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## The Politics of Breastfeeding in Northeast Indian Literature

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### Abstract

Breastfeeding, both in its literal consequences on a woman's body and its symbolic associations with attachment, highlights the simultaneously powerful yet servile position of the maternal figure. I trace this ambivalence in Mahasweta Devi's story "Breast-Giver," exploring women's literal and metaphorical hungers, as well as the hunger their children experience, arguing that breastfeeding often serves as a means of showcasing a woman's physical limitation based on her familial status as "feeder." However, I also argue for a profoundly embodied version of the breastfeeding trope, one that negates prior conceptions of breastfeeding as a "taking" and establishes it as a "giving" that not only nourishes one's family, but also one's self, as mothers circumvent hierarchical systems of cooking and food preparation. Ultimately, I both lay bare the interconnection between a woman's body and food-based labor systems and reveal literary methods for their extrication, through narrative instances of breastfeeding.

**Keywords:** Mahasweta Devi; "Breast-Giver"; food studies; hunger; motherhood

Despite their virtual universality, breastmilk and breastfeeding are topics usually relegated to the periphery of literature, alongside other unspoken biological processes. However, one of the most widely recognized instances of literary breastfeeding, which appears in Toni Morrison's 1987 *Beloved*,<sup>1</sup> offers an

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<sup>1</sup> My decision to begin this article with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* acknowledges the great debt that scholarship on breastfeeding owes to critical research on Morrison's novel. The comparison between *Beloved* and "Breast-Giver" connects structural hierarchies across cultures and nations and, though these characters are enmeshed in different systems of oppression, slavery in the American, Antebellum South versus a waning feudal system in Bengal, their actions are motivated by several of the same factors: structural hunger and maternal connection. The exploitation apparent in *Beloved* necessarily operates differently in "Breast-Giver," as a result of its Bengali Hindu context; yet the

introduction to this article's thematic threads. In a novel filled with visceral images, Sethe's stolen breastmilk is one of the most compelling: "All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me.... After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it."<sup>2</sup> Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman processing a lifetime of trauma, fixates on her stolen breastmilk in this recollection. Breastmilk both emphasizes her connection to her daughter, despite their separation, and epitomizes maternal nurturing, staving off the hunger so familiar to enslaved people, often fed just enough to meet a basic metabolic requirement. The scene focalizes several contradictory notions about breastfeeding that are central to my own argument. Breastmilk is first established as a motherly commodity, precious for its literal and symbolic power to connect mother and child, as well as to ease encroaching hunger. But Sethe's former status as an enslaved person, and the novel's initial setting on Sweet Home farm, also cast the scene in terms of livestock. Sethe explains that they "handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses."<sup>3</sup> The boys see Sethe as chattel, a farm animal who needs to be milked, and her milk as their birthright. Here, Morrison places the long-established rhetoric of enslaved people as animal chattel in the context of both motherhood and womanhood and, though the literary case studies in this article do not feature literal enslavement, nor acute sexual violence, they echo the triangulation Morrison establishes in *Beloved*—breastmilk as maternal connection, a reflection of a mother's own literal and metaphorical hungers, and an occasion for livestock comparisons.

This article will build on, then revise notions of breastfeeding as a form of "taking" epitomized by Sethe's stolen breastmilk, in a specifically Northeast Indian<sup>4</sup> context. Mahasweta Devi's Bengali-language "Breast-Giver" ("Stanadayini"), published in 1979 and translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1997, will serve as my keystone text.<sup>5</sup> Its central motif, breastfeeding, promotes exploration of mothers' literal and metaphorical hungers, as well as the hunger threatening their children, though breastmilk does not serve as a mechanism for dehumanization in the same manner as *Beloved*, in this Bengali Hindu context, as comparisons between main character Jashoda and various deities suggest. Both a breadwinner for her family and nurturer to her husband and children, Jashoda, in Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver," highlights

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"milk-taking" scene from *Beloved* provides a relevant starting point for understanding the economic and gendered structures that lead to Jashoda's eventual food insecurity, isolation, and death.

<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 236–37.

<sup>4</sup> By using the term "Northeast Indian," I refer to the Indian subcontinent as a whole. Mahasweta Devi was born in pre-Partition Bengal, in what is now Bangladesh, before moving to West Bengal, India. Purabi Basu was also born in modern-day Bangladesh, called East Pakistan at the time of her birth in 1949. Though each author was born in Bangladesh, prior to its independence, Mahasweta Devi is typically labeled an Indian author, whereas Purabi Basu is designated a Bangladeshi one. I therefore do not employ the term "Northeast Indian literature" to categorize their literature along national lines, but to indicate a shared geographical origin.

<sup>5</sup> Mahasweta Devi, "Breast-Giver," in *Breast Stories* (Calcutta: Seagull Books: 1997), 38–74.

the ambivalence of maternal experiences. Breastfeeding, both in its literal consequences on a woman's body and its symbolic associations with both attachment and constraint, mobilizes this ambivalence, highlighting the simultaneously powerful yet servile position of the maternal figure. I argue that breastfeeding in literature of the Northeast Indian Subcontinent often highlights a woman's physical limitations based on her familial status as "feeder," even as breastmilk in abundance is treated with reverence. However, I then turn to another Bengali-language author, Purabi Basu, and argue for a profoundly embodied version of the breastfeeding trope, one that negates prior conceptions of breastfeeding as a "taking" and establishes it as a "giving" that not only nourishes one's family, but one's self, as a mother circumvents hierarchical systems of cooking and food preparation.

Harriet Blodgett asks, "Are women empowered or *enslaved* by their role as food givers and, more broadly, nurturers?" and I suggest that a study of literary breastfeeding is a fertile starting point for answering her question.<sup>6</sup> This article rests on a central argument that breastfeeding itself, both as literal action and symbolic method of sustenance, is simultaneously an act of power and of constraint on the mother. Sarah Sceats argues that "mothers are overwhelmingly powerful but at the same time are socially and domestically disempowered by their nurturing, serving role."<sup>7</sup> Breastfeeding epitomizes this ambivalence, adding a biological element to the social and domestic disempowerment Sceats identifies. It simultaneously offers a low-cost, sustainable food source for a mother's children, while leaving her own body open to malnutrition. In her 1986 work on dining and feminism, Eileen Bender establishes the "ambiguous role of women ... apparently valorized through their service, simultaneously empowered and enslaved by the incessant demands of a hungry world for satiation."<sup>8</sup> Like Sceats, she sees the mother's role as "nurturer" ambivalently because a mother's nutrition is linked with her children's in a variety of ways. In the context of breastfeeding, the connection is straightforward: a nursing woman requires a higher caloric intake than one who is not. Some mothers also engage in "buffering," a practice in which parents reduce their food intake to ensure their children's nutrition, a common feature of narratives involving food insecurity. Yet, the analysis of breastmilk in this article also indicates a different kind of buffering, one that represents breastmilk as a resource that allows a mother to feed her children by proxy. Jashoda leverages her own body's sustenance, breastmilk, to feed children who have outgrown the milk themselves.

