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# A Comparative Marxist-Feminist Reading of Ismat Chughtai's "The Mole" and Mahasweta Devi's "The Breast-Giver"

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**Abstract**

This paper explores a comparative analysis of "The Mole", by Ismat Chughtai and "The Breast Giver", by Mahasweta Devi through the framework of Marxist feminist reading. The research highlights how both stories portray the intersection of gender, class and the commodification of the female body within patriarchal society. Both stories highlight how female body is being exploited in different ways. In The Breast Giver Jashoda's body is portrayed as economic resource as she chooses to become a wet nurse in a wealthy household where she was respected and valued until she reproduces milk; once she was of no use she was abandoned and reduced to mere object. Whereas in The Mole the protagonist Rani, a lower-class woman, becomes a focus of the male gaze because she has a mole on her cleavage. Choudhry, a renowned painter, treats Rani as an object, and through his character the story highlights how female bodies are used as a commodity within a patriarchal society. By comparing these two stories, the paper presents a deep understanding of how women are being objectified in patriarchal society. By applying a Marxist feminist perspective, this paper shows how both stories highlight the ways in which society and economy come together to exploit and control women, especially from marginalised groups. Marxist feminism teaches us that women's oppression is not just about gender inequality but also about the economic systems which get benefited by using women's body as an object.

**Keywords:** Marxism, feminism, marginalised, inequality, patriarchy, oppression, commodification.

## INTRODUCTION

### Intersections of Gender, Class, and Patriarchal Domination

Feminist writing in India has played an important role in questioning patriarchal values and highlighting the lived experiences of women within a society undergoing constant social transformation. Through literature, many writers have exposed the inequalities faced by women and have created space for their voices and perspectives. Among the prominent contributors to this literary tradition are Ismat Chughtai and Mahasweta Devi, whose works have made significant contributions to discussions on gender relations and power structures in Indian society. Their writings explore the complexities of women's lives by examining issues such as restrictive gender roles, social pressures, sexual oppression and systems of domination. By analyzing their narratives, this study seeks to understand how these authors represent women's struggles and challenge existing power dynamics within the social and cultural framework of India. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains that women from marginalized or subaltern communities often remain unheard because dominant patriarchal structures suppress their voices (Spivak 271). In a similar way, Simone de Beauvoir argues that patriarchal societies position women as the "Other," which helps to maintain gender inequality (Beauvoir 16). In Indian literature, writers such as Mahasweta Devi and Ismat Chughtai question these oppressive systems by depicting female characters who struggle against social, cultural, and physical forms of oppression. Their writings bring attention to the experiences of marginalized women and reveal how patriarchal systems attempt to control women's bodies and identities.

Ismat Chughtai occupies a significant position within the tradition of progressive Urdu literature in the twentieth century. As an active member of the Progressive Writers' Association, she became widely recognized for her bold narrative style and her fearless engagement with socially sensitive themes. Much of Chughtai's fiction is set within the domestic spaces of conservative Muslim households, where she critically exposes the rigid structures of patriarchy and the social orthodoxy that governs women's lives. Through her literary works, she demonstrates how Progressive writers challenged the conservative values and hierarchical power relations prevalent in patriarchal society. Chughtai's writings frequently depict the suffering, marginalization, and emotional struggles of women who remain trapped within oppressive social systems. Her female characters often represent those who are denied agency and whose voices are silenced by the dominance of male authority. By portraying their experiences with psychological depth and realism, Chughtai brings attention to the hidden forms of oppression operating within domestic and social spaces. In doing so, she not only highlights the silent tyranny imposed upon women but also reveals how many women themselves remain unaware of the structures that suppress them. Consequently, her fiction functions as a form of social awareness, encouraging readers especially women to recognize and question the patriarchal norms that shape their lives (Jalal 87). Shagufta Naj aptly observes in her book that; "Women characters in Chughtai's stories do not want to be labelled as a 'second object' or the 'territory' under the domination of male. They want to have power in man and in the lack of it they reject their relationship and come out as a 'new woman' with more experience and awakening for their 'self'" (Naj 150). As we see in "The Mole", Rani represents the idea of the 'new woman'. Although Choudhry tries to objectify and control her yet Rani refuses to be emotionally or socially dominated. She openly expresses her sexuality and behaves accordingly. Her refusal to entertain the male patriarchal structures becomes an act of rebellion against the male supremacy. Whereas, Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) was a prominent

