



Women's Narratives in Reading Multicultural Subjectivities: An Academic Discourse

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Abstract

'Difference' in multicultural America is confusing to me as its concept determines some visible physiological features of people, and 'knowledge' of their history/culture, which is naturalized, circulated, and practiced through cultural institutions. Identity politics plays crucial role in its deliberate categorization and hierarchization of American subjects, which continues the historical process of separation through racism, sexism, and homophobia. As a university teacher, I have found how through the cultural institutions of university a mono-cultural population of American subjects is produced through multicultural demographic. If the primary object of multiculturalism is celebration of 'difference,' what 'differences' are celebrated most, and based on what criteria? For better understanding of 'difference' we should go beyond the academically sanctioned 'Knowledge' that disqualifies some 'other' knowledges, and it is by exploring some marginalized narratives of women we can reformulate the notion of 'difference,' that would add to the richness of 'difference' in multicultural discourse. Moreover, in traditional academic discourse, women's narratives, particularly on motherhood, are less explored to finding out how they contribute to the varieties of multicultural subjectivities. My paper is based on Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver" (Standayini in original) in re-formulating a different concept of mother in its investigation on how discourses, being practiced as 'ideologies' through institutions, affect individuals. I propose different teaching-learning classroom activities in encouraging students to develop new perspectives of the world to modify the notion of multiculturalism that would accommodate any 'difference.'

Key Words: *'Difference', Women's narratives, multicultural subjects, motherhood. Discourses.*

I would like to begin this article with the memory of my schooldays during the mid1970s when I was in the sixth grade. It was the class of Mrs. Treepati Bhattacharjee, our Bengali teacher who, once after our class assignment was over, described how often she faced challenges in both her domestic and professional activities, particularly in dealing with her children. Then she shared with us a lively story of her younger daughter who, particularly during her study hours in her mother's supervision, would try to fool her mother by talking very convincingly about her *mini*, her pet cat, its fever, its indifference to milk and fish, and so she needed medicine, and similar many things related to her pet, and thus the daughter would move from one subject to another, so that the mother would be distracted from the daughter's homework. The class fell into burst of laughter, and then immediately our teacher warned us to be very careful in writing her assignment the following week. I interlink this memory of my teacher with another in which I'm both a teacher and a mother; it's a memory which still lingers--- my 5-year-old son is running towards me on my way back to home, after my classes are over. Now when I ponder what was there in my teacher's facial expression, I am struck by a mixture of uncanny feelings about her style of mothering, which is now my own. In this article I would like to inter-relate these memories to formulate my thesis on how to use women's narratives to read 'differences' in multicultural subjectivities. First, I will discuss motherhood in Mahasweta Devi's short story "Breast Giver" and then I will propose the development of an alternative academic environment in classroom that might foster a more democratic environment for discussing things with each other openly and without hesitation.

Most studies of women's narratives on motherhood in the academic field of English Literature are centred on a form of anti-patriarchal, socio-cultural, and political analysis that encompasses race, class, gender, sex, and other sub fields like nation, border and religion. Though most of these studies have redefined woman's motherhood broadly, they also stereotype or oversimplify woman's exploitation under patriarchy including other forms of exploitation including class, and colonizer/colonized antagonism. Also, the issues of motherhood in the exploration of multicultural subjectivities have been used less in pedagogic field of English Literature. In my study of motherhood, I reconstruct the subjectivity of woman through her tales of everyday life resisting the academically sanctioned knowledge of the third world women, which is unified, fixed, and homogenized. My study not only proposes different ideas of motherhood but also helps reframe pertinent knowledges about women from different backgrounds, offering something that is culturally valuable for people belonging to different socio-cultural

background.

