The Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi

Mother of 1084
A Novel.Translated and introduced by
Samik Bandyopadhyay.

Breast Stories: Draupadi, Breast-Giver, Choli ke Pichhe
Translated with introductory essays by
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Five Plays: Mother of 1084, Aajir, Urvashi and Johnny, Bayen, Water
Adapted from her fiction by the author.
Translated and introduced by
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BREAST STORIES

MAHASWETA DEVI

Translated with introductory essays by
GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

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introduction

gayatri chakravorty spivak

THIS INTRODUCTION WAS to have been called The Breast Trilogy. Mahasweta Devi is writing another story about the breast.Let us look forward to The Breast Series.

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. Devi's mature fiction never romanticizes the socio-libidinal relationship between the sexes. In 'Behind the Bodice,' she bitterly decries the supposed 'normality' of sexuality as male violence.[1] In the eyes of the Caretaker, it is just that

Gangor's breasts have been destroyed. If 'the girl doesn't understand the police are men too, they will craze if you tease them'. In the process Mahasweta fixes her glance at art, 'popular' and 'high,'pulp filmmaker and archivalist photographer. The point is not just aesthetics and politics, but aesthetics and ethics, archivization and responsibility.

The breast is what the stories have in common. What they don't share is shown by the staging of the names of the three protagonists: Dopdi, Jashoda, Gangor; in 'Draupadi,' 'Breast-Giver,' 'Behind the Bodice.'

'Breast-Giver' is the story that builds itself on the cruel ironies of caste, class, patriarchy. Devi keeps Jashoda's name unchanged from the Sanskrit scriptural form. Although the orthodox Hindu middle class nominally reveres the brahmin, the prerogatives of economic class are in fact much more real for it. The underclass 'Hindu female' ('Breast-Giver'), as long as she credits Hindu maternalism and family values, is unable to save herself. Even in her lonely death, she remains 'Jashoda *Devi*'—literally, the goddess Jashoda, honorary goddess by caste.

It is the Aboriginal Dopdi and the migrant proletarian Gangor who are the subjects of resistant rage.[2] Their names bear the mark of their distance from the top: the Aboriginal's immediate ('Dopdi' although she was named Draupadi by her brahmin mistress) and the Dalit's historical: Gangor from Ganagauri, 'corrupt' through usage.

Here, too, there is a difference. We are as sure of the derivation of Dopdi from Draupadi as we are of the author's hardly implicit point of view. The story of

Draupadi, the narrative efficient cause of the battle of the great epic *Mahabharata,* is wellknown in India. God had prevented male lust from unclothing her. And she had had five husbands. This Dopdi, gang-raped by police, refuses to be clothed by men in office.

(The mythic Jashoda's story is also wellknown. She is the foster-mother of Krishna, in Hindu Bengal a famous erotic god; in his role as strategist and adviser, it is he who saves Draupadi from dishonour.)

Although the power of Gangor's resistance and rage is, if anything, worked out more explicitly than Dopdi's —Gangor explicitly accuses the police—the staging of the provenance of her name is interestingly obscure. 'Ganagauri' as the origin of 'Gangor' is a bit of documentation offered by the most problematic character in 'Behind the Bodice,' Shital Mallya, the 'new' Indian woman, the mountain-climbing individualist in a liberated marriage, official interpreter for 'The Festival of India' (an elaborate museumized international self-representation of Indian 'culture' as arrested pre-capitalist tradition of folk-artisanal ethnic simplicity). The reader cannot be sure if Shital is right or wrong about this. It is, however, quite certain that her explanation, given in tones of contempt to an 'uncultured' Indian, is ridiculously wrong. The name Ganagauri has nothing to do with the river Ganga.

This is a new object of critique for Mahasweta: 'Indian intellectuals not knowing a single Indian language meet in a closed *seminar* in the capital city and make the[ir] wise decision known:' the custodians of Indian culture. Mahasweta is altogether uninterested in fragmenting India along language lines. Her extraordinary command of Dalit North Indian heteroglossia

is proof of how far she has expanded her own Bengali language base.[3] She is, however, equally uninterested in handing over India's heterogeneity to this new consumerist class, politically correct by international coding, full of a class contempt that is either open, or disguised by impersonal benevolence.

When in 1981, I had suggested that the expert on Third World resistant literature nourished by First World civil societies had something like a relationship with the police chief in 'Draupadi,' diasporic commentators had been displeased. Perhaps I had stated my case too strongly. In 'Behind the Bodice,' Mahasweta refines the point. Even when the expert is 'good,' the cultural worker as such is not by that fact resistant. (By contrast, in the figure of the 106-year old freedom fighter, Mahasweta lodges an affectionate aside for those who see every contemporary event as 'colonial discourse.') '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'.