Mahasweta Devi's story, as many previous scholars have noted, calls clear attention to the exploitation of mothers. For example, Rifat Rezowana Siddiqui argues that the commodification of Jashoda's body evidences a double

<sup>6</sup> Harriet Blodgett, "Mimesis and Metaphor: Food Imagery in International Twentieth-Century Women's Writing," *Papers on Language & Literature* 40.3 (2004): 264; emphasis mine.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Surrey: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Eileen T. Bender, "The Woman Who Came to Dinner: Dining and Divining a Feminist 'Aesthetic,'" *Women's Studies* 12.3 (1986): 316.

colonization by both colonial and patriarchal forces.<sup>9</sup> Although I agree that Jashoda's bodily commodification is a clear example of the exploitation of motherhood, I also attend to the ways in which breastfeeding initially affords Jashoda personal and economic autonomy, even if it is of a transient quality. Like Kinana Hamam, I explore the ways in which "female agency in postcolonial women's texts overlaps with female oppression and suffering."<sup>10</sup> Hamam's subtle and sophisticated analysis of "Breast-Giver" attends to the very discrepancy in bodily representation, which describes a woman's body simply as moving "from its monolithic depiction as a space of exploitation into that of agency." Jashoda's body is a symbol for neither complete exploitation nor agency.<sup>11</sup> Like any person, she cannot be reduced to a wholly exploited or wholly empowered symbol of women's experiences.<sup>12</sup>

Mahasweta Devi is perhaps one of the most fitting authors for a study on the interactions among women's bodies, politics, and literature, as one of the few contemporary authors whose history of political activism is just as robust as her creative oeuvre. Author of more than one hundred novels and twenty short story collections, primarily written in Bengali, Devi consistently centers the plight of marginalized people, such as women and tribal communities. For this reason, and because several of her works have been translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Devi's fiction is also commonly cited in scholarly conversations surrounding subalternity. A December 2011 interview with Madhurima Chakravorty underscores what Mahasweta Devi herself has established many times: she is committed to politically informed fiction. Mahasweta Devi argues that "Activist writing must follow a realist impulse to understand, and subsequently represent, 'real' circumstances."<sup>13</sup> She understands social activism and

<sup>9</sup> Rifat Rezowana Siddiqui, "Commodification of 'Motherhood': A Study of Mahasweta Devi's Breast-Giver," *Labyrinth: An International Refereed Journal of Postmodern Studies* 5.4 (2014): 133.

<sup>10</sup> Kinana Hamam, "Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast-Giver' and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*," *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 397 (2016).

<sup>11</sup> Hamam, "Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast-Giver' and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*."

<sup>12</sup> Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 350; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "'Breast-Giver': For Author, Teacher, Subaltern, Historian ...," in *Breast Stories* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997), 77. For this reason, I also avoid analyzing Jashoda's story as a national allegory, in the style of Robert J. C. Young, or even Mahasweta Devi herself. Though it is a fertile topic for discussion, I prefer to treat Jashoda, and the other breastfeeding characters in this article, as embodied individuals, focusing on their materiality rather than their symbolic potential as versions of "Mother India" nurturing her citizen children.

<sup>13</sup> Becca Longmire, "'Handmaid's Tale' Author Margaret Atwood Insists Everything in the Book 'Happened in Real Life,'" *ET Canada*, 2018. It is important to note that Mahasweta Devi's thinking here is indicative of her tendency toward nonfiction and reportage. She suggests that writing about "real" events (i.e., events that someone, somewhere has experienced) is directly linked to realism as a genre. By contrast, Margaret Atwood's now famous insistence that "when I wrote 'The Handmaid's Tale,' nothing went into it that had not happened in real life somewhere at some time" also implies that Atwood considers her fiction to be informed by "real" events, yet her works are largely characterized as speculative fiction. Though I disagree with Mahasweta Devi's conflation between realistic fiction and "real" plot events, her own desire to write politically engaged fiction establishes her short story as political by intention. Madhurima Chakravorty, "'The only Thing I Know How to Do': An Interview with Mahasweta Devi," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 50.3 (2013): 284.

realism in literature as intimately connected, one informing and reinforcing the other. Mahasweta Devi's concern with "real" problems is directly connected to her representation of breastfeeding, as she cites structural hunger as a primary example of the topics responsible writers should target. Indeed, the topics at the center of "Breast-Giver" are nothing if not "real"—cancer, gendered labor, and breastfeeding—and material concerns drive the plot.

I place "Breast-Giver" in conversation with other texts whose topics follow Mahasweta Devi's own "real" subject matter. Although Sarah Sceats indicates that "where nurturing mothers are featured [in literature], the experience evoked is most often that of the child, the grateful or resentful recipient, rather than that of the nourishing provider," she also admits that "there are, of course, exceptions."<sup>14</sup> The texts examined in this study are the exceptions, in which a narrator presents a parent's perspective rather than the prevailing perspective of the child. I argue that literary breastfeeding mobilizes contradictory notions about women's roles as nurturers, including the commodification of these nurturing qualities and its impact on a mother's own body, despite economic or emotional benefits early on. Though I focus on "Breast-Giver" for the majority of this article, its concluding section opens out into a wider literary context, both to establish the continued relevance of conversations surrounding hunger in literature and to consider alternatives to Mahasweta Devi's ambivalent, and ultimately tragic, rendering of a breastfeeding woman. I choose to end this interrogation of literary breastfeeding with another Bengali-language story, "French Leave" ("Arandhan") by Purabi Basu, which treats breastmilk as both symbolically and literally subversive, arguing for the power of the breastfeeding motif to supplant structural hierarchies of food and bodily labor.<sup>15</sup>

### Breastfeeding as Labor, Breastmilk as Commodity

"Breast-Giver" is a story whose exact details can be difficult to pin down, a result of Mahasweta Devi's unique use of free indirect discourse and lack of quotation marks to signify dialogue. The story centers on Jashoda, whose husband, Kangalicharan, is left without the use of his legs when the youngest son of a *zamindar*, the hereditary landlord of their village, accidentally hits him with his father's car. The story's initial events take place shortly after Indian independence, in the early 1950s, concurrently with the abolition of the *zamindari* system. Though the Haldars are never explicitly labeled *zamindars* in the text, their role as landlords and "protectors," and the slow dissolution of their family's power, all but seals this reading. The purpose of the *zamindari* system, which Jashoda and Kangali would have likely experienced in some form even after it was abolished in 1951, was to:

<sup>14</sup> Sceats, *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Purabi Basu, "French Leave," in *A Matter of Taste: The Penguin Book of Indian Writing on Food*, ed. Nilanjana S. Roy, trans. Sarmistha Dutta Gupta (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004), 154–59.