Both as a teacher and a student from a third world academy and also as a Fulbright visiting scholar of a first world academy I'm often confused with the concept of 'difference' as it is a concept that generally determines some marked physiological features of people, in addition to some 'knowledge' about their history/culture, which is naturalized, circulated, and practiced through cultural institutions for the production of 'knowledge' of other (non-Anglo) subjects/identities. If the primary object of multiculturalism is celebration of difference, what differences are most celebrated, and based on what those are celebrated? Is the inclusion of some multicultural literary texts by some hyphenated American, ethnic, or regional writers enough to represent what we call 'difference'? How, then is such knowledge about 'difference' represented to the students in the academy? Who produce that knowledge, and at what political cost? Who are American subjects and who are not? Can 'Difference' be defined by representation or by different ideas/perspectives?

Ideologically multiculturalism works well through institutional policy, in which identity politics plays crucial role to categorize dominant subjects, and so doing, American subjects/identities are hierarchized. The paradox of multiculturalism is that it reproduces the categories of people historically subject to racism, sexism, and homophobia. In my performance of both subject positions within contemporary academic field, I have found how through the cultural institutions of university, a homogenized and mono-cultural American subject is being produced out of multicultural demography, and that this problematizes the notion of 'difference' in multiculturalism. My primary argument is that English, as a core academic discipline of most universities, which is charged with producing and reproducing homogenous, mono-cultural, (Anglo) American subjectivities, based on which constitutive others, who are visibly marked, are also constructed. Even though people in the academy are increasingly of more diverse backgrounds, we do not use our diverse ideas in our scholarly and academic activities. Instead of going through "a living encounter---a large-scale-face-to-face meeting among persons of diverse faiths," (Smith 140) we follow the dominant practices of the academic discourse, and thus we participate in this mono-cultural and hegemonic production of American subjects and the ideas that mould the subjects. Moreover, the dominant discourse of multicultural subjectivity pays less attention to women, particularly to mother's voice. It is by shifting our critical gaze to women through her narratives, irrespective of an author's geographical background, historical, and socio-cultural context we can evaluate the 'difference,' of multiculturalism as they share a big part of multicultural American subjectivities. I have selected Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver"

(translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak from the original *Standayini*) for my analysis of 'difference' through Jashoda's narratives to reform the homogenized identity of woman of the Third world country like India, that would not only redefine motherhood, but also would reformulate the hegemonic identity of professional mother by adding to the significance of multicultural subjectivities. Though Mahasweta's story is based on India's socio-cultural context of Bengal, my study will help formulate a different notion of women and motherhood, particularly of the professional mother. This is my primary example of a form of 'difference' that might nuance currently existing formulations of the same in the American context.

Cultural debates on race, gender, sex, class, and homophobia often ignore mother's voice. Even women's accounts on feminist maternal discourse are either daughter-centred, or accounts of progress of some kind or another. The Feminists have used universal experience of daughters in defining motherhood as against patriarchal social conditions, which are mostly focused on daughters' experience. The subjectivity of mother often disappears from even the most sensitive feminist psychoanalytic studies that focus most on what it is to be mothered than what it is like to mother. Jessica Benjamin has noted the perception of motherhood in psychology as "an object for her child's demand," and "that is deeply embedded in culture as a whole" (23-24). The very phrasing of the question "*But what was it like for a woman?*" in the forward to Adrienne Rich's famous book *Of Women Born* also illustrates silence of mothers' voices in her broad, inclusive definition of woman (xviii, emphasis in original). Rich has defined motherhood as "*potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children*" (xv, emphasis in original). Mother's subjectivity from the mother's perspective remains an un-discussed perspective and topic.

I would like to develop my thesis on motherhood both as a potential relationship rooted to female physicality and a choice, essentially separate from the idea that motherhood is biologically predetermined for women, thus drawing a distinction between a biological mother and a mother who, deliberately chooses to take care of children though she may not give the birth of a child. In the introductory note of *Narrating Mothers* Brenda O. Dally and Maureen have said, "Although giving birth is indeed a part of mothering, it is care giving that *defines* the act of mothering, and care giving is a choice open both to those who give birth and those who do not"(3-4). Jashoda, the protagonist of Mahasweta's *Breast-Giver* is both a biological mother and a mother in her choice of feeding children of Haldars, a family that has made fortune just after India got her freedom. Being driven by the crisis of her family's sustenance Jashoda deliberately made her choice of being a wet-nurse

