

Aestheticization vs. Traumatization of the Female Body in Mahasweta Devi's 'Behind the Bodice'

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Abstract

Violence against women seems to be a ubiquitous phenomenon affecting their physical as well as psychological aspects. Encountering discrimination from all directions across the globe in the name of various factors, a woman's social existence stands jeopardized. Moreover, if that woman belongs to the tribal community, discrimination based on their biological sex and the associated social factors becomes their destiny. Woman characters in literature like Gangor in 'Behind the Bodice' become evidence of such atrocities. Devi's tribal female protagonists like the one in the selected text represent the predicament of tribal women who find themselves trapped in the cobweb of the structural oppression of patriarchal institutions for the fault of being born in a female body.

Keywords: Female body; Oppression; Trauma; Tribal women; Violence.

Women as socially existing beings have been considered always secondary in the patriarchal structure. This patriarchal mindset allows the assumed superior gender to exercise its power over the unfortunately obvious inferior gender. Women seem to complete their life cycle with the full control of the dominant male in every role as mother, daughter, sister, daughter-in-law, etc which is why she becomes a victim of oppression in different ways inside and outside the domestic space.

Belonging to a tribe, the struggle for survival of a woman becomes a more challenging task to stand in opposition to the different sources of oppression hurling at her. Mahasweta Devi's 'Behind the Bodice' seems to be excellent evidence to showcase the tribal female's predicament in terms of physical violence, the impact of which extends all dimensions. Gangor's

plight epitomises the destiny of all tribal women in general who are seen to be dragged down automatically under the patriarchal structure of oppression.

“Mahasweta Devi’s fiction radically destabilizes the basic premise of female vulnerability and the violent objectification of women in the context of rape as well as the expected traumatic aftermath” (Banerjee 4). The story ‘Behind the Bodice’, which has been taken from the collection, *Breast Stories*, presents the dictum of oppression in form of rape on Gangor, the tribal female protagonist. It presents how Gangor has been caught in the trap of systematic and structural oppression that defines her striving for existence with grim consequences.

The story illuminates some major aspects of a tribal woman’s livelihood that challenge her existence. Gangor in ‘Behind the Bodice’ is the mouth-piece of the women of her community who confront the deliberate social, political, and economic injustices and somehow manage to exist if not live their life to the fullest. Gangor’s lifestyle as a tribal woman seems to be centred around some unavoidable circumstances of her life. Her poverty-stricken life owes to the intense economic scarcity and instability in her daily life. Apart from her poverty, she is seen to be the object of male violence in society which brings the traumatic experience to her body. The incident of rape enforces her to take whoredom as the only way for earning money to feed herself and her child. The painful fact of her life seems to be embedded in the system of society in which Gangor being a tribal woman has to be raped but no legislation is set to question the social injustice. In this story, Gangor is seen to pass through the crucial phases of life in different social situations where she experiences the deadly biological and psychological trauma of being part of an ostracized community.

Gangor’s body becomes the object of the capitalist’s interest that leads her towards prostitution. Gangor’s natural breasts fascinate Upin, the ace photographer who expresses his frustration against the harsh reality regarding the silicon breasts of his wife, Shital. Gangor’s exposed statuesque breasts while feeding her baby make Upin obsessed and compel him to take photographs of Gangor’s bare breasts. Gangor charges money being clicked by Upin. The photographs published in the magazine directly give Upin economic benefit but make the lustful men too crazy to have Gangor for sexual pleasure after watching the photos. She dares to protest against this exploitation but eventually gets raped by the policemen. She lodges a case against the rapists in a police station where she is gang-raped by the policemen. Gangor being included in the underprivileged

class of society seem to be destined to live in terror and fear from the oppression of people from mainstream society. It's a deliberate system of patriarchy to submerge the marginalised woman like Gangor in the dark world of oppression so that her voice cannot be heard. "This is also why rape becomes an acceptable form of punishment for a woman who tries to step out of her boundaries. By pinning her down and violating her, she is shown her position in the society, which is always below men, and this position is normalised in her consciousness through the use of force and systematic violence" (Bhardwaj). The dominant male tries to put the woman below the social hierarchy only to take advantage of her subordination.