Provide possessors with an income. This could derive from the land's products, as well as from holding back a share of the annual harvest, but also from other sources, such as the sale of milk. In this situation, agricultural production was not at all left intact in the hands of the peasants: it was creamed off by the land tax, with the government, central or provincial, taking the major share. The rest went to local landholders, with a small residue allotted to the villages collectively and from which corporate village life and its services were maintained. The actual cultivator was left with just enough to subsist on and with no reserve against famine.<sup>16</sup>

Given their participation in this feudal system, lower class tenants like Kangali and Jashoda, though Brahmin, would already be in a state of tenuous food security when Kangali becomes paralyzed at the start of the story. His disability means that he can no longer find work, and the family becomes doubly threatened by hunger, at both structural (feudal or semi-feudal) and household levels.

Though the Haldar family patriarch supports Kangali's family after his accident, they face food insecurity after his death, and Jashoda decides to find a position as a cook in the Haldar household. While there to apply for work, Jashoda breastfeeds a crying boy to pacify him, and Mrs. Haldar instead offers her a job as a wet nurse for the extended family's many children. During this time, a span of about thirty years, Jashoda and her family are well fed, and Jashoda becomes pregnant twenty times to retain her supply of breastmilk. Her fertility and service to the Haldar family earns their veneration. But when Mrs. Haldar dies, years after Jashoda's supply of milk has dried, Jashoda's place in the household becomes uncertain. Knowing she will no longer enjoy the same privileges she had as a wet nurse, Jashoda seeks out Kangali, who has been staying at the local temple, profiting on monetary donations, and enjoying the consecrated foods brought by devotees. Of Jashoda's twelve remaining children, several boys remain with Kangali at the temple, whereas the girls have been married off. Kangali and Jashoda argue bitterly at the temple and their relationship dissolves, at which time Jashoda determines to live the rest of her life as a kitchen maid at the Haldar house, isolated from both children and partner. However, it quickly becomes clear that Jashoda has developed breast cancer, which is left untreated until only the very final stages of her life. She dies alone in a hospital.

"Breast-Giver" places motherhood at the forefront of the narrative. Within the story's first lines, Mahasweta Devi reveals that "Jashoda doesn't remember at all when there was no child in her womb."<sup>17</sup> Motherhood drives both her personal and professional life, as Jashoda is employed as a wet nurse for the Haldars and remains perpetually pregnant to meet the needs of the large family's children. But it is also a story characterized by hunger, thematically linked with maternity. Kangalicharan whines for food, just as his children do. Jashoda is surrounded by hungry children at work, as she nurses every Haldar child born in

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Pozzo, "A Suitable Boy: The Abolition of Feudalism in India," *Erasmus Law Review* 1.3 (2008): 54.

<sup>17</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 38.

the family over several decades. When she returns home, she must also nurse her own hungry children. While employed as a wet nurse, Jashoda's own dietary needs are met; her income provides food for both herself and her family, and the Haldar family even sends her home with extra grain to keep her strength up. Notably, the narrator never mentions Jashoda's concerns for her future, though she must understand that a career based on breastfeeding cannot continue forever. This omission may be the result of Mahasweta Devi's characteristically sparse style, but it also mirrors Jashoda's own food insecurity at the story's outset—a lean, economic style of writing that both elides any future planning on Jashoda's part and exemplifies the very meagerness that catalyzed her decision to become a wet nurse in the first place. Sentences like, “He and Jashoda eat rice,” which references Kangali and appears in the first pages of the narration, are straightforward in content and simple in sentence structure, stylistic decisions that simulate the paucity of the family's diet prior to Jashoda's wet-nursing career.<sup>18</sup> Mahasweta Devi even suggests that the great food insecurity Jashoda experienced at the beginning of the story meant that “she never had the time to calculate if she could or could not bear motherhood” or a wet-nursing career.<sup>19</sup> Foresight is not a luxury she can afford, with a growing family and unemployed husband. Indeed, after she can no longer bear children, no longer breastfeed, and after the Haldar family matriarch passes away, Jashoda's meals are harder to come by. As such, her breastfeeding labor is intimately connected with her own sustenance.

As South Asian historian Swapna M. Banerjee outlines in her 2010 article on nonkin female caregivers for children in Bengal, information on domestic caregivers is largely absent from official narratives and records, and even contemporary historical scholarship. Banerjee's article begins with a synopsis of “Breast-Giver” to suggest that the story offers a “far wider reach into niches of human life than conventional history that still fails to document and coherently reconstruct a wet-nurse's life in India.”<sup>20</sup> Significantly for my own argument, Banerjee establishes the fact that wet nursing would have been fairly common among upper-class and upper-caste (though not Brahmin) households, such as the Haldars', throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, much of what contemporary historians can deduce about their lives is mediated through the narratives of their employers, or employer's children. “Breast-Giver,” though fictional, is unique for its robust reconstruction of a nonkin caregiver's treatment throughout her life. Because the story is largely focalized through Jashoda's perspective, we know that it is never her intention to become a wet nurse, but to become a cook for the Haldars. Instead, Mrs. Haldar gazes “in charmed envy at Jashoda's *mammal projections* and says, The good lord sent you down as the legendary Cow of Fulfillment. Pull the teat and the milk flows!” and, after consulting with the rest of her extended family, she offers Jashoda work as a

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<sup>18</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 40.

<sup>19</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 38.

<sup>20</sup> Swapna M. Banerjee, “Blurring Boundaries, Distant Companions: Non-Kin Female Caregivers for Children in Colonial India (Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries),” *Paedagogica Historica* 46.6 (2010): 777.

“suckling-mother.”<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Haldar explicitly links wet nursing and cow milking. When Jashoda approaches the family with an offer to prepare their food, she instead becomes their food, siphoning her own supply of breastmilk to the large Haldar brood. Mrs. Haldar directly compares Jashoda with a cow, even relabeling her breasts as “teats,” a term ordinarily reserved for cows’ utters. It is nothing about Jashoda’s personality or manner that inspire the cow analogy; their connection is simple: milk production.

Mrs. Haldar’s specific comparison between Jashoda and the “legendary Cow of Fulfilment” complicates the implied dehumanization of an animal comparison, though, as her reference is to Kamadhenu, the bovine goddess considered the mother of all cows, not just a common farm animal.<sup>22</sup> Kamadhenu is a wish-fulfilling cow, who brings prosperity to her owners.<sup>23</sup> Although the excerpt from *Beloved* that begins this article features an animal comparison as justification for sexual assault and milk theft, Mrs. Haldar’s own cow comparison attempts to honor Jashoda’s bounteous production. Cow rhetoric might denigrate a wet nurse’s position in a plantation context, or even colonial context,<sup>24</sup> but here, the comparison also venerates her. Jashoda single-handedly nurses every child born into the large extended family, bringing “prosperity” to their home just as Kamadhenu might. Their devotion toward Jashoda is “so strong that at weddings, showers, naming and sacred threadings they” not only invite her but give her “the position of chief fruitful woman [as] her worth went up in the Haldar house.”<sup>25</sup> Babies are seen running after her whining “Mother Mother.”<sup>26</sup> Family members and other members of the staff also refer to her as “the Goddess,” a likely reference to the lion-seated goddess, Durga, that appears in Jashoda’s wet-nursing dreams, and whose temple Kangali works in at the story’s outset.<sup>27</sup> As a wet nurse, Jashoda is personally responsible for the growth and nourishment of countless infants in the family—their bodies are literally made from hers—and the Haldar family honors her, both with comparisons to maternal deities and

<sup>21</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 48–50.

