

*The Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi*

*Mother of 1084*

A Novel. Translated and introduced by  
Samik Bandyopadhyay.

*Breast Stories: Draupadi, Breast-Giver, Choli ke Pichhe*

Translated with introductory essays by  
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

*Five Plays: Mother of 1084, Aajir, Urvashi and Johnny, Bayen, Water*

Adapted from her fiction by the author.  
Translated and introduced by  
Samik Bandyopadhyay.

*Rudali: From Fiction to Performance*

This volume consists of the story by Mahasweta Devi  
and the play by Usha Ganguli.  
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*The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*

A collection of articles published in  
*Economic and Political Weekly, Frontier*, and other journals.  
Introduced and translated by Maitreya Ghatak.

**BREAST  
STORIES**  
**MAHASWETA DEVI**

*Translated with introductory essays by*  
GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK



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BEHIND THE BODICE: CHOLI KE PICHE  
Mahasweta Devi

7. A *sari* conjures up the long many-pleated piece of cloth, complete with blouse and underclothes, that 'proper' Indian women wear. *Dopdi* wears a much-abbreviated version, without blouse or underclothes. It is referred to simply as 'the cloth.'

## breast-giver mahesweta devi

My aunties they lived in the woods,  
in the forest their home they did make  
Never did Aunt say here's a sweet dear,  
eat sweetie, here's a piece of cake.

JASHODA DOESN'T REMEMBER if her aunt was kind or unkind. It is as if she were Kangalicharan's wife from birth, the mother of twenty children, living or dead, counted on her fingers. Jashoda doesn't remember at all when there was no child in her womb, when she didn't feel faint in morning, when Kangali's body didn't *drill* her body like a geologist in a darkness lit only by an oil-lamp. She never had the time to calculate if she could or could not bear motherhood. Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings.

Jashoda was a mother by profession, *professional mother*. Jashoda was not an *amateur* mama like the daughters and wives of the master's house. The world belongs to the professional. In this city, this kingdom, the amateur beggar-pickpocket-hooker has no place. Even the mongrel on the path or side-walk, the greedy crow at the garbage don't make room for the upstart *amateur*. Jashoda had taken motherhood as her profession.

The responsibility was Mr Haldar's new son-in-law's Studebaker and the sudden desire of the youngest son of the Haldar-house to be a driver. When the boy suddenly got a whim in mind or body, he could not rest unless he had satisfied it instantly. These sudden whims reared up in the loneliness of the afternoon and kept him at slave labour like the khalifa of Bagdad. What he had done so far on that account did not oblige Jashoda to choose motherhood as a profession.

One afternoon the boy, driven by lust, attacked the cook and the cook, since her body was heavy with rice, stolen fishheads, and turnip greens, and her body languid with sloth, lay back, saying, 'Yah, do what you like.' Thus did the incubus of Bagdad get off the boy's shoulders and he wept repentant tears, mumbling, 'Auntie, don't tell'. The cook—saying, 'What's there to tell?'—went quickly to sleep. She never told anything. She was sufficiently proud that her body had attracted the boy. But the thief thinks of the loot. The boy got worried at the improper supply of fish and fries in his dish. He considered that he'd be fucked if the cook gave him away. Therefore on another afternoon, driven by the Bagdad djinn, he stole his mother's ring, slipped it into the cook's pillowcase, raised a hue and cry, and got the cook kicked out. Another afternoon he lifted

the radio set from his father's room and sold it. It was difficult for his parents to find the connection between the hour of the afternoon and the boy's behaviour, since his father had created him in the deepest night by the astrological calendar and the tradition of the Haldars of Harisal. In fact you enter the sixteenth century as you enter the gates of this house. To this day you take your wife by the astrological almanac. But these matters are mere blind alleys. Motherhood did not become Jashoda's profession for these afternoon-whims.

One afternoon, leaving the owner of the shop, Kanganalicharan was returning home with a handful of stolen samosas and sweets under his dhoti. Thus he returns daily. He and Jashoda eat rice. Their three offspring return before dark and eat stale samosa and sweets. Kanganalicharan stirs the seething vat of milk in the sweet shop and cooks and feeds 'food cooked by a good Brahmin' to those pilgrims at the Lionseated goddess's temple who are proud that they are not themselves 'fake Brahmins by sleight of hand'. Daily he lifts a bit of flour and such and makes life easier. When he puts food in his belly in the afternoon he feels a filial inclination towards Jashoda, and he goes to sleep after handling her capacious bosom. Coming home in the afternoon, Kanganalicharan was thinking of his imminent pleasure and tasting paradise at the thought of his wife's large round breasts. He was picturing himself as a farsighted son of man as he thought that marrying a fresh young thing, not working her overmuch, and feeding her well led to pleasure in the afternoon. At such a moment the Halder son, complete with Studebaker, swerving by Kanganalicharan, ran over his feet and shins.