Bengali author and social activist, widely regarded as an important voice in postcolonial Indian literature. Her writings, which have been translated into many languages, mainly focus on the lives and struggles of marginalized groups, especially the tribal communities of India. Through her stories, Devi highlights the complex challenges faced by subaltern individuals, particularly tribal women who experience multiple layers of oppression such as patriarchy, caste discrimination, the legacy of colonialism, and economic exploitation under capitalism. Beyond being powerful literary works, Devi's writings also function as a form of social activism. She used literature as a means to expose injustice and bring attention to the harsh realities faced by indigenous communities, especially women. Her commitment to social change extended beyond writing, as she was actively involved in movements that fought for the rights and dignity of tribal people and other marginalized groups.

**Women, Gender, and Class: Sexuality, Motherhood, and Bodily Exploitation**

Ismat Chughtai's The Mole may at first appear to be a psychological story that shows how an artist gradually loses his mental balance. However, when viewed from a feminist perspective, the story reflects a deeper struggle for power between men and women that is shaped by class, caste, and gender differences. The narrative ultimately reveals that the male artist becomes a victim of his own arrogance and patriarchal mindset. His ego, strengthened by social privilege and male authority, is unable to tolerate the bold and uncontrolled passion of a woman who refuses to behave according to his expectations. Rani the protagonist of the story is a young woman who belongs to the lower class of society. The male protagonist is Choudhry, an artist who hires Rani to pose as a model for one of his paintings. Two other male characters also appear in the narrative: Chunnan, a man from Rani's neighbourhood, and Ratna, the servant working in Choudhry's house. Rani is depicted as having sexual relationships with both of them. She openly expresses her sexuality and frequently draws attention to the mole on her breast, which becomes a significant symbol in the story. One striking aspect of her personality is the way she playfully teases the men by displaying this mole. Both Chunnan and Ratna respond eagerly to her teasing, while Choudhry, although strongly attracted to her, never becomes physically involved with her. Choudhry finds himself in a difficult emotional position. He is unable to tolerate Rani's relationships with Chunnan and Ratna, yet he cannot bring himself to engage in a sexual relationship with her. His internal conflict becomes evident when he once sees Rani bathing in a pond with Ratna, which deeply angers and disturbs him. This incident intensifies his suppressed attraction toward her. Later that night, driven by desire and frustration, he goes to Rani's hut and desperately searches for her in the darkness, only to realize that she is not there. He assumes that she must be with another man, a thought that deeply unsettles him. However, the following morning he cannot question her about her absence because doing so would reveal that he had secretly visited her the previous night. The next day, when Rani suddenly disappears, people begin asking Choudhry about her whereabouts, and some even start suspecting him. Several months later, the police find Rani attempting to abandon her newborn baby in a dustbin. This incident further strengthens the suspicion among the villagers, who assume that Choudhry must have sexually exploited her. During the court proceedings, when Rani is asked about the identity of the child's father, she calmly states that, "Choudhry is not a man" (Chughtai 80). She explains that the father could either be Chunnan or Ratna. Through this unexpected statement, Rani simultaneously frees Choudhry from the accusation while also humiliating and punishing him. Choudhry is proved innocent but he wished he was guilty and caught in in the trap of the mole. Choudhry's fear of losing his masculinity turns into a mental obsession, and by the end, he is

shown drawing long, round, conelike shapes, almost like a signature.