<sup>22</sup> Nanditha Krishna, *Sacred Animals of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2010), 81.

<sup>23</sup> Radhika Govindrajan, “Labors of Love: On the Political Economies and Ethics of Bovine Politics in Himalayan India,” *Cultural Anthropology* 36.2 (2021): 197. Not to be confused with Gau Mata, the holy mother cow, Kamadhenu is typically depicted with a women’s face and torso. However, both deities are associated with maternity, as Gau Mata is a cow described as a mother to humankind, and Kamadhenu is the mother of all earthly cows.

<sup>24</sup> Narin Hassan, “Feeding Empire: Wet Nursing and Colonial Domesticity in India,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 38.5 (2016): 166. In their article on colonial wet-nursing practices in India, Narin Hassan offers this passage from an 1868 memoir by Florence Marryatt as indication of the typical Anglo-Indian sentiment: “I have known several cases in India, where English children have been lost from the desertion, or constant change, of their ‘amah’; and my only wonder is that Englishwomen can ever prefer the use of them to that of a cow.” In this instance, not only are Indian wet nurses compared with livestock, but it is to indicate that their employment is less useful, less detrimental than that of a cow. Such common nineteenth-century conceptions suggest that British women’s distrust in Indian “amahs” often manifested as dehumanizing the wet nurses by comparing their labors to that of livestock.

<sup>25</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 52.

<sup>26</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 52.

<sup>27</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 53.



material rewards, for her contribution. Her job title as a “suckling-mother,” over the more common “wet nurse,” even indicates Jashoda’s status in the household in another capacity. Though the root “suck” implies a “taking” from Jashoda, the hyphenated “mother” also indicates her higher status as a matriarchal figure in the family. The title exemplifies the ambivalence of her position.

During this time as a wet nurse for the Haldar family, Jashoda also earns the title of breadwinner for her own. The Haldars supply “her daily meals, clothes on feast days and some monthly pay,” but also send “grains-oils-vegetables” to Jashoda and her family regularly.<sup>28</sup> Providing for her family fills Jashoda with pride and she begins referring to her job as a profession, imbuing her wet-nursing responsibilities with prestige; where a job is simply a task, a profession is a specialized vocation, one that places Jashoda at the head of her household. This gender reversal is affirmed when Kangali becomes the cook of their home. Concerned over Jashoda’s supply of milk, Mrs. Haldar orders Kangali: “take up the cooking at home and give her a rest. Two of her own, three here, how can she cook at day’s end after suckling five?”<sup>29</sup> Her formulation evokes the story’s first scene, the all-too-common image of a tired man, Kangali, coming home from work to find dinner on the table. Reversing these roles, Kangali “took charge of the cooking at home” and “became an expert in cooking plantain curry, lentil soup and pickled fish.”<sup>30</sup> More than simply telling readers that Kangali began cooking, Mahasweta Devi notes the dishes he became adept at. He does not merely “get by,” but becomes an expert cook, leaving Jashoda free to pursue her occupation and the veneration that accompanies it. So long as Jashoda continues to bring home a steady income, Kangali is satisfied with maintaining the family that allows her to work.

However, this apparent reversal of domestic gender roles also belongs to a larger historical tradition of divorcing a wet nurse from her own family to take full advantage of her reproductive years. Jashoda’s inability to cook for her family, and general absence from their home, reads as another version of bodily bartering, which Sara Suleri Goodyear terms the “economy of the borrowed breast,” though within a colonial context. Writing on wet nursing in nineteenth-century mutiny novels, Sara Suleri Goodyear argues that maternal loss is literalized by a bartering system in which “the lactating Indian feeds another’s child and loses her own, in order that the economic unit of her entire family may be equally fed.”<sup>31</sup> In essence, the wet nurse must neglect her family in order to feed them, even though, according to several historical accounts, “wet nurses, nursing mothers themselves, sometimes lost their own babies in order to nurture their Anglo-Indian charges.”<sup>32</sup> Though employed by an Indian family rather than a British one, Jashoda’s time and body are similarly “borrowed” from

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<sup>28</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 50.

<sup>29</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 51.

<sup>30</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 51.

<sup>31</sup> Sara Suleri Goodyear, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1992), 81.

<sup>32</sup> Parama Roy, *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 15.

her own children. Not only is she depicted as largely absent, a fact further evidenced later in the story when she learns her husband and children had been earning money at a nearby temple for years without her knowledge, but she becomes pregnant so many times that her own maternal connection begins to dull. Throughout her tenure as a wet nurse, Jashoda becomes pregnant seventeen times, in addition to the three children she had prior to working for the Haldars, to maintain her ready supply of milk, even though “the maternities towards the end were profitless.”<sup>33</sup> Despite her repeated miscarriages near the end of her wet-nursing career, Jashoda continues to become pregnant. We learn that Jashoda is the mother of twelve living children, by the time of her retirement, meaning that eight of her children were either miscarried or died in childhood. Mahasweta Devi implies that at least some of these children were lost at the expense of Jashoda’s wet-nursing career, as she continued to become pregnant even after they consistently stopped coming to full term. Devi labels these pregnancies “profitless,” in a moment of heavy irony: though they do not result in children, Jashoda’s late pregnancies earn her several “profits,” wages, meals, and respect both within the Haldar household and in her own family as “breadwinner.”

The cost of these “profits” first manifests in Jashoda’s mental health. In her book chapter “The Politics of Breastfeeding,” Penny Van Esterik advocates against “breastfeeding promotion that treats women as mere milk producers,” which considers breastmilk a “renewable resource” that ought to be tapped when it can.<sup>34</sup> Such efforts are “bound to fail” because “women are not canaries or cows or machines” but women with autonomous bodies.<sup>35</sup> Though Van Esterik is referring only to mothers feeding their own children, her point is exaggerated when placed in the context of “Breast-Giver.” A paradigm of productivity, Jashoda becomes pregnant twenty times to continue nursing the Haldar children over thirty years. Like a precious family cow, Jashoda offers the family the use of her breastmilk at the expense of her own health, but when she can no longer produce it, and after Mrs. Haldar dies, Jashoda is put out to pasture. She begins sharing a room with the other cooks of the house, cooking and serving where before she was served. It seems to Jashoda that her “good fortune was her ability to bear children. All this misfortune happened to her as soon as that vanished.”<sup>36</sup> Jashoda’s self-esteem is intimately tied to her motherhood, and to breastfeeding, as evidenced by the narrator’s description of motherhood as a “great addiction,” one that “doesn’t break even when the milk is dry.”<sup>37</sup> Her retirement from breastfeeding signals a steep decline in her mental health, and several members of the Haldar household describe her as increasingly confused once she can no longer satisfy her “addiction” to motherhood.