for the new-borns of Haldar family as her husband Kangalicharan had lost his leg due to an accident with the youngest Haldar son's Studebaker. By continuous childbirth she remains a lactating mother, and thus she feeds the children of her master. Now her body part, particularly her mammary gland becomes a site of interrogation for the cultural implication of mothering which is meant for a biological mother. What socio-cultural-economic-political forces are there through which the 'little/para-narratives' of women are circulating in continuous and unending movement through Jashoda's narrative? Jashoda's narrative of motherhood projects several meta-narratives on women of the third world country.

Mahasweta reminds us that, Jashoda was "*by profession Mother*" (italics in origin 228). Jashoda's professional mothering signals different little narratives of the regime of power at the intersection of the discourse of women as mothers, mothering and motherhood that speaks of different hierarchies of mothers, who are always in the process of both undergoing and exercising power in systematized chain-like settings of power structure through various institutions. For Foucault, power is not something to be taken as a phenomenon of one individual's or groups' or institutions' domination over others, rather it must be analysed as how it works like something that circulates, and functions like a chain. He says, "power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power" (98). The effects of power are on individual in form of some discourses, who reproduces power and thus the shifting of Subject/Other takes place.

In analysing how multiple discourses of subjects/others are constituted as peripheral subjects because of power, I'll look at the text. Though Jashoda's choice of being a wet nurse for the new-born children of Haldars is not unconditional, it fulfils her immediate family crisis, and as such her desire. But in her choice of being a wet nurse she also gets entrapped in the desire of other(s) and undergoes through a circulatory chain of the power structure of the Haldar family by strict observation of Mistress-Mother as the subject, whereas Jashoda, is other/object. The author says, "Mistress-Mother kept a strict watch on the free flow of her supply of milk" ("BG" 228). Jashoda's position as other/object is shifted to the position of subject in the power structure of the Haldars, once she is assigned her profession, and she becomes an icon of 'Mother-goddess', in which she exercises her power over Haldar family. Thus Jashoda, as a 'Milk-Mother,' 'Holy-Mother,' the 'Mother of the World' undergoes simultaneously in the circulation of power game, and as such she is in continuous process of shifting her position from subject to other

or vice versa. By being shifted from object to subject, she exercises her power; she becomes 'vocal,' criticises harshly the young mothers of Haldar family as 'show-offs!'(229). In this position, she is also conscious of her status among other maids like Basini of her master's house. Mistress-Mother, on the other hand is led by her strong belief that the children are being suckled by a Brahmini ;(a wife of Brahman, who belongs to high caste) children are having holy milk by 'holy mother'. In the chain like power structure of Haldar family Mistress-Mother is also simultaneously in the process of both undergoing and exercising power; as an object, she is led, though indirectly, by the pressure of keeping the family custom alive by each wife's production of twenty children, which she could not, but her mother-in-law did, and so she dearly wishes that one of her daughters-in-law would do that, and so she exercises her power over her daughters-in-law through her management employment strategy of employing Jashoda as a milk mother so that the wives of Haldars would have relief in suckling their babies, and they would go through continuous pregnancies for human production. The replacement of the biological mothers by the professional mother for taking care of new-born babies would also help the biological young mothers keep their bodies in shape, and that would distract the sons from beauties outside and turn them inside, and thus consequently the family customs would be fulfilled. Jashoda's professional mothering projects not only fulfilment of desires but hierarchies of power too, as evidenced in the text in the episode of Jashoda's later life, after the death of Mistress-mother, in her dependence on the mercy of elder daughter-in-law for her survival, in which the previous position of Jashoda as subject gets reversed in the regime of servants' hierarchy. What 'knowledge' and or 'truth' is produced by these meta-narratives of 'mothering' of Jashoda at the nexus of history, culture, and politics?