Whereas, in "The Breast Giver", Mahasweta Devi introduces the protagonist Jashoda through the narrator, who describes her life as one defined almost entirely by marriage and motherhood. Jashoda cannot recall much about her early life, as if she had always existed only as the wife of Kangalicharan and the mother of numerous children (Devi 39). She is portrayed as a conventional Indian wife and mother whose identity revolves solely around her husband and offspring. Jashoda does not perceive herself as an independent individual; rather, she internalizes the role of the nurturing "Divine Mother," whose large breasts become the basis of her livelihood and social identity. Because she lacks awareness of her own autonomy, she remains vulnerable to exploitation throughout her life. At home, her husband Kangalicharan takes advantage of her reproductive capacity, treating her body primarily as a means of producing children. Her fertility transforms her into what the narrative metaphorically presents as a "divine engine," constantly bearing, raising, and caring for children while managing household responsibilities. A significant turning point occurs after Kangalicharan suffers an accident, leading to a reversal of traditional gender roles. Jashoda, once confined to domestic duties, becomes both a producer and a reproducer within the household economy, while her husband takes on the role of a cook. She later becomes a professional wet nurse for the wealthy Haldar family, where she is expected to breastfeed numerous infants, her milk compared to that of a cow that endlessly nourishes others (Devi 52). Over time, Jashoda endures seventeen pregnancies across three decades, and the idealized concept of motherhood gradually erases her sense of individuality. She is rarely portrayed as an autonomous person; instead, she is almost always pregnant or nursing a child. However, social circumstances eventually change within the Haldar family. The younger generation begins to reject the practice of having many children, and the social value of Jashoda's maternal labor declines. As a result, she is dismissed from the household once her services are no longer required, much like an unprofitable commodity removed from the market. At the same time, her husband and even her children no longer depend on her. After decades of physical and emotional exploitation, Jashoda is abandoned and left to face the consequences of a life spent serving others. Ultimately, her body, which had sustained so many lives, develops breast cancer, symbolically turning against her and marking the tragic collapse of her identity and existence (Devi).

**A Marxist-Feminist Analysis of Gender, Labour, and Economic Inequality**

Marxist feminism helps us understand how gender inequality is closely tied to class oppression in capitalist societies. Based on the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, it argues that women's oppression comes mainly from economic and material conditions, rather than just cultural or social norms. Friedrich Engels further argues that the structured institution of the family reduces women to instruments of reproduction, a reality vividly reflected in Jashoda's commodified role as a mother (Engels 85). It shows that capitalism depends a lot on women's unpaid household work and their role in reproduction, which strengthens male control over women's bodies. As Frigga Haug points out, real social change cannot happen unless women are freed from this system, which means challenging both class inequality and gender-based power. From this perspective, literature becomes an important space to show how women's bodies are controlled, used, and treated like commodities. The works of Ismat Chughtai and Mahasweta Devi clearly reflect these realities. In The Mole, Chughtai highlights how women's bodies are objectified and controlled within a patriarchal society while in The Breast Giver, Devi shows

how a woman's reproductive labour is used for economic benefit. Together, these texts reveal how closely economic exploitation and gender oppression are connected.