'Rape of the people'—ganadharshan. Here the name Ganagauri has quite another resonance. For 'gana' is, ot course, 'demos,'—the people—as in 'democracy'—ganatantra. Behind the bodice is a rape of the people. Here the breast becomes a concept-metaphor (rather than a symbol) of police violence in the democratic state. In a comparable though not identical way, Buchi Emecheta will not let the rape of Ayoko 'stand for' collaborative colonial exploitation in *The Rape of Shavi.*

It is precisely the figure that I am loosely calling the 'expert' that Devi has fine-tuned and diversified. The readership of these Englished stories (though not necessarily of all her work) will contain many such figures. Puran in 'Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha' writes *two* reports, one suppressed in the imagination, and leaves the valley, forever marked in his being. Upin, too, is marked by Gangor's case and rage; and dies, either by chance brought on by confusion, or by choice.

Here a word on nature, artifice, or prosthesis may be appropriate.

I have often been critical of the French historian Michel Foucault in the context of the critique of imperialism. But one lesson superficial Enlightenment-merchants would do well to learn from him: that resistance inscribes itself in polarities available in the discursive formation. 'Power' *is* nothing if not opposed to what it is not, by those rules of the discursive formation that are not only larger than personal good- or ill-will, but indeed make the latters' forms of expression concretely possible.

Moving by this Foucauldian intuition we might say that academic US feminism names social-constructionism as 'anti-essentialism,' and polarizes it against 'nature' because, briefly, this is how their discursive formation de-fangs Marxist-materialist radicalism. I therefore point out that we translate as 'nature' *two* Bengali words—shobhab (Sansk. *swabhava*) and prakriti—and will continue to do so because they relate to an equally vague split in the English word: characteristic behavior on the one hand, and that part of the animate universe which is taken to be without reasonable consciousness, on the other. A contrast derived from this split is used by Marx to explain 'value:' a contrast between the 'raw' (material=nature) and the cooked (fabricated=commodity, the German

Fabrik being, also, factory).[4] I have pointed elsewhere at the meretricious political results of understanding 'nature' in Bengali usage as mere 'essentialism' without attention to the general framework of the argument.[5] Here let me point out that the same sort of problem might arise from an impatient or careless reading of Upin's *anagnorisis*: 'Gangor's developed breasts are natural, not manufactured. Why did he first think they were the object of photography? Why did it seem that that chest was endangered?".

The first mistake would, of course, be the intentional fallacy: to mistake the staging of a character's realization in a moment of anguish as the author's own Luddite (or 'essentialist') tendencies. But the second mistake, which takes into account that the author-text opposition might itself be interested, is more dangerous. It spells the rejection of resistant polarizations by assigning master-meanings to single English words, by treating polarizations within the various histories of English as 'natural.'

Upin is not shown to be engaged in a celebration of the 'natural'. His realization is that he had made a mistake in assuming that the part object ('that chest') is no more than the object of photography as prosthesis for permanence, a species of silicone implant, as it were. There is a moment, earlier, when even the superficial contrast is undermined—even stone sculpture, *as sculpture,* erodes, for erosion is 'natural'. But is it, with chemical pollution in the air? And how chemical is photography? The thoughtful reader enters a labyrinth here that can deroute Plato's critique of writing as *hypermnesis* or 'memory implant' and accomodate Marx's critique of mistaking the social (rational,

abstract average, spectral) *relationship* between human beings as the relationship between things. To preserve the breast as aesthetic *object* by photography or implant is to overlook its value-coding within patriarchal social relationship: it is 'natural' that men should be men. It is therefore 'natural' that women should be modest, and not provoke, by making the living breast dance.

It is my misfortune that I read literature as teaching texts. Therefore, helped by the arrangement of Mahasweta's story, I must go from this point to another. Upin made Gangor self-conscious about the unique beauty of her breasts, without any thought of the social repercussions. His political correctness ended with personally not lusting after Gangor's breasts: 'Learn to praise and respect a beautiful thing,' he chides. I cannot not read this as a literary representation of anchorless 'consciousness-raising' without shouldering any responsibility for infrastructural implementation. Those who already know what I am describing will need no examples. Those who do not will learn nothing from the only example I will cite here: credit-baiting through women's 'micro-enterprise' while removing infrastructural supports in the society at large: rape of the people. There is no figure of violence in such a global case to make the disaster immediately visible. And the most active collaborators, to keep the violence invisible by ignorance or design, are the 'New Women' of the South, 'cultural interpreters,' hybridists or popular culturists when necessary, environmentalists when possible, quite like Shital Mallya or Gayatri Spivak. Does Mahasweta do them an injustice? No doubt. Historical responsibility is asymmetrical. The rich and the poor are not equally free to sleep under the bridges of Paris.