Instantly a crowd gathered. It was an accident in front of the house after all, 'otherwise I'd have drawn blood', screamed Nabin, the pilgrim-guide. He guides the pilgrims to the Mother goddess of Shakti-power, his temper is hot in the afternoon sun. Hearing him roar, all the Haldars who were at home came out. The Haldar chief started thrashing his son, roaring, 'You'll kill a Brahmin, you bastard, you unthinking bull?' The youngest son-in-law breathed relief as he saw that his Studebaker was not much damaged and, to prove that he was better human material than the money rich, *culture-poor* in-laws, he said in a voice as fine as the finest muslin, 'Shall we let the man die? Shouldn't we take him to the hospital?'—Kangali's boss was also in the crowd at the temple and, seeing the samosas and sweets flung on the roadway was about to say, 'Eh Brahmin!! Stealing food?' Now he held his tongue and said, 'Do that *sir*.' The youngest son-in-law and the Haldar chief took Kangalicharan quickly to the hospital. The master felt deeply grieved. During the Second War, when he helped the anti-Fascist struggle of the Allies by buying and selling scrap iron—then Kangali was a mere lad. Reverence for Brahmins crawled in Mr Haldar's veins. If he couldn't get Chatterjeebabu in the morning he would touch the feet of Kangali, young enough to be his son, and put a pinch of dust from his chapped feet on his own tongue. Kangali and Jashoda came to his house on feast days and Jashoda was sent a gift of cloth and vermillion when his daughters-in-law were pregnant. Now he said to Kangali—'Kangali! don't worry son. You won't suffer as long as I'm around.' Now it was that he thought that Kangali's feet, being turned to ground meat, he would not be able to taste their

dust. He was most unhappy at the thought and he started weeping as he said, 'What has the son of a bitch done.' He said to the doctor at the hospital, 'Do what you can! Don't worry about cash.'

But the doctors could not bring the feet back. Kangali returned as a lame Brahmin. Haldarbabu had a pair of crutches made. The very day Kangali returned home on crutches, he learned that food had come to Jashoda from the Haldar house every day. Nabin was third in rank among the pilgrim-guides. He could only claim thirteen percent of the goddess's food and so had an inferiority complex. Inspired by seeing Rama-Krishna in the movies a couple of times, he called the goddess 'my crazy one' and by the book of the Kali-worshippers kept his consciousness immersed in local spirits. He said to Kangali, 'I put flowers on the crazy one's feet in your name. She said I have a share in Kangali's house, he will get out of the hospital by that fact.' Speaking of this to Jashoda, Kangali said, 'What? When I wasn't there, you were getting it off with Nabin?' Jashoda then grabbed Kangali's suspicious head between the two hemispheres of the globe and said, 'Two maid servants from the big house slept here every day to guard me. Would I look at Nabin? Am I not your faithful wife?'

In fact Kangali heard of his wife's flaming devotion at the big house as well. Jashoda had fasted at the mother's temple, had gone through a female ritual, and had travelled to the outskirts to pray at the feet of the local guru. Finally the Lionseated came to her in a dream as a midwife carrying a *bag* and said, 'Don't worry. Your man will return.' Kangali was most overwhelmed by this. Haldarbabu said, 'See, Kangali? The bastard unbelievers say, the mother gives a dream,

why toggled as a midwife? I say, she creates as mother, and preserves as midwife.'

Then Kangali said, 'Sir! How shall I work at the sweetshop any longer. I can't stir the vat with my kerutches.<sup>1</sup> You are god. You are feeding so many people in so many ways. I am not begging. Find me a job.'

Haldarbabu said, 'Yes Kangali! I've kept you a spot. I'll make you a shop in the corner of my porch. The Lionseated is across the way! Pilgrims come and go. Put up a shop of dry sweets. Now there's a wedding in the house. It's my bastard seventh son's wedding. As long as there's no shop, I'll send you food.'

Hearing this, Kangali's mind took wing like a rainbug in the rainy season. He came home and told Jashoda, 'Remember Kalidasa's poem? You eat because there isn't, wouldn't have got if there was? That's my lot, chuck. Master says he'll put up a shop after his son's wedding. Until then he'll send us food. Would this have happened if I had legs? All is Mother's will, dear!'

