is any revolutionary act like questioning the authority. Althusser points out the potential threat the IPA holds and describes how people as the subjects of the state remains inside the web of power forever.

### **Concept of Ideology in *Breast-giver***

In 1884, in his noted work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* Engels rewrites a famous quote by himself and Marx about the accepted gender discrimination in terms of labour and production in our society. He wrote, "The first division of labor is that between man and woman for the propagation of children. The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male." Engels points out that the concept of labour and production is intertwined within the very basic concept of civil social order that is marriage. Using the concept of the ideology of the state, Althusser figures out the snare concealed behind the simple way(s) of thinking that is perceived as the conventional phenomenon of society.

With the evolution of the concept of feminism, a group of feminists (Marxist Feminists) started to identify exploitations women face every day in terms of labour and production. They began pointing out the double bind of exploitation; women have to face as being a

female and also as being a proletariat. These binds of exploitation get intense and intricate for Third World women. Their existential battle begins at the sedimentary level as they are convinced and conceived that the way they live their life, is natural for them. With several third world feminist writers and thinkers talking and questioning the situation of marginal women of the third world, and the third generation Marxist theorists, questioning the way of writing history and thus rewriting history from the bottom, helped the deprived women understand their repressive state and put forward their resistance.

One such third world feminist writer is Mahasweta Devi. Devi was not only a writer or a professor but an activist as well, who fought for the rights of marginal people. Devi's literary creation has always depicted the pains and struggles of marginal people, especially women. Devi's famous story *Stanadayini*, which was translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, titled as *Breast-giver*, portrayed the multi-dimensional repression and deprivation faced by women. The story revolves around a Brahmin housewife Jasoda. Jashoda is looking for a job to take care of her family as her husband Kanganicharan faced an accident and lost his leg. Jasoda's husband cannot earn bread for the family anymore. Now, Jasoda has to become the breadwinner for her family, but this act of earning for her family turns out to be a life-giving action.

In the story, Jasoda works as a wet nurse but to do so she has to get impregnated continuously otherwise, she cannot produce breast milk. Jashoda becomes very conscious of her breasts as these are now her tools 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)

Devi also used the village atmosphere with dexterity to lay the ideological pitfalls around Jashoda. In the story, the performance of Jashoda as a wet nurse is asserted at the celestial level. Jashoda had a dream after she "had gone through a female ritual and had travelled to the outskirts to pray at the feet of the local guru" and "the Lonsated came to her in a dream as a midwife". The devotion here shown by Jashoda is treated as a yardstick of her eligibility of being a true wet nurse and this is how IPA like temple works in everyday life. As Althusser points out, "The ideological state apparatuses were located in religious, legal, and cultural structures, in the mass media and the family, and especially in the educational system."

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 "mammal projections" become the object of the gaze for her husband and the people of the Haldar family, a target to feast upon. 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) Thus this is how the ideological state apparatus work, using the conscience and the consciousness of the subjects as the autonomous tools which performs as the set pieces and the subjects find the activities as their duty which is logically and morally appropriate and necessary for their existential battle not to themselves only but to their family and the society they belong to.

Jashoda is convinced that she must reproduce and her reproduction paves the way for the production of food for her family. As Althusser points out about the IPA, in this story we can imagine the temple as the IPA and the people related to the temple as the working agents of this apparatus. The deceiving power of this ideology of the state makes Jashoda proud, maybe that was in the support of her existential battle against poverty and hunger for her family, still, there was multilayered exploitation where ideology set its claws and prospered over Jashoda until it was completely utilised. She has constantly been used as a source of pleasure of bodily fulfilment by her husband. She has been used as 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. And when she was diagnosed with breast cancer she understood that she is no more useful to anybody. "Jashoda understood that her usefulness had ended not only in the Haldar house but also for Kangali." (53) Maybe she was unable to recognise the folly of this capitalist pattern. Or she submitted herself before this superstructure even if it has caused her life.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, the breasts of Jashoda turns out to be an important symbol not only for Jashoda but for many others in the story. The breasts conceived as the tool for Jashoda to remain afloat in the struggle of existence along with her family turned out to be a weapon. The weapon triggered itself against her only. Jashoda and the other members benefitting from the breasts of Jashoda were the mere set pieces of the state ideology. The responses by the characters to the ideological movements of the state are almost pre-conceived. These ideological tools are providing constant acceleration to the capitalist wheel and with advancing time the capitalist masters are using this tool with more professionalism. In this perspective, Spivak notices Ann Ferguson in 'On Conceiving Motherhood' as Ferguson says:

...This is that women as mothers are placed in a structural bind by mother-centered infant and small child care, a bind that ensures that mothers will give more than they get in the sex/affective parenting triangle in which even lesbians and single parents are subjected. (87)

It is the usage of ideological apparatus by the state that generalized the concept of motherhood and depicts motherhood under the capitalist lens. In this respect, one can easily look back at what Spivak commented in *Breast Stories*:

The lesson of 'Stanadayini' may be simply this: when the economic as such (here shown in terms of the woman's body) enters in, mothers are divided, women can exploit, not merely dominate. Ideology sustains and interpenetrates this operation of exploitation. (87)

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