<sup>33</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 53.

<sup>34</sup> Penny Van Esterik, “The Politics of Breastfeeding: An Advocacy Update,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2013), 520.

<sup>35</sup> Van Esterik, “The Politics of Breastfeeding,” 520.

<sup>36</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 60.

<sup>37</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 60.

Jashoda's physical health also declines after her retirement, as she discovers that her breasts, the very means of her employment, are also the location of her cancer. The irony is not lost on Jashoda. With her breasts now hard, red, and swollen, she recalls the way she "scrubbed her breasts carefully with soap and oil, for the master's sons has put the nipples in their mouth," and asks, "Why did those breasts betray her in the end?"<sup>38</sup> Jashoda cared for her breasts, her "most precious objects," like a crafts-person cleaning, wiping, and sharpening their tools.<sup>39</sup> As the main jobholder for her family, Jashoda came to see her body as a tool for provision, recalling her own earlier wish: "to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest."<sup>40</sup> Jashoda nurses the Haldar's children, who in turn keep her own family fed, indirectly fulfilling her desire to be the harvest that sustains her family. Indeed, this mixed metaphor, Jashoda's body as both the earth and the tool, suggests that the symbolism of Jashoda's breasts throughout "Breast-Giver" is unstable. In the sections that follow, I trace this symbolic slippage alongside Jashoda's own food security. Though her breasts begin as symbols of fulfilment and satiation, Jashoda comes to associate them with emptiness: a fact symbolized by the craterlike wound on her breasts, but materially connected to her own food insecurity; her stomach is empty, just as her breasts are both empty of milk, and eventually of flesh itself.

### Maternal Hungers

While wet nursing, Jashoda understands her breasts as tools of her trade, which she must keep clean so she may continue to feed her family. This very commodification of her body, which in turn leads to a sharp decline in her self-regard, turns out to be unnecessary; Kangali had been easily supporting himself and their children. Confronting her husband, Jashoda laments, "Why did I have to worry for so long? You're bringing it in at the temple, aren't you? You've saved everything and eaten the food that sucked my body."<sup>41</sup> This language of "sucking" casts the scene in a parasitic light. Just one letter off from "suckling" in the English, Spivak's choice to use the words "sucking" and "suckling" throughout the translation suggests a parasitic reading of breastfeeding. The children suckling on Jashoda's breasts allow her to feed her family, but, in this moment, she realizes her profession has truly been a "sucking"; her relationships with both employer and family are paratrophic, as they quite literally grew fat on her body. Where she previously viewed her husband as another mouth to feed, as helpless as her own children, in fact, he had been providing for himself for years. Jashoda's status as breadwinner, and the resulting gender subversions, are immediately undercut with this information. Though Kangali served as the homemaker, cooking and caring for children during the day, Jashoda's power

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<sup>38</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 66.

<sup>39</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 50.

<sup>40</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 46.

<sup>41</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 57.

in their relationship has been simulated. Kangali's exaggerated helplessness afforded Jashoda more authority, more autonomy to leave the home. But, when it no longer suits Kangali to act the dependent, because Jashoda will herself become his dependent, he secures meals in other ways. Though it is unclear whether Kangali's actions are calculated, Mahasweta Devi does represent him as an opportunist—eating the food Jashoda brings home while earning at the temple all along—a characteristic that leaves Jashoda open to food insecurity by the person she had supported throughout her reproductive years.

Feeling defeated by this new reality, Jashoda leaves the temple where her husband and children find their meals “to throw herself at the goddess [Durga's] feet,” where she lays still and fasts for three days.<sup>42</sup> Jashoda meets the news of her food insecurity by leaving the very place her family has been sustained for years and decides to fast. In the context of Amartya Sen's conception of structural hunger, Jashoda's hunger is not a question of deprivation at the household level, but a question of her *entitlement* to the family's supply of food.<sup>43</sup> In Sen's most foundational description of starvation, he notes hunger is not a question of there “being not enough food to eat,” but rather of “some people not having enough food to eat,” a characteristic of hunger that applies not only to large-scale disaster, like famine, but everyday hungers as well.<sup>44</sup> Though Sen's formulation of entitlement relations owes more to notions of poverty than of gender, he does acknowledge that one's gender impacts access to food within a household, as it does for Jashoda. After her wet-nursing career, Jashoda is no longer entitled to the food wages the Haldars paid her with, nor is she entitled to food at the Shiva temple as a result of her argument with Kangali. Then, when she breaks her fast, she only does so “in name” because she remains socially prohibited from the food in the Durga temple.<sup>45</sup> Even when fasting, scenes that one might assume to be absent of food or eating, the question of Jashoda's food entitlement remains at the forefront of Mahasweta Devi's narration.

It is just after this “broken” fast that Jashoda decides to take her employment issues to Nabin, a local pilgrim guide working in the temple. Jashoda tells him, “I've carried so many, I was the regular Milk-Mother at the Master's house. You know everything. I've never left the straight and narrow,” to which he responds, “But of course. You are a portion of the Mother.”<sup>46</sup> Jashoda replies, “But Mother remains in divine fulfilment. Her ‘portion’ is about to die for want of food.”<sup>47</sup> Mahasweta Devi exposes the tenuous nature of Jashoda's food security with a wry humor. This interaction focalizes the simultaneously exalted, yet impoverished position Jashoda is in, represented both in terms of motherhood and hunger. Nabin describes Jashoda's breastmilk as a symbol of the Divine Mother, likely a reference to Durga, the lion-seated goddess whose temple he works in. Jashoda's

<sup>42</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 57–58.

<sup>43</sup> Amartya Sen, “Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation,” in *Poverty & Famines: An Essay on Entitlement & Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 1.

<sup>44</sup> Sen, “Poverty and Famines,” 1.

<sup>45</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 58.

<sup>46</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 59.

<sup>47</sup> Devi, “Breast-Giver,” 59.

ability to feed so many is, for him, an indication of her holiness. Yet, her legendary lactation abilities, which earned her comparison with divinity, do nothing to earn Jashoda a meal now that she is no longer productive.

