



Motherhood as survival in Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast Giver': An Analytical Study

Dr. Sumitra Meghwal

PhD, Department of Slavonic Finno-Ugrian Studies, University of Delhi- 110007, India

Received: 29 Apr 2026; Received in revised form: 23 May 2026; Accepted: 28 May 2026; Available online: 01 Jun 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper explores the idea of motherhood as a means of survival in Mahasweta Devi's short story "Breast Giver". The protagonist Jashoda, a Brahmin woman whose identity as a mother is transformed into a source of livelihood. Through her role as a professional wet nurse, Jashoda's body becomes both her livelihood and her burden, revealing how motherhood is shaped by class, patriarchy, and social expectations. The study argues that motherhood in the story is not merely a biological or emotional experience, but a survival strategy imposed by circumstances. Jashoda's continuous nurturing of others' children highlights the exploitation of the female body, where care and sacrifice are objectified. At the same time, her identity is reduced to her maternal function, leaving little space for individuality or dignity and self identity. By examining themes of exploitation, gender roles, and marginalisation, the paper shows how Mahasweta Devi presents motherhood as both empowering and oppressive. While Jashoda gains temporary security through her maternal labor, she ultimately suffers physical and emotional deterioration. The story thus questions the glorification of motherhood and exposes its harsh realities in a socio-economic context. In conclusion, "Breast Giver" redefines motherhood as a complex site of survival, where resilience is intertwined with suffering, and care becomes a form of silent endurance, loneliness and painful death.



Keywords— Motherhood, Survival, Exploitation and Maternal body

Introduction

Motherhood is deeply based on care, nurturing, and unconditional or selfless love. However, in the works of Mahasweta Devi, motherhood takes on a far more complex and often troubling dimension. Her writings frequently focus on marginalized communities, exposing the intersections of gender, class, and power.

"Breast Giver" presents a powerful critique of how motherhood can be shaped by socio-economic pressures. The protagonist, Jashoda, becomes a professional mother, feeding and nurturing the children of others to support her family. This paper examines how motherhood in the story functions as a strategy of survival, while simultaneously revealing the exploitative structures that sustain it.

Motherhood as Economic Necessity

In "Breast Giver," Jashoda's journey into motherhood as a profession begins out of sheer necessity.

When her husband becomes incapacitated, the burden of survival falls upon her. In a society where women have limited economic opportunities, her ability to produce milk becomes her primary asset.

Motherhood, in this context, is no longer a private or emotional experience but a public and economic function. Jashoda's body becomes a means of livelihood, and her identity is defined by her capacity to nurture others. This transformation highlights the harsh realities faced by women in lower socio-economic strata, where survival often depends on the commodification of the body.

Commodification of the Maternal Body

One of the central themes of the story is the commodification of the female body. Jashoda's role as a wet nurse reduces her to a biological function, where her worth is measured by her productivity. Her body is continuously used, consumed, and ultimately exhausted.

The act of breastfeeding, typically associated with intimacy and care, is stripped of its emotional significance and turned into labor. This commodification reflects broader societal structures in which women's bodies are controlled and exploited under patriarchal systems. Jashoda's identity becomes inseparable from her role as a "breast giver," erasing her individuality.

Patriarchy and Gender Roles

Patriarchy plays a crucial role in shaping Jashoda's experience. Despite being the primary provider for her family, she remains confined within traditional gender roles. Her labor is not recognized as skilled or valuable; instead, it is seen as a natural extension of her role as a woman.

The story exposes how patriarchal norms normalize the exploitation of women's bodies. Jashoda's suffering is overlooked because it aligns with societal expectations of maternal sacrifice. Her identity as a mother becomes both her strength and her limitation, trapping her within a cycle of dependence and exploitation.

Marginalization and Subaltern Identity

Jashoda belongs to a marginalized section of society, and her experiences reflect the struggles of subaltern women. Her lack of social and economic power leaves her vulnerable to exploitation. She has little control over her body or her labor, and her voice remains largely unheard.

Through Jashoda's story, Mahasweta Devi highlights the intersection of gender and class oppression. The narrative gives visibility to the lives of women who exist on the margins, challenging dominant narratives that romanticize motherhood.

Motherhood, Suffering, and Decline

While motherhood initially provides Jashoda with a means of survival, it ultimately leads to her downfall. Years of continuous breastfeeding/ overfeeding take a toll on her health, resulting in severe illness. Ironically, the very society that once depended on her abandons her in her time of need.

This tragic outcome underscores the unsustainable nature of motherhood as a survival strategy. Jashoda's suffering reveals the lack of support systems for women who sacrifice their bodies for others. The story critiques the societal tendency to celebrate maternal sacrifice while ignoring its consequences.

CONCLUSION

"Breast Giver" offers a powerful rethinking of motherhood, presenting it as a complex and often painful

experience shaped by socio-economic realities. In the hands of Mahasweta Devi, motherhood becomes a site of survival, resistance, and exploitation. Jashoda's story challenges the idealized image of the selfless mother, exposing the harsh conditions under which many women live. Motherhood, rather than being a purely nurturing role, is shown to be deeply entangled with issues of power, labor, and inequality. Ultimately, the narrative calls for a more critical understanding of motherhood, one that acknowledges both its strength and its suffering.

REFERENCES

- [1] Mahasweta Devi. *Breast Giver*. In *Breast Stories*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Seagull Books, 1997.
- [2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 1987.
- [3] Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 2011.
- [4] Chandra Talpade Mohanty. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- [5] Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, editors. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Kali for Women, 1989.
- [6] Sharmila Rege. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan, 2006.