

Milk Mothers, Marginalized Bodies: A Critical Exploration of Exploitation, Gendered Labor, and Caste in Mahasweta Devi's *The Breast-Giver*

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Abstract

“In a world where women’s work is consistently undervalued, their bodies become commodities—sources of life and labor, yet ultimately disposable once they are deemed unproductive,” writes Silvia Federici, capturing the essence of Mahasweta Devi’s “The Breast-Giver”. Through the character of Jashoda, Devi presents a scathing critique of how women’s bodies, particularly those of marginalized women, are commodified and exploited within systems of caste, class, and reproductive labor. Jashoda, a lower-caste Brahmin wet nurse, becomes the sole provider for her family by offering her body as a resource to the wealthy Haldar household. As her breast milk sustains their children, her value is reduced to her biological function. Once her "utility" fades, she is discarded, symbolizing how society treats women as expendable objects of labor.

This article investigates the socio-political significance of Jashoda’s role as a wet nurse, using feminist and postcolonial frameworks to explore how Devi critiques the intersection of gendered labor, economic dependency, and caste-based oppression. Jashoda’s story not only reflects the harsh realities faced by women in patriarchal and caste-based systems but also mirrors contemporary global issues. From the commodification of women’s reproductive capacities in surrogacy and caregiving to the undervaluation of domestic labor, the exploitation of Jashoda’s body remains a pertinent reflection of modern labor practices. Through close textual analysis and contextual research, this article emphasizes how “The Breast-Giver” continues to resonate with contemporary feminist and social justice movements. By examining the intersections of health, labor, and caste-based exploitation, the article highlights Devi's narrative as a powerful lens through which to understand and critique ongoing global inequities. Jashoda’s plight serves as a timeless reminder of the systemic oppression women face, demanding continued action and reform in addressing the commodification of female bodies.

Keywords: Commodification, Reproductive labor, Caste-based oppression, Patriarchy, Exploitation.

Introduction:

Mahasweta Devi’s ‘The Breast-Giver’ (from her collection “Breast Stories”) remains one of the most poignant literary critiques of the exploitation of women’s bodies and labor in patriarchal and caste-based societies. The story follows Jashoda, a lower-caste Brahmin woman who becomes a professional wet nurse for the wealthy Haldar family, a role that both sustains and depletes her physically and emotionally. Jashoda’s body, much like the bodies of countless women in both historical and contemporary contexts, becomes a site of economic production, reflecting the dual burdens of gender and caste in Indian society. This study seeks to critically analyze the systemic exploitation of women, focusing on how caste and class intersect to intensify the commodification of Jashoda’s body. We will explore how the narrative mirrors contemporary global labor issues where women’s reproductive and caregiving capacities are exploited for economic gain, drawing parallels between Jashoda’s experience and that of modern-day surrogates, domestic workers, and nannies.

This article addresses several research questions: How does 'The Breast-Giver' critique the commodification of women's labor in a caste-ridden society? How does Jashoda's experience reflect contemporary issues of reproductive labor, health inequities, and gendered exploitation? How does Devi's narrative maintain its relevance in the modern feminist discourse on women's bodily autonomy and labor rights? Through an intersectional feminist and postcolonial lens, we aim to contribute to the critical discourse on the exploitation of marginalized women in both local and global contexts.

Methodology:

The study employs a combination of literary analysis and socio-historical contextualization to explore the central themes of exploitation and commodification in 'The Breast-Giver'. First, we conduct a close reading of the text, identifying key moments where Jashoda's labor and body are commodified. Special attention is paid to the language of the narrative, particularly how it reflects power dynamics and social hierarchies based on gender and caste. Second, we contextualize Jashoda's story within the broader socio-political framework of postcolonial India, focusing on how caste and class continue to shape labor dynamics and reproductive exploitation. The study draws on feminist theories, including those of reproductive justice, as well as postcolonial critiques of caste-based marginalization. Contemporary data on global surrogacy, domestic labor, and gendered economic inequality are used to draw parallels between Jashoda's experience and modern exploitative labor practices. We rely on feminist scholars like Silvia Federici and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to frame Jashoda's exploitation as emblematic of broader patterns of capitalist patriarchy.