Everyone is properly amazed that in this fallen age the wishes and wills of the Lionseated, herself found by a dream-command a hundred and fifty years ago, are circulating around Kanganalicharan Patitundo. Haldarbabu's change of heart is also Mother's will. He lives in independent India, the India that makes no distinctions among people, kingdoms, languages, varieties of Brahmins, varieties of Kayasthas and so on. But he made his cash in the British era, when *Divide and Rule* was the policy. Haldarbabu's mentality was constructed then. Therefore he doesn't trust anyone—not a Punjabi-Oriya-Bihari-Gujarati-Marathi-Muslim. At the sight of an unfortunate Bihari child or a starvation-ridden Oriya

beggar his flab-protected heart, located under a forty-two inch Gopal brand vest, does not itch with the rash of kindness. He is a succesful son of Harisal. When he sees a West Bengali fly he says, 'Tchah! at home even the flies were fat—in the bloody West everything is pinched-skinny.' All the temple people are struck that such a man is filling with the milk of human kindness toward the West Bengali Kanganalicharan. For some time this news is the general talk. Haldarbabu is such a patriot that, if his nephews or grandsons read the lives of the nation's leaders in their schoolbook, he says to his employees, 'Nonsense! why do they make 'em read the lives of characters from Dhaka, Mymensingh, Jashore? Harisal is made of the bone of the martyr god. One day it will emerge that the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* were also written in Harisal.' Now his employees tell him, 'You have had a *change of heart*, so much kindness for a West Bengali, you'll see there is divine *purpose* behind this.' The Boss is delighted. He laughs loudly and says 'there is no East or West for a Brahmin. If there's a sacred thread around his neck you have to give him respect even when he's taking a shit.'

Thus all around blow the sweet winds of sympathy-compassion-kindness. For a few days, whenever Nabin tries to think of the Lionseated, the heavy-breasted, languid-hipped body of Jashoda floats in his mind's eye. A slow rise spreads in his body at the thought that perhaps she is appearing in his dream as Jashoda, just as she appeared in Jashoda's as a midwife. The fifty percent pilgrim-guide says to him, 'Male and female both get this disease. Bind the root of a white forget-me-not in your ear when you take a piss.'

Nabin doesn't agree. One day he tells Kangali, 'As

the Mother's son I won't make a racket with Shakti-power. But I've thought of a plan. There's no problem with making a Hare Krishna racket. I tell you, get a Gopal in your dream. My Aunt brought a stony Gopal from Puri. I give it to you. You announce that you got it in a dream. You'll see there'll be a to-do in no time, money will roll in. Start for money, later you'll get devoted to Gopal.'

Kangali says, 'Shame, brother! Should one joke with gods?'

'Ah get lost,' Nabin scolds. Later it appears that Kangali would have done well to listen to Nabin. For Haldarbabu suddenly dies of heart failure. Shakespeare's *welkin* breaks on Kangali and Jashoda's head.

## 2

Haldarbabu truly left Kangali in the lurch. Those wishes of the Lionseated that were manifesting themselves around Kangali *via-media* Haldarbabu disappeared into the blue like the burning promises given by a political party before the election and became magically invisible like the heroine of a fantasy. A European witch's *bodkin* pricks the colored balloon of Kangali and Jashoda's dreams and the pair falls in deep trouble. At home, Gopal, Nepal and Radharani whine interminably for food and abuse their mother. It is very natural for children to cry so for grub. Ever since Kangalicharan's loss of feet they'd eaten the fancy food of the Haldar household. Kangali also longs for food and is shouted at for trying to put his head in Jashoda's

chest in the way of Gopal, the Divine Son. Jashoda is fully an Indian woman, whose unreasonable, unreasoning, and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness, have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati-Savitri-Sita through Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani.<sup>2</sup> The creeps of the world understand by seeing such women that the old Indian tradition is still flowing free—they understand that it was with such women in mind that the following aphorisms have been composed—'A female's life hangs on like a turtle's'—'her heart breaks but no word is uttered'—'the woman will burn, her ashes will fly/ Only then will we sing her/ praise on high.' Frankly, Jashoda never once wants to blame her husband for the present misfortune. Her mother-love wells up for Kangali as much as for the children. She wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest. Sages did not write of this motherly feeling of Jashoda's for her husband. They explained female and male as Nature and the Human Principle. But this they did in the days of yore—when they entered this *peninsula* from another land. Such is the power of the Indian soil that all women turn into mothers here and all men remain immersed in the spirit of holy childhood. Each man the Holy Child and each woman the Divine Mother. Even those who deny this and wish to slap *current posters* to the effect of the '*eternal she*'—'Mona Lisa'—'La passionaria'—'Simone de Beauvoir,' et cetera, over the old ones and look at women that way are, after all, Indian cubs. It is notable that the educated Babus desire all this from women outside the home. When they cross the