Jashoda's story lies at the trajectory of Sixties India, when just after the independence of British *Raj* a sudden change was remarkable in India, particularly among the educated intellectuals of Calcutta. In Mahasweta's fictional representation of contemporary Bengali culture, we come to know about people who were going through a very complicated process of reformation in their outlooks, in which neither they were able to liberate themselves from their age-old cultural values, nor they could adapt themselves with the 'new wind'(230), metaphorically suggestive of 'liberalism', affected by British imperialism. They were also being influenced by their reading of mostly woman centred, social reformative novels by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, and an eminent Bengali author of India. On the one hand they believed in almanac (read, a book published every year containing astrological facts that have influences on human being) approved progeny, and

on the other, they liked that their wives would remain always physically attractive, despite their frequent pregnancies. These few intellectual men liked themselves expressed outwardly liberal in their preference for woman, who is a combination of both beauty and intellect like " *'eternal she'*—'Mona Lisa'—'La passionara'—'Simon de Beauvoir' " (226), but inwardly they would like women in form of 'Divine Mother,' fulfilling their whim as holy children in bed so that "half Calcutta" would be "filled with Haldars" (230). Instead of utilizing their new liberalism for the causes of the common people, these few educated men, would involuntarily help common people in sticking to their own constructed but unquestioned age-old social structure of caste, class and gender which glorifies woman as Mother Goddess. In the conflict between caste, class and gender women became easy targets. Such condition of contemporary Bengali culture, and it is described by Mahasweta a ". . . . There is too much influence of fun and games in the lives of the people who traffic in studies and intellectualism in West Bengal and therefore they should stress the wood-apple correspondingly (226). In their own self-complacent attitude of life these few 'educated Babus' (upper class educated men) of Calcutta never interrogated the regime of truth/knowledge, sanctioned by age-old religious institutions of India, particularly by Hinduism which has made woman its easy scapegoat by deliberately glorifying her as Holy Mother, whose body and mind are ready to sacrifice for the sake of her holy children. Indian society's general politics of truth, i.e., types of discourses, namely discourses on mother as both nurturer/preserver and destroyer are accepted as true, which is circulated through the political apparatuses of academic institutions, and functions as systematised 'Knowledge.' Woman as an incarnation of both nurturance and destruction is practised through the occasional festivals of worship of Goddess in the image of loving mother (Mother Jashoda with her child Gopal on lap) and 'Shakti' mother (Mother Kali, who carries an assortment of weapons and wears a garland of human skulls around her neck). Most Bengali people grow up infused with the information/knowledge, produced by discourses, which are supplied by institutions, in this case, religious institutions, and they practice ideologies of religious discourses through rituals. In Mahasweta's story frequent references to mother in the image of lion-seated Goddess backdrop the story of Jashoda, foreshadowing the miseries of many Jashodas, whose stories are never included in the 'knowledge,' circulated by institutions. Jashoda's constant suckling for almost 50 children including her own, ultimately causes her death by breast cancer. Thus, Jashoda's story is finished. The author says, "Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must die alone." (240).

The protagonist's name is metaphorically suggestive of love, affections, and plight of Hindu mythic mother of Lord Krishna. But how can we read her story differently? Besides being a representation of a Third world country's professional mother, what another reading is there to cultivate new meaning? If Jashoda's narrative of motherhood projects struggles and sufferings of mothers of poor economic class, other mothers, the unnamed daughters-in-law of Haldar family are no less suffering, though of different kind, as they are located at upper level of the society. They did not have to enlist themselves in the professional market of labour like Jashoda, they were labourers in their own home, as slaves to their husbands, fulfilling the demands of their sexual urge for keeping up the reproduction of children. What power politics is represented at the interior region? Mr. Haldar had made his fortune "in the British era, when *Divide and Rule* was the policy," (224) which created class distinctions between privileged and non-privileged, and that made the privileged like Haldars crave for more powers by means of more production of Haldars. In the exchange of her milk Jashoda is in an unequal contractual relation that reinforces social hierarchal interdependence, in which "human beings rather than material products and services are produced" (Ferguson 83). Thus, women's womb becomes a site of contest between desire and power that further demonstrates class conflicts at broader level. Jashoda's narrative also represents a new imperialism at the interior in which women's bodies are the means of domestic colonial expansion through human production, ruling of higher class over the lower and working-class people. The Haldar sons internalise European beauties and practise it on their wives at the cost of other women's labour. In the domestic region of upper class, women are puppets in the hands of their husbands; they easily submit themselves to their husbands' desires, and thus participate in the interdependent power structure of the society. The author says, "The wives are happy. They can keep their figures. They can wear blouses and bras of European cut" (*BG* 229). It becomes possible through the power relation that works through institution of labour, in this case through Jashoda's suckling of her masters' children.