In The Mole, a Marxist-feminist reading focuses on the unequal power relationship between Choudhry and Rani, highlights how both class and gender shape this imbalance. Chughtai employs vivid visual bodily details to reveal how struggles of class and gender are played out through the body itself. The artist's failure to portray Rani "realistically" highlights the limits of the dominant class in fully understanding or possessing the subaltern figure. According to Judith Butler, the body is not merely a biological reality; rather, it gains meaning through repetitive social practices and structures of power. From this perspective, Rani's body, constantly shaped and interpreted through the male gaze and masculine desire, emerges as a socially constructed site of meaning rather than an autonomous and self-defined identity (Butler). "How translucent each feature! The bulge of Ratan's thighs, his wet hair, his small eyes set together. And Rani's tousled, wet plait …. And the mole. That fleshy, protuberant mole" (Chughtai 77). After seeing her in a state of wetness and undress during bathing in the pond with Ratan. "The muscle in his arms bulged and grew taut, and he felt ant crawling inside his brain; a strong gust of cool ……. His eyes plunged at the black, fleshy mole like hungry vultures and…" (Chughtai 77). Through these vivid visual descriptions Ismat Chughtai suggests that Rani's body becomes something that can be controlled and exploited. Moreover, Chughtai also reveals how women's bodies are treated as an object for male desires and artistic use. However, the artist's failure to truly represent Rani shows that people from powerful classes cannot fully understand or own the experiences of marginalized women. "And women from faraway places, both naked and clothed, felt honoured to pose for him. But this sprightly, illiterate chit of a girl …. was completely unmanageable" (Chughtai 75). In this way, the story reveals that lower-class women face double oppression both because of their gender and their economic status which highlights how closely class and gender are connected. Similarly, The Breast-Giver clearly and powerfully brings out Marxist-feminist ideas, especially when it comes to the exploitation of women's reproductive labour. Instead of staying at a theoretical level, the story shows in a very real and relatable way how a woman's natural abilities, like giving birth, breastfeeding, and caring for others are turned into sources of income within an unfair social system. Jashoda's work as a wet nurse becomes a strong example of how women's bodies and their nurturing roles are treated as something normal and expected, while at the same time being used for the advantage of others. From a Marxist-feminist viewpoint, the story highlights that this kind of labor, even though it is essential for sustaining families and society, is not properly valued. It is controlled by those in power, whether social or economic. Jashoda's body is treated almost like a machine of production, where her ability to produce milk is used for economic gain. Yet, despite doing such important work, she remains poor and socially neglected. This shows a clear contradiction: she creates value, but she does not receive fair recognition or reward for it. Jashoda is elevated by her employers to the symbolic position of Kamdhenu, the mythical cow believed to fulfil all needs, and as a result, she is regarded as one of the most respected women in the village. Her husband, despite being physically disabled yet still sexually active, plays a role in guiding her by sharing what he considers practical knowledge. Described as being inspired by the creative force of Brahma, he presents his advice as if it carries a kind of divine authority. "You will have milk in your breast only if you have a child in your belly. Now you'll have to think of that and suffer. You are a faithful wife, a goddess. You will yourself be pregnant, be filled with a child, rear it at your breast, isn't this why mother comes to you as a midwife?" (Breast Stories 50). Jashoda ultimately becomes a victim

of gender-based violence, which is deeply tied to the wider structures of social and economic exploitation. The Breast-Giver reveals how patriarchal ideology, working hand in hand with capitalist systems, turns the female body into a tool for generating profit and benefit. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interprets the story through a Marxist-feminist lens, explaining that the milk Jashoda produces for her own children holds "use value," while the extra milk she provides to others takes on "exchange value." However, even when her labour no longer brings any economic benefit, she is abandoned by those who once depended on her. Left completely alone, Jashoda dies in isolation. Her cremation is carried out by someone from an untouchable community, symbolising her complete social exclusion. "She was cremated by an untouchable. Jashoda's death was also the death of God" (74). Though she was treated as a godlike figure, she was in reality only a human being performing that role. In the end, she is rejected by society, and the very idea of her "divinity" becomes ironic, as it ultimately contributes to her suffering and abandonment (Vats and Sharma 2023).