But Gangor stands strong against the injustice that happened to her. With the bruised body and tormented mind, she finally enters into the world of forced whoredom. When Upin realizes his mistake that he used a human body asexually explicit material for his own economical and physical ulterior motives in a newspaper, he runs to meet her. He stands before the sombre reality of violence that results in the amputation of Gangor's breasts. He gets disturbed to see the scars left on her body in place of the breasts that once were his obsession. The bruised breastless body makes him realize Gangor's perception about what lies behind her bodice, love or lust. He goes mad thinking that women's bodies need to be saved to retain their natural beauty but he fails to save them. He dies while running along the tracks amidst the thoughts of guilt and helplessness. The death of the photographer remains unnoticed amidst the search for the object that lies behind the bodice.

Mahasweta Devi has presented a clear picture of the economic plight of Gangor who belongs to the tribal community: "Semi-feminine condition... Gangor's crowd came to Jharoa looking for work. They will work on a piece-wage basis in the kilns for light bricks and tiles" (Spivak 141). The poverty, stressful state, and poor lifestyle expose the dirtiest realities of her community. She represents her class through her dirty choli, dirty red cloth, and lice-adorned hair. Her subaltern struggle is clearly understood in her words "...money, Sir, rupees? Snap a photo so give me cash!" (Spivak 141). It is ironic to see Gangor's struggle to earn the meagre amount of money ends with the bartering of her bare photographs. Her quick demand for money as a poor and downtrodden woman has been justified as quite natural on her part as Upin too feels that the simple woman also knows how to gain money as he says to his friend, Ujan: "Listen friend, I will sell these pictures...why shouldn't she take money? They are not dumb beasts Ujan, they understand, that even when the gentlemen distribute

relief, they have some hidden agenda" (Spivak 142). The commercial gain of the photographer has been presented in sharp contrast to the meagre economic gain of Gangor by giving a shot of her exposed breasts, the symbol of feminine sexuality. Gangor's gain by asking for money to feed her stomach and the personal benefits of the task of the photographer stand in sharp contrast as the former is seen to confront violence like rape as the outcome of the latter's purpose of economic gain.

The poverty of the tribal female protagonist, Gangor, makes her feel so helpless that she doesn't think twice to bargain for the photograph of her breasts that has been clicked. "The second time Gangor had said, 100 rupees per picture" (Spivak 143). Upin gives him the watch instead of money but Gangor throws it away and shouts at Upin: "You bastard ball-less crook! Give me a watch with one hand, and tell the police I stole it? Go, go, old jerk" (143). Gangor's anger towards Upin indicates her anticipation of the ultimate humiliation she would have to go through being accused of stealing. The pain she reflects in her fear of being cheated by a wealthy person like Upin highlights nothing but her miserable circumstances to exist in a male-dominated society. The humiliation does not come along with her poverty but from her biological existence too for which she becomes the object of physical abuse frequently in various ways. The contractors slap her like a beast and her husband also takes her for granted. She is a money giver to her husband who visits her at night to ask for money. Her mental and physical sufferings have been presented through her helplessness as she comes to Ujan, Upin's friend and says, "Sir! Sir! He is not my man! Our contractor, he's come to make us work. My man... not in my room, Sir... the police beat him up for he steals... it's a bad place where I come from Sir" (Spivak 143). Her words of utter dismay highlight her disturbed marital relationship too where her husband gets beaten for the crime of stealing and the contractor takes the opportunity of her helplessness by beating her and forcibly engaging her in work against her will. Her social status with the poor economy and without love and care of her husband directly makes her the victim of physical torture by the contractors outside.

Her starving child seems to aggravate her situation as Gangor being a mother can't tolerate her baby crying in hunger. She desperately struggles against the socio-economic condition in her life. She craves food, cloth, and shelter. Her distressed situation reverberates in her own depressive words: "... Sir, why not take me away? A cloth to wear ... a bite to eat... a place to sleep for mother and child ... What to do Sir ... no field, no land, living is very hard ... pots and pans ... stove and knife ... cleaning rooms

... laundry ... I'll do anything Sir..." (Spivak 144). Gangor represents the hardship that reflects the resourceless livelihood of Adivasi community too who are deprived of their lands and fields. The patriarchal force pushes Gangor into the vicious circle of oppression where there is no way to escape but to flow with the stream and thus the exploitation, and violence against her gets encouraged to continue as a social system. Here her obsecration to Ujan, Upin's friend, evolves her impecuniousness, the compulsion of leaving in a meagre economic situation.