Though Mahasweta's fictional representation of Bengali culture gives us access to contemporary socio-political history, and cultural contents, many stories/knowledges are often deliberately kept in darkness; they have been buried and disguised by the power discourse as sanctioned by institutionalized 'Knowledge'. A pure academic task of a scholar is 'insurrection' of these historical contents to find out the 'subjugated knowledges,' buried within the 'Knowledge' that is authorised in a "functionalist coherence or formal systemisation" as normal. For a different reading of a third world mother's

narrative, we must pay attention to the 'peripheral knowledge' that circulates the way power works, for accessing into the interior 'knowledge,' "a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge" that are "opposed . . . to the effects of centralising power which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organised scientific discourse..." (Foucault 81, 82, 84). Such scholastic activities would focus on manifold relations of power at work within the discourse of women's narratives. In our academic activities we can engage our students with 'insurrection' of these 'disqualified' knowledges for accessing a 'differential knowledge' of woman of the third world country like India. This 'differential knowledge' is not a linear socio-cultural history of the Post Independent India at its nascent, that a Sociologist might be interested in, but an unacknowledged history of women as mothers at the intersection of socio-cultural-political-religious history of India.

Jashoda's narrative does not only project the contemporary changing environment of the Post Independent India at its nascent, but also the sufferings of women at the cost of motherhood. Motherhood as an icon of 'Holy Mother', 'World Mother', and 'Mother Goddess' is such a prominent feature of Bengali culture that a girl grows up internalising it, and in her own self-image she cannot make a distinction between her own self-identity and that is infused in it. Mahasweta has deliberately subverted the status of father by making Kangalicharan a professional father who would look after their children and cook at home during Jashoda's duty at the Haldar family in the negotiation of Jashoda's earning and her domestic activities. But that subverting role of man, in authorial design, is not for liberating woman, but for showing how power works even through little adjustment of man's traditional role in the interior of economically lower-class people. Jashoda, for the immediate fulfilment of her family's economic crisis submits herself to the system through her constant pregnancy by "being a faithful wife, a goddess". She says, "Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit" (228)? Now Jashoda in her devotion to her husband, in her duty to her home, children, and in her duty as a professional mother becomes complete: "Is a mother so cheaply made? /Not just by dropping a babe!" The ideology of this song is glorification of mother and mothering which is so popular that women take it for granted as the purpose of living their lives. They are led by this ideology full of their lives forgetting that besides being mothers they are human beings too. This ideology of motherhood pervades Jashoda's mind and soul so much that even in her desertion by the society due to her uselessness with age it becomes difficult for her "to sleep without a child at the breast." The author says, "Motherhood is a great addiction. The addiction doesn't break even when the milk is dry" (BG 233). After her usefulness ended, she throws herself at the mercy of the lion-

seated Goddess Durga. Jashoda, whom the age-old tradition had made an incarnation of Mother Goddess during her production days, seems to challenge the Goddess and or the religious manifestation of Indian mentality: " if you suckle you're a mother, all lies!" She rightfully questions, " Why did those breasts betray her in the end" (236)? Forsaken and forlorn she dies. In the hospital during her medication Jashoda looks at the doctor and mutters, " you grew so big on my milk, and now you're hurting me so?" " The doctor says, "she sees her milk-sons all over the world' " (240).