The irony of her food entitlement is most apparent in descriptions of the setting surrounding Jashoda's conversation with Nabin: in a temple surrounded by consecrated food. Jashoda, constantly compared with maternal divinity, faces dire food insecurity, while temple icons of Durga are offered food each day. A customary practice among Hindu worshipers, those visiting a temple or other holy site often bring along an offering for the gods in the form of vegetarian food, typically fruits or other raw foodstuffs. It is common to find several third-party food stalls crop up in a temple's vicinity, where visitors can purchase foods to offer to the gods, known as *naivedya*.<sup>48</sup> Once offered to the divine, the food becomes *prasad*, consecrated food, and it does not often go to waste, but is rather consumed by temple Brahmins and other employees associated with the temple. Kangali takes advantage of this system, Jashoda discovers from Nabin, who has heard that her husbands and sons "call pilgrims, eat temple food, stretch out in the courtyard" having established their presence in the nearby Shiva temple.<sup>49</sup> Jashoda's youngest son tells her that he, his brothers, and his father enjoy the *prasad*, or "holy food," every day, but because of her recent fallout with Kangali, Jashoda knows the food will not be available to her.<sup>50</sup> This temple *prasad* focalizes gendered issues of entitlement. Though Jashoda is told, throughout her life, that she is an incarnation of "the legendary Cow of Fulfillment," of the "Lion-seated," or "the Goddess" more generally, it is her husband and sons who enjoy temple *prasad*. Her response is a play on words: the Divine Mother's "'portion' is about to die for want of food."<sup>51</sup> Jashoda is a "portion" —a morsel, a helping—of the mother, and her connection with divinity is presented in terms of her own ingestion. As she is "about to die for want of food," Jashoda herself is a "portion" to be consumed, not to consume herself. This moment even parallels Jashoda's first interaction with Mrs. Haldar, in which she came to offer her services in food preparation and, instead, herself became the food. Her power, as the consistent connections with divinity might suggest, is only in name, no longer translating into material food items once she is unable to breastfeed. Jashoda's motherhood, and associated divinity, is intimately connected with her breastfeeding and evidences a perilous slippage between satiated deity and a starving person.

I also trace Jashoda's transition away from her identity as "feeder" back to traditional classifications in Hinduism that distinguish between "eating" and "feeding." According to Manuel Moreno, as quoted by R. S. Khare, a classical example of this categorization comes from the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, "namely that giving food away is the only way of preserving it, and thus preserves life itself."<sup>52</sup> Feeding has therefore become more important, in many Hindu cultural practices,

<sup>48</sup> R. S. Khare, *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 152.

<sup>49</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 56.

<sup>50</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 58.

<sup>51</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 59.

<sup>52</sup> Khare, *The Eternal Food*, 148.

than eating.<sup>53</sup> In this context, Jashoda's retirement from wet nursing is a degradation from feeder to fed, from a divine giver, to a mere taker. Even though Kanganalicharan and the Haldars had been "taking" from Jashoda for thirty years, when Jashoda is demoted from feeder to fed, she is no longer food secure. The great irony in Jashoda's change in life situation is that the moment at which she is no longer a divine feeder, when she becomes the "fed," is the moment she can no longer find reliable meals.

Returning to the Haldar household, Jashoda accepts a demotion in status, now expected to wash dishes or prepare meals alongside the maids and cooks who used to venerate her, who "used to wash her feet and drink the water" hoping that some of her divine energy would be transferred to them.<sup>54</sup> Now she "cooked and served in silence," sleeping in a room with all the other domestic servants.<sup>55</sup> Most significantly, however, is that Jashoda gradually stops eating: "she serves nearly all the rice and curry, but forgets to eat," the first clue that her health may be declining.<sup>56</sup> Mahasweta Devi mentions her appetite twice more before the story's conclusion. Once, while Jashoda is still at the Haldars', but in the later stages of breast cancer, she writes that "slowly Jashoda gave up eating and lost her strength" and, while she is in the hospital, Kangali mentions that "she stopped eating."<sup>57</sup> "Breast-Giver" is a narrative book-ended by Jashoda's experiences with hunger: she faces dire food insecurity when a Haldar boy strikes and disables Kangali, then again after she can no longer breastfeed. Indeed, hunger is Mahasweta Devi's most successful mechanism for irony. It necessitates the grueling burden on Jashoda's body, but it is also the outcome of her tireless labors. Her transition from "feeder" to "fed" coincides with her most acute food insecurity. As her access to food is threatened by her loss of wet-nursing privileges, Jashoda begins to fast, in a voluntary abstinence from food, only broken in name for want of access to the temple food that her husband and sons enjoy themselves. Yet, when she returns to the Haldar household, again surrounded by food as her new position in the kitchen requires, she still does not eat. Devi notes only her *lack* of appetite for the remainder of the story. The loss of this hunger, repeated several times in the story's final pages, epitomizes Jashoda's destitution not merely of food or money, but of intimate relationships, and, most crucially for Jashoda herself, the loss of her identity as a mother.

### **Breastfeeding as Power and Radha's Resistance**

It is not only the power Jashoda enjoyed as a wet nurse that disappears when she can no longer produce milk, or her influence within her marriage, but her self-identification as a mother. Shortly before being transported to the hospital, during the late stages of her breast cancer, Jashoda laments: "If you suckle you're

<sup>53</sup> Khare, *The Eternal Food*, 148.

<sup>54</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 61.

<sup>55</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 61.

<sup>56</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 62.

<sup>57</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 64, 68.

a mother, all lies! Nepal and Gopal don't look at me, and the Master's boys don't spare a peek to ask me how I'm doing."<sup>58</sup> She reflects on her young adulthood, when she "preserve[d] the progeny" of the Haldar family, a great responsibility that she thought would connect her with the Haldar children for the rest of her life.<sup>59</sup> At this moment, Jashoda realizes the fleeting nature of her maternal status. She includes both her surrogate children, or "milk-children," and her biological children in her formulation of motherhood, an internalization of her community's belief that she was "the Mother of the World," because of her divinely ordained, ever-flowing breastmilk.<sup>60</sup> For Jashoda, motherhood is both an experience of bearing children of her own and breastfeeding surrogate children; she does not distinguish between them. Though in each case their bodies were created from her own, neither her biological children nor the Haldar children acknowledge the somatic connection they share, neither repaying what Jashoda terms a "milk-debt" with their presence at her deathbed.<sup>61</sup> Even until her final waking moments, Jashoda understands maternal connection as mediated through, and symbolized by, breastmilk.

In a strikingly similar scene, from Amit Majmudar's 2013 novel, *The Abundance*, the narrator reflects on her own motherhood. Like "Breast-Giver," *The Abundance* privileges the perspective of the unnamed mother figure, who is also an Indian woman, though living in the United States. Like Jashoda, this mother figure also learns that she is dying of cancer. In one of the novel's later scenes, the narrator holds her adult son close and thinks, "I have broken through to the old Ronak, which is to say, the young Ronak, weak as he once was, when I was all food and drink to him. When he would push away from his father and call to me. This is how powerful I used to be."<sup>62</sup> Like "Breast-Giver," this scene finds the narrator reflecting on her young motherhood, when she was "all food and all drink" to her child, and she connects her breastfeeding experience with feeling "powerful." Breastfeeding provides a lens through which these women reflect on motherhood: as their children grow, and their connection becomes less corporal, this feeling of powerlessness sets in for each character. Though neither character becomes dependent on their children, and thus there is no complete role reversal, their shared cancer diagnosis coupled with the relative isolation of their respective lives leaves them each feeling vulnerable.