The abasement of Gangor starts with the picture of her bare breasts. The representation of her breasts in a magazine is the part of the purpose to show the naked reality of tribal people's plight but later on, it makes the photographer obsessed. Anoushka Sinha has rightly observed, "Gangor's social reality as Dalit migrant laborer, working on a piece wage basis, is not the subject of Upin's photography. He rather produces a voyeuristic picture of titillation whose focal point is to sexualize Gangor's breasts within a system of phallogocentric signification" (158). Gangor not only has been observed by Upin as the poverty-stricken wage labour but also as a shameless, desperate woman trying to collect money for taking snaps of her body. The crude irony behind Gangor's daily life has been presented through her indifference to the male gaze to her bare breasts and her frantic and desperate attitude to ask for money. Her carelessness about the natural beauty of her body makes allowance for others to make her represent herself as an erotic object in public through magazines which the consequence was horrendous. Her body becomes both the symbol of innocence through the representation of her naturalness and the experience of the trauma of gang rape.

The struggle of Gangor in search of food and shelter has been ironically presented by the fantasy of a secured economic life of Shital, Upin's wife who is far from the feeling of starvation. The privileged and underprivileged classes never can be mingled together. The distance in terms of economy and class runs through society. The malicious, unjust treatment in form of physical violence falls on the women only to have full control over them by the upper class to make economic benefit and sexual satisfaction. Upin's attempt to gain name, fame, and money leads Gangor towards the ultimate destruction of body and mind. Cappelli has observed- "The photograph ends up stealing Gangor's reproductive livelihood by forcing her into a sexually coded spotlight of patriarchal attention, sexual fantasy, and community disgust, pushing Upin onto the borderland ledge of insanity, and ultimate death" (50).

Gangor is seen to be represented by Upin in the newspaper for his fame and name with the articles on the livelihood of the tribals of Purulia in West Bengal. Through social media Gangor's body becomes a vulnerable object. Gangor's fame is seen to spread like the flame fanned by the wind. Upin too realizes this later when the caretaker says, "You ruined her with your pictures Sir, otherwise how would she dare?" (Spivak 149). Basu has identified Upin as "A selfish upper class man who objectified and utilized a marginalized woman for his own gain. Gangor was a regular migrant worker objectified and commodified by a man who saw her body as "art". His artistic fervour led to her body being turned into a baser commodity" (393). Upin faces the truth of ruining his object of art, Gangor's breasts, through her gangrape by policemen in lock up. Gangor has shown the courage to report to the police station and as a result, her body has been torn apart into pieces by the policemen to gratify their lust. As a result, the natural beauty of the tribal female body is seen to turn into a deadly scarred body.

Undoubtedly, Gangor's subalternity makes her the object of sexual harassment because of her belongingness to a particularly oppressed group of the lower class. Young has rightly said that "violence is systematic because it is directed at any member of the group simply because he or she is a member of that group" (287). The ace photographer's several photos of Gangor go viral through the magazine. The naturally excellent 'mammal projections' of Gangor make the men crazy and they search for their object of sexual pleasure. Simultaneously some people turn her down for her sexual presentation through pictures. The caretaker also shows his abhorrence for Gangor in his comments: "The Gangor's of this world don't come to die, Sir, they come to kill. Shameless country girl...jiggling her body all the time...saying no to the market people, didn't snap your photos, snapped mine!" (Spivak 149). Gangor seems to allow herself to be a vulnerable object to gratify the lust of males as the structure of society demands so. Gangor's husband who is used to snatch money from her during the nocturnal visit in her room ironically now abhors her to take her name even. The gang rape as the denouement of her audacity to stand against injustice has left her alone to be demeaned by men in her struggle for existence. She seems to be treated as a social stigma both inside and outside the culture whose existence is taken under consideration only to gratify the avarice of males and nothing else.

In many of Mahasweta Devi's short stories rape seems to be an inseparable part of the definition of a tribal woman's life. Sharmila Rege observes, "In several instances, the rape of Dalit women may not be considered as

rape at all because of the customary access that the upper-caste men have had to Dalit women's sexuality" (111). Gangor's rape presents her helplessness to get into the complex system of social oppression where her body is not only the object of gaze but of exploitation too.