The most difficult problem of teaching multicultural subjectivities in today's constantly changing scenarios is with the problem of textual representation in its production of meaning and the interpretation of its meaning. How would a teacher mediate between these two and the students? How do texts, written in one culture address multicultural audiences? How do people from different cultures interpret and evaluate texts written in other cultural contexts? Robert S. Burton has said how the growing interest of awakening 'multicultural voices' through English Studies tends to highlight 'othering' or 'differentiating' multicultural literature from mainstream tradition. He notes, ". . . it seems to be another version of what Edward said calls, 'Orientalism': of stressing the exotic otherness of a culture and thereby separating it from your own (uncontaminated) body"(115).

My proposition is that we should engage students in debates about these issues through multicultural texts, so that 'different' perspectives would emerge, and that would formulate 'difference' but that would never be 'whole,' 'unified' and 'complete', but rather multiple and plural, and always in the condition of being reformed and modified. The significance of a truly multicultural classroom would be realized in our academic intention of letting our students speak freely, in their own way of looking into a text of different geographical and cultural background in which their cultural sensibilities, informed by their upbringing, would add meaning to the 'difference.' Today we are living in constantly changing scenarios, which is described by the cultural anthropologist James Clifford as "increasingly out of place," in which we feel a pervasive condition of off-centeredness in a world of distinct meaning system" (6, 9). When our society around us is hybrid and intercultural, we cannot speak of anything as fixed and absolute. In their skilful practice of applying theoretical tools, they must be speculative and self-reflexive. Self-reflexivity acknowledges relativity that entails the ability "to see one's own knowledge as well as that of others, as a personal and social construction, capable of being interrogated, reframed, or reconstructed" (Claxton, 194). The teacher would initiate the discussion, and s/he would be guiding students in their distraction. But there is a danger also; our students may turn to their

autobiography instead of using an active critique. Self-reflexivity would help them recognizing their biases for 'differences', and that would make them critical in thinking how their outlooks are socially, culturally, and personally construct.

Now I would explain how such teaching environment can be created with reference to Mahasweta's "Breast Giver". After their reading, first the students will select topic for themselves; these topics may include Motherhood/mothering, 'Almanac' (read, a book published every year containing astrological facts that have influences on human being) childbirth in India, Women in third world country, surrogated mother/professional mother, for four different groups; each constituting suppose 6 members. Now one representative from each group will start talking about their topic that would be interrogated and challenged by somebody either from the same group or from different. The next assignment would be writing on their topic by developing their ideas more. They can formulate their theses based on the original text and using theoretical tool, if they want. In their next class students will exchange his or her writing with students from different group; suppose, A1 has exchanged with C2, and B4 with D3, in which they will have different topics for speculations and self-reflexion. Next responsive writing would be the place of real contest that would help understand a student, suppose A1, what has made C2 think the way s/he did, what is her own bias etc. Finally, several new and different ideas will come up to formulate 'difference', 'which is not that of an 'Orientalist' one, "an exotic otherness of a culture" which has been pointed out by Robert. In this manner multiple, fluid ideas of indeterminable nature would be developed, informed by "a living encounter---a large-scale face-to face meeting among persons of diverse faith." In their dialogue between 'we' and 'you,' in 'listening' and 'mutuality' of the classroom would become a site of progress when 'we all' talk with each other about 'us' (Smith 140,142). We, the teachers must create that platform for our students for this kind of dialogue, so that multicultural subjectivities can be reformulated outside of homogenous and mono-cultural logics. The repeated phrases of Mahasweta about the probable presence of 'someone ' as the witness of Jashoda's death: "Who was it? It was who? Who was it? " can be interpreted as an eye-opening recognition for an intellectual of the death of an individual, a mother, a human being, caused by the collective power, blinded by religious dogmatism, indifferent to individuals plight due to a society constructed by power. If we fail on our academic activities raising consciousness for the humanity, mothers will go on dying by sacrificing their body and mind in their negotiation with socio-political, cultural, and religious construction of the world, and there would be an unavoidable destruction, as

Mahasweta has forewarned us, ". . . after all she (Jashoda) had suckled the world, could she then die alone" (240)?

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