Results and discussion:

The Exploitation of Reproductive Labor:

In Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast-Giver', Jashoda's role as a wet nurse symbolizes the systemic exploitation of women's reproductive capacities, particularly in caregiving roles. By transforming her ability to produce milk into a commodity, the Haldar family reduces Jashoda to a mere biological function, with little regard for her physical and emotional well-being. This commodification of her body highlights the pervasive patriarchal structures that prioritize economic utility over women's health. The portrayal of the Haldar daughters-in-law, who refuse to breastfeed in order to preserve their physical appearance, further underscores the socio-economic disparity and gendered oppression that govern women's bodies. The stark contrast between Jashoda's self-sacrifice and the upper-caste women's reluctance to engage in motherhood-related labor reveals the socio-political mechanisms that exploit lower-caste women. This phenomenon reflects global parallels in the surrogacy industry, where economically disadvantaged women are often coerced into surrogacy contracts, commodifying their reproductive labor for the benefit of wealthier families. The intersection of class and gender in the exploitation of reproductive labor continues to be a pervasive issue in contemporary global labor practices, illustrating the gendered commodification of women's bodies for economic gain.

The Intersection of Caste and Gender in Exploitation:

While patriarchal structures primarily drive Jashoda's exploitation, her lower-caste status further intensifies her subjugation. Mahasweta Devi critically examines how the intersection of caste and gender exacerbates the marginalization of women like Jashoda, whose vulnerability stems from both her gender and her caste identity. The Haldar family, situated within the upper-caste hierarchy, exploits Jashoda's reproductive labor while remaining indifferent to her physical and emotional suffering. Caste serves as a social mechanism that normalizes and justifies the exploitation of lower-caste women, positioning them as disposable laborers within the socio-economic framework. Despite her critical role as a "milk mother" to the Haldar children, Jashoda is denied the dignity and respect that a mother from a higher caste might expect. Once her body is no longer capable of fulfilling her wet nurse duties, she is discarded, reflecting the brutal realities of caste-based exploitation that dehumanizes lower-caste women. Devi's portrayal of Jashoda thus critiques the broader socio-political structures that enable the commodification and subsequent marginalization of lower-caste women, reinforcing their economic and social vulnerability.

Health and Reproductive Rights:

Jashoda's eventual decline into breast cancer serves as a powerful commentary on the physical toll of her commodified reproductive labor. Her relentless role as a wet nurse transforms her body into a site of reproductive violence, where her health is rendered secondary to her economic utility. The narrative highlights the profound health disparities faced by women, particularly those from marginalized communities, who often lack access to adequate healthcare. Jashoda's deteriorating health reflects the societal indifference to her well-being, mirroring the global realities of women whose reproductive labor is divorced from considerations of health and safety. In many parts of the world, particularly in regions with inadequate maternal healthcare systems, women face similar struggles, where their bodies are exploited for economic gain with little regard for their health. Jashoda's fate underscores the need for a critical examination of the global exploitation of women's reproductive labor, particularly in sectors like surrogacy and domestic labor, where the commodification of women's bodies continues to perpetuate gendered and economic inequalities.

The narrative of Jashoda in 'Breast-Giver' thus resonates with contemporary global issues surrounding the commodification of women's bodies, particularly in the surrogacy industry and domestic labor sectors. In countries like India, economically disadvantaged women are frequently coerced into surrogacy contracts under exploitative conditions, reflecting the same patterns of commodification that define Jashoda's experience. Similarly, the undervaluation of caregiving labor, as demonstrated by the disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic work on women globally, echoes the gendered exploitation that shapes Jashoda's life. Through Jashoda's narrative, Devi critiques the socio-political structures that allow for the systemic exploitation of women's reproductive labor, highlighting the enduring relevance of these issues in contemporary global labor practices.

Conclusion:

The Breast-Giver offers a searing critique of the exploitation of marginalized women's labor, particularly in the context of caste, class, and reproductive capacities. Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of Jashoda's commodified body as a wet nurse highlights the systemic structures that exploit women's biological functions for economic gain. By examining Jashoda's narrative through an intersectional feminist lens, this article demonstrates how the story continues to resonate with contemporary global issues of reproductive labor, health disparities, and gendered exploitation. As women around the world continue to face systemic barriers in accessing reproductive justice and economic equality, 'The Breast-Giver' remains a crucial text for understanding the socio-political dynamics that perpetuate their exploitation. This article contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation on the commodification of women's bodies, particularly those from marginalized communities, and calls for continued attention to the intersectional forces that sustain gendered and caste-based oppression.

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