We hope Mahasweta Devi will continue to write her 'breast' stories, for the breast is indeed a powerful part object, permitting the violent coming-into-being of the human, on the uncertain cusp of nature and culture. In 1986, writing on 'Breast-giver,' I had invoked Lacan. I did not then know of a generally unacknowledged debt to Melanie Klein.[6]

Klein's work has been almost fully appropriated by the patriarchal maternalist establishment of British Kleinian psychoanalysis. If, however, Klein is read without fear of that authoritative restricted interpretation, the following summary can be made:

The infant has one object with which to begin to construct the systems of truth (meaning) and goodness (responsibility) which will make it human. This object is its source of nourishment, deprivation, and sensuality—usually the breast. At weaning and before, the breast—and, secondarily, other part objects—become 'symbolized' and recognized as whole persons. Our sense of what it means to be human is played out in scenarios of guilt and reparation where the object is the primary part object incessantly transmogrified into people and other collectivities.

To tie human subject formation to Oedipus was to tie it to the patriarchal nuclear family. To make it depend upon the primary part object (overwhelmingly still the breast) as chief instrument for the production of truth and lie (signification) and of good and evil (responsibility) is to free it from that historical bondage.

Behind the bodice is therefore the long-ago part object that plays in the constant dynamic of the construction of whole persons. We see Gangor first with her breast carelessly lodged in the child's mouth. And it

is the child, crying, that brings Upin's guilt home to him. These are not logical but figural connections. This is not maternalism but a reminder of the line from the breast as part-object to the 'whole person' who is the impossible presupposition of all ethical action. To 'save' the part object (save that chest, 'save the breast') as art object (is Mahasweta thinking of 'save the dance not the dancer?'—the slogan that led to the simultaneous establishment of kalakshetras and the Indian classical dance forms as such; and the devastation of devadasis into whores' colonies?) is to shortcircuit that presupposition. By the time Upin knows this, the breasts are destroyed and Gangor, the agent of resistant rage, finds him guilty. If theory is judged in its setting to work, here is a fable of justice. Mary Oraon, technically a murderer, runs along the railroad track toward an open future.[7] Upin Puri, technically innocent but judged by his victim, encounters his sentence upon the tracks. Senanayak ('Draupadi') had only been afraid. If one wishes to construct a pattern in Devi's breast-fiction or woman-fiction, this may be one.

In the current global conjuncture, then, behind the bodice is the rape of the people: choli ke pichhe ganadharshan. The archivist could not understand it,. and died in the understanding. Let us call it archive-fever.[8]

October 1996, Calcutta *GCS*

Notes

1. The translator has published separate essays on 'Draupadi' and 'Breast-Giver,' which are reproduced here from Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987) on pgs. 1 and 76 respectively. This

essay attends more particularly to 'Behind the Bodice.'

2. Readers who think of 'India' or 'Woman' as monolithic have complained that Mahasweta's depiction of them is not uniformly upbeat. I hope this invocation of heterogeneity will answer them.

3. In fact, the Dalit 'national' language is generally a combination of dialectal variants of the local language, of Hindi, the 'official' national language, and phonotypes from the lexicalized indigenous English of India. It is a pity that translation cannot keep track of Devi's movement from standard Bengali to varieties of local dialects, not only the one I have just described.

4. Karl Marx, *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy,* tr. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1976–81), p. 129f.

5. Spivak, 'Diasporas Old and New: Women in a Transnational World,' *Textual Practice* 10(2)(1996), p. 245–260, n 9.

6. For Lacan's reading of Klein, consult Shuan-hung Wu, Department of English, Columbia University; for Derrida's reading, see Spivak, tr. *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), p.88; for Deleuze and Guattari, see Robert Hurley et. al., tr. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1977), p.324 and *passim.* These writers often miss Klein's boldness because of their less practical, less womanist relationship to the importance of the family in the bag of tricks that society gives us to make sense of our lives and within which we play out our sense of human responsibility.

7. Devi, 'The Hunt' in *Imaginary Maps,* tr. Spivak (Calcutta: Thema, 1993) p.1.

8. Jacques Derrida, 'Archive-Fever,' *Diacritics* 25 (Summer 1995), p. 9–63. Why should we listen to Derrida, Foucault, Klein? Because they have seen 'only the Enlightenment' from close up. We cannot and must not do without the fruits of the Enlightenment. The point is to use them from below. But that is another story.

draupadi
translator's foreword[1]

I TRANSLATED THIS BENGALI SHORT STORY into English as much for the sake of its villain, Senanayak, as for its title character, Draupadi (or Dopdi). Because in Senanayak I find the closest approximation to the First-World scholar in search of the Third World, I shall speak of him first.

On the level of the plot, Senanayak is the army officer who captures and degrades Draupadi. I will not go so far as to suggest that, in practice, the instruments of First-World life and investigation are complicit with such captures and such a degradation.[2] The approximation I notice relates to the author's careful presentation of Senanayak as a pluralist aesthete. In *theory,* Senanayak can identify with the enemy. But pluralist aesthetes of the First World are, willy-nilly, participants in the production of an exploitative society. Hence in *practice,* Senanayak must destroy the enemy,