Gangor's life inside and outside her community seems to depict the crudest form of physical and psychological oppression through violence. Experiencing the trauma of the body lies at the root of the painful living of an Adivasi woman, Gangor. Her marginalization as a woman, in general, gets heightened by her double marginalization within her community even. A raped woman like her has equally been abhorred by the people outside as well as the inside community. She as a woman has to go through the strictest rules of the Adivasi community, the curse of being driven out of her place. Her people don't allow even her a place to live freely. She has to breathe in an atmosphere that is under the full control of tribal patriarchy. Devi deliberately hints at the predicament of a tortured woman, Gangor who has no right to live in her community, and simultaneously she has to be raped outside the community. When Gangor has been searched by Upin if she has gone back to her village, the caretaker unfolds the rigidity of Adivasi patriarchy: "Will anyone let her come into the village? No place there, no one talks to her in Jharoa-she comes from Seopura, and she does what is expected". (Spivak 151)

The unacceptability in her community makes her life more miserable and restless. She is seen to accept whoredom as the inevitable happening in her life and she reacts naturally to Upin to take him as her customer of the night. She systematically creeps into the trap that has been woven for her to survive in society. She has nothing to do but accept her identity as a prostitute. She is now seen to offer Upin desperately, "Do your stuff, 20 rupees. Spend the night, 50, tell me quick" (154). Now she appears as an experienced woman who starts bargaining for her body to earn money. She is forced to live as an outcast inside her community and a prostitute outside the community. She is seen to pass through the ordeals of life by experiencing trauma by enduring physical abuses by the contractors, experiencing the trauma of the body through rape by policemen, and selling her body as a prostitute at last. She has to deal with the lustful people, slang languages, etc. for her survival. Migration from one place to another enhances nothing but her existential crisis making her life more onerous to adjust to the social circumstances in which she is compelled to live.

Gangor's natural, unadorned physical beauty seems to become the sole cause of her degradation into a prostitute from migrant wage labour. But

the physical oppression is treated as a very natural action as it has been expressed by the caretaker who believes in the pre-defined fact. The caretaker evolves the harsh truth of a society that a woman's daring act of protest ultimately has to pay evil consequences like sexual assault. Amidst the quagmire situation, Mahasweta Devi has presented a subaltern woman's strength to protest against the ruthless, spine-chilling violence. She has tried to break the social boundary a woman is destined to be confined to. She has aggravated the policemen by complaining. Her determination to revolt against the power of authority has been punished by the violence that has been practiced on her body by raping her. Gangor's sexual oppression is natural to people as the caretaker too knows the violation of social rules regarding a woman's daring act of protest ultimately has to pay evil consequences like sexual assault. He says, "Women have to be careful in Shiva's world. You're punished if you don't understand this... when the girl doesn't understand the police are men too, they will craze if you tease them" (150). The reason behind the gang rape is Gangor and his frivolousness, as the caretaker believes so. Gangor has been made responsible for her ruin. The act of violence by policemen seems to consider quite natural an incident in society to rape a woman who dares to point a finger at the act of a male. But the reason behind the horror-stricken violence was nothing but Upin's interest in fulfilling his desire to make her physiquan attraction to males. Upin seems to be the main culprit who has paved the path for other men like policemen and the customers to exploit Gangor's body sexually in a heinous way.

The Violence perpetrated by Upin on Gangor's body simply by photographing her is akin to the violence perpetrated by the policemen who eventually rape her, in that Upin essentializes Gangor's femininity by making her breasts representative of her authenticity, her naturalness as a rural woman, and her womanhood. His photographs unleash the violence of gang-rape on Gangor. (Banerjee 12)

The story takes a twisted turn when Gangor makes Upin perceive the fault that has unknowingly been done to him. In his attempt to highlight the issues regarding the oppression of tribal women in Purulia, he has given the photograph of the bare breasts of Gangor. Her pictures have been used for capitalist gain. But this has endangered the existence of the simple living Adivasi woman, Gangor. The breasts that make Upin frantic finally become the object of violence. The lustful men like crazy foxes want to tear the flesh of Gangor apart to derive sexual pleasure after watching the photos. Upin's search for Gangor ends with the exposure of the dark reality of

Gangor's life with the history of brutal gang rape.

The gang-rape leaves her to be marginalized even in the class of her people. It leads her toward psychological devastation. Nobody talks to her. She becomes estranged and ostracized in the community to which she belongs. To survive she has to strive against hunger and to meet the need for food she takes the profession of a prostitute. The breasts become the object of violence to men here. The pleasure of men causes pain in the life of Gangor. The rape of Gangor by policemen has gratified their physical needs but leaves Gangor with biological wounds and mental agony. Ironically, the body that gives sexual pleasure to men provides economic security to Gangor to feed herself and her child. So, the female body of Gangor does not only share her traumatic experience of rape but the use of her body as the only way of her survival too. Gradually, the circumstances in her life push her into the gloomy world of sex trafficking to be a prostitute. Her moral and physical deviation at the end of the story to the pressure of society ultimately paves the path for the mainstream people to enjoy her body at a meagre cost.