**Rani and Jashoda: Gender, Class, and Economic Exploitation**

The socio-economic settings of these two writers form the themes and concerns of their works in different ways. Ismat Chughtai mostly talks about middle class Muslim society where questions of morality, respectability and social norms play a vital role. Her writing exposes the hypocrisy prevalent in these classes particularly highlighting how rigid moral conscience leads to sexual suppression of women. Ismat Chughtai demonstrates a profound understanding of the evolution of female consciousness in her literary works. Her writing is marked by a distinctive fusion of artistic vision, sharp critical insight, and a deeply rebellious spirit. Chughtai's narratives function as a mirror to the socio-cultural realities of her time, particularly highlighting the condition of women within a restrictive and conservative Muslim milieu. She exposes the injustices inflicted upon women under the guise of religious and moral authority, thereby challenging entrenched patriarchal norms. A notable feature of her style is the effective use of irony and satire, through which she dismantles the façade of societal piety and reveals the underlying hypocrisy and double standards governing gender relations. By interrogating these contradictions, Chughtai brings to light the tension between outward morality and concealed desires within a rigid social structure. In the broader context of Indian literature, her contribution is significant for her bold exploration of repressed dimensions of the human psyche, particularly female sexuality. Much like D. H. Lawrence and Walt Whitman, who are often regarded as celebrants of the human body, Chughtai asserts the legitimacy of bodily desires and critiques their suppression as unnatural. Her works compellingly portray the socio-economic and sexual exploitation endured by women, rendering visible experiences that are often silenced. Therefore, it is apt to regard Chughtai not merely as a storyteller but as a powerful social critic whose boldness and commitment to truth secure her a distinctive place in modern Indian literature. Whereas Mahasweta Devi compellingly foregrounds the struggles of tribal and Dalit communities in their pursuit of social and economic justice. Her literary works portray characters who embody resistance and resilience, persistently striving to assert their dignity despite enduring systemic exploitation at the hands of dominant upper-caste structures. Through her narratives, Devi instills a sense of courage among marginalized and silenced communities, encouraging them to challenge injustice and reclaim their agency. Beyond her literary contributions, Devi's role as an activist reinforces her critique of the dominant structures of Indian society that have historically excluded tribal communities, Dalits, and women from development and denied them fundamental rights. She draws attention to the persistent marginalization of these groups, including their limited access to political rights,

such as voting, and their continued victimization by both state authorities and upper-caste groups. Her work reflects a deep commitment to restoring dignity and humanity to these communities. Devi also offers a sharp critique of state policies, particularly those framed as instruments of economic development. She exposes the underlying motives of such policies, suggesting that they often facilitate the exploitation of tribal resources under the guise of progress, ultimately resulting in further economic dispossession. Her writings highlight the everyday challenges faced by tribal communities, including inadequate access to education, healthcare, land rights, and clean drinking water. Furthermore, Devi interrogates the formulation and implementation of laws intended for social welfare. She critiques the gap between legislative intent and practical execution, arguing that such laws frequently remain ineffective due to poor implementation and lack of awareness among marginalized populations. Despite the existence of legal measures addressing issues such as bonded labor, untouchability, land reforms, and wages, these provisions often fail to benefit those most in need. Through her fiction, Devi also exposes the systemic mechanisms that perpetuate ignorance and exclusion among tribal communities, keeping them distanced from mainstream socio-political processes. In doing so, she underscores the complicity of political and social institutions in sustaining inequality. Her works ultimately serve as a powerful indictment of the structures that perpetuate marginalization, while simultaneously affirming the agency and resistance of the oppressed. Thus, Mahasweta Devi emerges not only as a literary figure but as a radical social critic whose writings challenge exploitative systems and advocate for the empowerment and inclusion of marginalized communities.

The issue of women's economic dependence occupies a significant position in the works of Ismat Chughtai and Mahasweta Devi, although it is expressed through differing socio-cultural and class contexts. In Chughtai's writings, women's economic dependence is deeply embedded within patriarchal family structures. Her female characters are frequently portrayed as financially reliant on male figures such as fathers, husbands, or patrons, a condition that severely restricts their autonomy and freedom. This dependence extends beyond material constraints to encompass psychological conditioning, as women are compelled to internalize obedience and conform to rigid gender roles. In The Mole, Chughtai illustrates how the absence of economic independence renders women susceptible to emotional neglect, sexual exploitation, and objectification. Through this portrayal, she exposes the intricate relationship between financial dependency and the broader structures of patriarchal control that govern women's lives. "Chunan gives you gurdhani?" "And kneel too". She …. Rani was crazy about gurdhani… "I've been giving you money and you're still going to Chunan for the sweet?" (Chughtai 76). These lines reveal that how a woman is being exploited over a piece of gurdhani. Moreover, Choudhry uses Rani's body for his economic benefit and instead of treating her as a piece of art he reduces her as an object. The domestic space which should be a place of comfort becomes a place of confinement where women's labour remains unpaid and unrecognised. In contrast, Mahasweta Devi situates women's economic dependence within a broader framework of class exploitation, caste hierarchy, and systemic state neglect. Her female characters predominantly belong to marginalized tribal and lower caste communities, where conditions of poverty and dispossession significantly heighten their vulnerability. In The Breast Giver, the protagonist Jashoda's body itself becomes a means of economic sustenance, as her reproductive and nurturing capacities are transformed into commodities within an exploitative socio-economic structure. In Devi's narratives, economic dependence assumes a far more severe and corporeal dimension. Women