Each narrator also laments the isolation she experiences during the final stages of her life. Majmudar's narrator mourns the loss of a symbolic connection with her children, as both of her two children live independent lives, growing their own families in cities far removed from their parents' Midwest home. By contrast, Jashoda mourns the *fact* of her solitude. Mahasweta Devi mentions few of her children by name, but it is instead the idea of her isolation that plagues her. During Jashoda's long tenure as a "professional mother," her breasts are perpetually full of milk and she is surrounded by family, both her own and the

<sup>58</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 66.

<sup>59</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 51.

<sup>60</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 51.

<sup>61</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 72.

<sup>62</sup> Amit Majmudar, *The Abundance* (New York: Picador, 2013), 232.

Haldars'. When she can no longer produce milk, she describes her breasts as "empty, as if wasted."<sup>63</sup> The isolation she experiences, the severed connections between her husband, children, and the Haldar family, is not only punctuated by this absence of breastmilk, but by a more tangible absence, an abscess created by her spreading cancer. During the late stages, Jashoda's chest becomes a negative space; her "left breast bursts and becomes like the crater of a volcano."<sup>64</sup> If breastfeeding in the milk-theft scene from *Beloved* is a "taking," then this craterlike image is the logical extreme. Jashoda's breasts, which have previously been the source of her meals, characterized by abundance and presence, have now become the epitome of absence both literally and symbolically. First simply devoid of milk, now devoid of flesh—her breasts become a literal and symbolic absence at the very moment her appetite withers to nothing.

When Jashoda first arrives at the hospital after her cancer diagnosis, the doctor asks a series of questions related to her profession as a wet nurse, and when he learns that she nursed twenty children of her own and another thirty Haldar children, he is aghast: "Fifty! ... God!"<sup>65</sup> Kangali asks if Jashoda's cancer stems from her breastfeeding, to which the doctor responds "One can't say why someone gets cancer, one can't say. But when people breast-feed too much—" and trails off.<sup>66</sup> Though Mahasweta Devi is careful not to imply the relationship between cancer and breastfeeding on a literal, medical level, the doctor's astonishment establishes a parabolic association. Taken as a moral tale, the answer to Blodgett's question, "Are women empowered or enslaved by their role as food givers and, more broadly, nurturers?" is straightforward. With a child perpetually latched to her, Jashoda is physically restrained, or "enslaved" to use Blodgett's term, and the need to remain perpetually pregnant means that she can never leave Kangali, so long as she remains fertile. Mahasweta Devi seals the moral with Jashoda's breast cancer diagnosis, in the style of nineteenth-century fiction; just as the fallen woman of a Victorian novel must die at the end of her story, so too does Jashoda's death read as a moral indictment, though one targeting her parasitic family and employers.

Yet, to read Jashoda as an entirely "powerless" character because of her isolation and death would be to ignore the ways her decline connects to her earlier experiences of maternal, economic, and even divine power. In her now canonized article, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes the habit of "defining women as archetypal victims [which] freezes them into 'objects-who-defend-themselves,' men into 'subjects-who-perpetrate-violence,' and (every) society into a simple opposition between the powerless (read: women) and powerful (read: men) groups of people."<sup>67</sup> This formulation of power "locks all

<sup>63</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 62.

<sup>64</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 73; emphasis in the original.

<sup>65</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 67.

<sup>66</sup> Devi, "Breast-Giver," 67.

<sup>67</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Critical Reader: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert Dale Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 699.



revolutionary struggles into binary structures—possessing power versus being powerless.”<sup>68</sup> Jashoda cannot simply be placed on a binary of “possessing power versus being powerless.” She enjoys the comparisons between herself and deities, but, after her retirement, none of the material rewards. She becomes the family breadwinner, subverting traditional gender roles, only to find that her husband had been securing his meals elsewhere all along. She has the capacity to nourish fifty bodies with her one, but this same body succumbs to breast cancer. For each representation of breastfeeding as a symbol of power—as divinely ordained, as a reversal of gendered labor norms, or as evidence of monumental strength of body—there is an equal and opposite reversal of that power.

In fact, the true tragedy of “Breast-Giver” is that Jashoda’s experiences of power and powerlessness are fundamentally interdependent: each of the aforementioned ways in which Jashoda experiences the *feeling* of power is in fact a power that has been granted to her, by the Haldar family or her husband, Kangali. By lavishing her with praise for being a divine milk producer and essential breadwinner for her family, the people in Jashoda’s life offer her the experience of power and influence. Their praise placates her, such that she does not question the labor she offers them, dressed up as “power.” These experiences of economic, maternal, and divine power, because awarded to her, can also be removed, resulting in feelings of vulnerability and isolation. Indeed, to label Jashoda as either powerful or powerless would be to misrepresent their interconnection: her experiences with each are ultimately governed by the same actors in her life, the Haldar family and her husband.

Yet, another Bengali-language short story, Purabi Basu’s “French Leave,” expands on the potential for breastfeeding as an act of power set out by Mahasweta Devi, though Devi’s ending forecloses this possibility for her own main character. Like Mahasweta Devi, Basu is a writer and activist born in a district of Dhaka, now in Bangladesh, who writes primarily in Bengali. “Breast-Giver” and “French Leave,” sometimes called “Radha Will Not Cook Today,” were published in English in 1997 and 1999, respectively. But beyond these accidents of birth and language, Mahasweta Devi and Purabi Basu share a sparse, economic writing style. “French Leave” contains many of the same simple, lean sentences as “Breast-Giver,” such as the example offered at the beginning of this article—“He and Jashoda ate rice”—most readily apparent in the story’s refrain, “Radha will not cook.”<sup>69</sup> It is for these reasons that I choose to end my discussion of “Breast-Giver” with a different short story: they mirror each other in language, style, and content, but their ultimate treatment of breastfeeding is disparate and instructive.

Jashoda experiences a transitory feeling of power—a power granted to her by the Haldars or Kangali, only to be withdrawn later—while Basu’s main character, Radha, draws power from an internal source, made tangible through breastmilk. In “French Leave,” breastfeeding itself is resistant. As in Mahasweta Devi’s story, or Majmudar’s novel, it is a source of deep, natural power, but not one that

<sup>68</sup> Mohanty, , “Under Western Eyes,” 709.

<sup>69</sup> Basu, “French Leave,” 158.

merely disappears once a mother's children begin to grow. Although "Breast-Giver" focalizes the ambivalence of breastfeeding, Basu employs breastfeeding as a method of maternal rebellion, evidencing a profound alimentary connection between mother and child, even as she refuses to cook for her family. "French Leave" begins in the predawn morning of a Bengali household, a morning ostensibly like any other. Basu tells readers that there had been no arguments the previous night, the weather is sunny—neither too warm, nor too cold—and that main character and mother, wife, and daughter-in-law Radha did not "feel unwell or fatigued in any way."<sup>70</sup> It is against this entirely ordinary backdrop that Basu introduces the story's central tension: that "Radha suddenly decided that she would not cook today."<sup>71</sup> The story continues throughout the day with the refrain "she will not cook today" appearing after each family member attempts to reason with Radha.