Gangor, the class representative shares her psychological journey from innocence to experience against the politics of the female body. A woman from the socially banished caste, Gangor has to be the victim of the destruction of her charming beauty only for the whims and the commercial gain of upper caste people. The upper caste people hardly think about the disaster they are bringing for the simple innocent Adivasi woman. Gangor's life is meant to be the object of violence, forced prostitution, and economic profit to the upper caste people.

Violence is a common form of oppression against tribal women recur severely due to their class and caste that silently kills them. Of the barbaric oppression of the body Gangor and her kindred folk have nothing but to accept the system of society that is to be sexually abused by upper caste men and to be ostracized by men of her caste. She is left to live with the wounded bruised mark on her body as well as her mind. Gangor through the violence makes Upin feel how the lower caste woman has to face the sarcasm when the customers of the female body throw vulgar questions, "Gangor, what's behind your bodice, love?" (153). The irony runs through the predicament of her life and the incident of rape. The lust of males for female bodies lies behind Gangor's choli. Gangor makes surprised Upin too Gangor stands in front of her with the identity of a prostitute. Gangor shouts at him for his follies. She rebukes Upin for her master plan to use Gangor for his benefit. Now with her ultimate ruin in life, she invites Upin

again to click photographs of her body. She becomes daring. She uses abusive language against him to make benefit by using her body and without compensating for the use-value of her body. She leaves Upin shocked to see the captivating 'mammal projections' of Gangor. She finally makes him stand to face her breastless body. Upin sees: "No breasts. Two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava at Upin-gang rape...biting and tearing gang rape...police...a court case...again a gang rape in the lockup..." (155)

The detailed descriptions of physical violence like the tortured body along with its proof of scarred marks have left an unfathomable psychological impact on her mind. The labour class woman, Gangor is well known for the fact that her body is the only way to survive. The amputation of the statuesque breast has destroyed its beauty by the painful gang rape that enforced to bear both physical and psychological affliction. She has been left with the grave realization of what lies behind a woman's choli. For men, these are breasts, the object of their sexual pleasure while for women these are physical and psychological wounds.

In the story, the traumatized Gangor has perceived the sombre truth that behind the bodice lies the trace of oppression, exploitation, and violence through rape by innumerable men as a systematic process of oppression to make the victim silent. The breasts of Gangor finally can't be saved by Upin. It will remain always an endangered object till the lust of males persists in society. The psychological feelings of Gangor that 'there is no non-issue behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it' (155) seem to shake the cornerstone of society where the oppressor boasts of his power to subjugate and dominate women as their object of oppression. The violence carries on systematically and unquestionably.

'Behind the Bodice' summarizes an individual woman protagonist's physical and psychological impasse that protests against the barbaric oppression of tribal woman, Gangor. Gangor's destiny lies embedded in the system and structure of society. Oppression has its roots in the mental and social structure of society where violence against women is taken as a matter of right to the person who holds the sceptre of power in society. Violence exists in society to violate human rights and in the case of women being Dalit, the situation gets aggravated as their body is treated as the right to exercise the sexual power of a male. Dalit women experience differently from the upper caste women as Aloysius et al. argue:

In the case of Dalit women, however, the devaluation of her per-

sonality takes on a double dimension: she is devalued *not only as-woman, but also as Dalit*. Patriarchy submits her to male control of her body and sexuality. The ritual-based caste structure allocates demeaning labour to her and denotes her low social standing as being due to her impure caste, distinguishing it from that of the dominant caste women's higher status. (178)

The women are classified as upper, middle, or lower class for the benefit of society. The tribal woman's horrendous body experience is different from the oppression undergone by the upper caste women by patriarchal customs. Gangor's rape highlights not only her physical plight but all Dalit women's predicament who bear the violence silently as the curse of being included in the socially ostracized tribal class. The innocent tribal woman like Gangor thus is seen to experience the trauma of rape like physical violence as a continuous social practice in society. It is very ironic to experience the trauma of the body for Gangor as an outcome of the hypocrisy of the upper class who pretend to anesthetize the female body. Truly, "...the rape of the tribal woman by the mainstream of the society means the terrible rape of democratic system and human values" (Dutta 29). The destiny of the Gangors of the Tribal community seems to be set not by the choice of a few men's lusts but by the pre-defined social structure that allows men to continue the violence.

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