are not merely financially dependent In fact they are reduced to instruments of labour, their bodies and capacities appropriated by oppressive systems for survival. Through such representations, Devi exposes the intersection of gender, class, and caste in intensifying the exploitation of women, thereby offering a powerful critique of the socio-economic structures that sustain their marginalization. "How you played with these tits? You couldn't sleep otherwise? My lap was never empty, if this one left my nipple, there was that one, and then the boys of the Master's house" (Devi 61). These lines highlight how Jashoda's body was exploited by her husband and by upper class as her body becomes a site of commodification, where reproductive labour is propelled by the upper class for their benefit. Her ability to give birth and produce milk are no longer personal or emotional rather transformed into wage labour that sustains elite comfort. The upper-class family exploits both her economic vulnerability and maternal strength, supporting existing class and gender hierarchy. Moreover, her prolonged illness was being neglected that exposes the brutality of this system. Devi uses this tragic episode to critique not only individual exploitation but also the wider socio-economic structures that normalise such inhumane activity.

## CONCLUSION

Both texts remarkably highlight the extreme of patriarchal dominance where a woman herself feels to be indebted to the male. From a Marxist-feminist perspective, such portrayals illustrate how ideology functions as a powerful tool of control. Women are not only oppressed through external forces but are also conditioned to accept, justify, and even participate in their own subjugation. Both Rani and Jashoda, therefore, exemplify how patriarchal and capitalist systems maintain dominance not merely through coercion, but through the internalization of norms that make exploitation appear natural and inevitable. As Toril Moi states, feminist criticism explores "the ways in which literature … reinforce or undermine the oppression of women" (Moi 7). Taking this into account, both Ismat Chughtai and Mahasweta Devi challenge patriarchal narratives by exposing how women's bodies are controlled, judged, and interpreted within male-dominated social structures. As Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 20). She argues that patriarchy functions through interconnected institutions such as domestic labour, economic systems, and cultural practices. This view helps explain the experiences of Rani and Jashoda, whose oppression is not limited to the household alone but is also reinforced by social and economic structures. Both women remain trapped within patriarchal roles where their bodies and labour are controlled and utilized for the advantage of others. Both narratives demonstrate how women's bodies are transformed into sites where power, desire, and control operate within patriarchal social structures. In The Mole, Ismat Chughtai portrays how Rani's body becomes the focus of male attention and artistic fascination. The male gaze, particularly that of Choudhry, attempts to appropriate and aestheticize her physical presence, thereby reducing the female body to an object of visual and sensual consumption. In a similar manner, The Breast Giver by Mahasweta Devi presents Jashoda's body as a means of economic survival. Her ability to reproduce and produce breast milk is commodified, turning motherhood into a form of labour that sustains both her family and the wealthy Haldar household. Through these portrayals, Chughtai and Devi expose the social structures that confine women's identities to their bodily attributes and reproductive functions. Their narratives suggest that patriarchal societies often value women primarily for their physical bodies—either as objects of male desire or as instruments of reproductive and nurturing labor. By highlighting these conditions, both authors reveal the deep structural inequalities that exist

at the intersection of gender and class. Consequently, women's individuality and autonomy are frequently overshadowed by social systems that exploit their bodies for male gratification, economic benefit, and social expectations (Chughtai; Devi).

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