As the household grows more confused by Radha's sudden decision to not cook, their daily routines break down, emphasizing Radha's crucial role in the maintenance of her family's nutrition. When her family first notices Radha's refusal to cook, they ask her "What's wrong? What on earth is the matter?" indicating that her behavior is out of the ordinary, though Basu has already established that the day itself is not.<sup>72</sup> One relation, presumably her mother-in-law, asks Radha, "Will you force us all to fast today?"<sup>73</sup> Her question is notable for its implication that, without Radha, the family would not eat. She does not ask Radha, "Will you force us all to cook today?" and provide for themselves, but rather places the duty of sustaining her family solely on Radha. Without her labor, they will not eat. Radha's behavior clearly reads as resistant; in a household in which three generations rely on her food preparation, taking a day off without illness or provocation reads as a profound statement. It calls attention to the value of her work, which may otherwise go unnoticed, given most cooking and food preparation takes place in a separate space, a kitchen detached from the rest of the home.

Despite the entreaties of her mother-in-law and husband, who is first surprised then angry at leaving home with an empty stomach, Radha remains silent, neither explaining her refusal to cook nor reversing the decision. This silence further suggests that we read Radha's decision not to cook as a protest, with all the quiet dignity of silent protestors who refuse negotiation. While sitting at the edge of the pond near her home, however, Radha's son tells her "Ma, I am hungry" and she knows that she must devise a workaround to account for him.<sup>74</sup> Though she easily stonewalls her other family members, Radha's reaction to her son, Sadhan, is more tender; she felt "something big stir her heart. Upon the calm sea of her mind, huge waves suddenly reared up in the furious dance of the storm."<sup>75</sup> Even still, Radha does not move to begin cooking, but remains sitting

<sup>70</sup> Basu, "French Leave," 154.

<sup>71</sup> Basu, "French Leave," 154.

<sup>72</sup> Basu, "French Leave," 155.

<sup>73</sup> Basu, "French Leave," 155.

<sup>74</sup> Basu, "French Leave," 157.

<sup>75</sup> Basu, "French Leave," 157–58.

with her son when a crow flies by and drops a papaya onto her lap, which she peels for Sadhan. A kingfisher brings Radha a water lily seed, which she also offers her son, but he remains hungry and asks, “Ma, won’t you cook?” to which she responds “no.”<sup>76</sup> Though she feeds her child, it is only with the fruits and seeds nature, quite literally, offers her, and successfully maintains her decision not to cook.

As the papaya and water lily seed suggest, Radha wants to feed Sadhan; in fact, his appeals for food are the only ones that stir her heart. But when he is still hungry after eating the foods that the forest had brought them, Radha circumnavigates her desire not to cook another way:

Radha put [her] left nipple into her son’s mouth. With the right hand she continually caressed Sadhan’s forehead, eyes, head and hair. Unused to breast-feeding, Sadhan was puzzled for a few moments at this unexpected gesture. Then gradually he began to draw upon his mother’s nipple in his mouth with great enthusiasm. First softly, then with a little more force and finally with all his strength Sadhan tried to suck in his best and safest food from his mother’s body ... Gritting her teeth, she bit her lips in determination and wished—exercised all her power. And then it happened that very moment. Like a gurgling waterfall, her body trembling with pleasure, something flowed out of her breasts, brimming over the banks like floodwaters. Radha looked at her son. Sadhan giggled. Bubbling white milk flowed from his busy lips and dripped on the ground.<sup>77</sup>

Where each previous family member’s reliance on Radha leaves them hungry, and leaves her labeled as a bad wife, or bad daughter-in-law, here, Radha is both resistant to traditional food labor systems and able to provide for her child while remaining outside of those systems. Her refusal to cook reads as a practice in regaining power, a term used explicitly here as Radha “exercised all her power,” drawing from her own internal reserves to produce milk for her child. Her body has all the force of a natural disaster, as her breastmilk is “brimming over the banks like floodwaters.”<sup>78</sup> An inverse of the “crater of a volcano” Mahasweta Devi invokes, language of “floodwaters” not only suggests bounty, but presents breastfeeding as both powerful, a current pulsing with energy, and natural. Like a human-made dam stopping up a river, Basu’s floodwater comparison calls attention to the constructed nature of food systems in Radha’s home; their wide acceptance does not mean they are “natural.” Radha’s will, physically represented by breastmilk and compared to powerful waters, beats against the human-made constructions that lie in her path and offers an alternative that refuses to participate in traditionally gendered food roles.

Unlike Mahasweta Devi’s story, in which representational realism means that Jashoda must remain perpetually pregnant to maintain her supply of breastmilk, Radha has no such burden on her body. She is not physically restrained by the

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<sup>76</sup> Basu, “French Leave,” 158.

<sup>77</sup> Basu, “French Leave,” 158–59.

<sup>78</sup> Basu, “French Leave,” 159.

presence of a child in her womb, nor the one on her lap, as her body can feed him without the practical need for pregnancy to induce lactation. The caloric burden placed on lactating women is not even a factor, at this moment, as Radha appears unconcerned with her own hunger. This, combined with the fantastic depictions of woodland creatures offering Radha food, places “French Leave” further along the realist-fantastic spectrum than Mahasweta Devi’s work. It is precisely in these moments of folkloric magic that Basu’s story supplies resistance. In them, Basu imagines a familial structure not defined by hierarchical domestic labor, simply categorized into who prepares food and who consumes it, but a radical reimagining that not only locates power *within* a mother figure, but also assures readers that her boycott of domesticity does not preclude her love for her family. Both Mahasweta Devi and Purabi Basu represent the negotiation of domestic power through the image of a breastfeeding woman. But where Mahasweta Devi’s story offers breastfeeding as an ambivalent image, as any domestic, economic, or divine power Jashoda experiences is later withdrawn from the very people that offer it, Basu’s magical realist elements offer an alternative: Radha’s power is an internal, and constant, force.

Yet, the fact that Radha’s refusal to participate in hierarchical systems of food preparation exists within a fabulist story also draws attention to the disparity between the ambivalent reality Devi represents and the radical imaginary of Basu’s tale. The gap between their work reinforces the exigence for their study: we must continue to trace instances of literary breastfeeding, be they realist or fabulist, practical or aspirational, because it is precisely in their comparison that we find profound moments of women’s embodied labor and even resistance. Such moments locate power within a woman’s body, long coded as weak and vulnerable, and whose physical labors, often surrounding the feeding of others, have meanwhile been overlooked and undervalued. Literary instances of breastfeeding both declare the power in a women’s body and highlight the issues of access that reroute that power, and it is by pursuing such instances that we may begin to tug at the relationships between a woman’s body and food-based labor systems, which remain inextricably intertwined.

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