threshold they want the Divine Mother in the words and conduct of the revolutionary ladies. The *process* is most complicated. Because he understood this the heroines of Saratchandra always fed the hero an extra mouthful of rice. The apparent simplicity of Saratchandra's and other similar writers' writings is actually very complex and to be thought of in the evening, peacefully after a glass of wood-apple juice. There is too much influence of fun and games in the lives of the people who traffic in studies and intellectualism in West Bengal and therefore they should stress the wood-apple correspondingly. We have no idea of the loss we are sustaining because we do not stress the wood-apple-type-herbal remedies correspondingly.

However, it's incorrect to cultivate the habit of repeated incursions into *by-lanes* as we tell Jashoda's life story. The reader's patience, unlike the cracks in Calcutta streets, will not widen by the decade. The real thing is that Jashoda was in a cleft stick. Of course they ate their fill during the Master's funeral days, but after everything was over Jashoda clasped Radharani to her bosom and went over to the big house. Her aim was to speak to the Mistress and ask for the cook's job in the vegetarian kitchen.

The Mistress really grieved for the Master. But the lawyer let her know that the Master had left her the proprietorship of this house and the right to the rice warehouse. Girding herself with those assurances, she has once again taken the rudder of the family empire. She had really felt the loss of fish and fish-head.<sup>3</sup> Now she sees that the best butter, the best milk sweets from the best shops, heavy cream, and the best variety of bananas can also keep the body going somehow. The

Mistress lights up her easychair. A six-months' babe in her lap, her grandson. So far six sons have married. Since the almanac approves of the taking of a wife almost every month of the year, the birth rooms in a row on the ground floor of the Mistress's house are hardly ever empty. The *lady doctor* and Sarala the midwife never leave the house. The Mistress has six daughters. They too breed every year and a half. So there is a constant *epidemic* of blanket-quilt-feeding spoon-bottle-oilcloth-*Johnson's baby powder*-bathing basin.

The Mistress was out of her mind trying to feed the boy. As if relieved to see Jashoda she said, 'You come like a god! Give her some milk, dear, I beg you. His mother's sick—such a brat, he won't touch a bottle.' Jashoda immediately suckled the boy and pacified him. At the Mistress's special request Jashoda stayed in the house until nine p.m. and suckled the Mistress's grandson again and again. The cook filled a big bowl with rice and curry for her own household. Jashoda said as she suckled the boy, 'Mother! The Master said many things. He is gone, so I don't think of them. But Mother! Your Brahmin-son does not have his two feet. I don't think for myself. But thinking of my husband and sons I say, give me any kind of job. Perhaps you'll let me cook in your household?'

'Let me see dear! Let me think and see.' The Mistress is not as sold on Brahmins as the Master was. She doesn't accept fully that Kangali lost his feet because of her son's afternoon whims. It was written for Kangali as well, otherwise why was he walking down the road in the blazing sun grinning from ear to ear? She looks 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 milk flows! The ones I've brought to my house, haven't a quarter of this milk in their nipples!

Jashoda says, 'How true Mother! Gopal was weaned when he was three. This one hadn't come to my belly yet. Still it was like a flood of milk. Where does it come from, Mother? I have no good food, no pampering!'

This produced a lot of talk among the women at night and the menfolk got to hear it too at night. The second son, whose wife was sick and whose son drank Jashoda's milk, was particularly uxorious. The difference between him and his brothers was that the brothers created progeny as soon as the almanac gave a good day, with love or lack of love, with irritation or thinking of the accounts at the works. The second son impregnates his wife at the same *frequency*, but behind it lies deep love. The wife is often pregnant, that is an act of God. But the second son is also interested in that the wife remain beautiful at the same time. He thinks a lot about how to *combine* multiple pregnancies and beauty, but he cannot fathom it. But today, hearing from his wife about Jashoda's surplus milk, the second son said all of a sudden, 'Way found.'

'Way to what?'

'Uh, the way to save you pain.'

'How? I'll be out of pain when you burn me. Can a year-breeder's health mend?'

'It will, it will, I've got a divine engine in my hands! You'll breed yearly *and* keep your body.'

The couple discussed. The husband entered his Mother's room in the morning and spoke in heavy whispers. At first the Mistress hemmed and hawed, but then she thought to herself and realized that the

proposal was worth a million rupees. Daughters-in-law *will* be mothers. When they are mothers, they will suckle their children. Since they will be mothers as long as it's possible—progressive suckling will ruin their shape. Then if the sons look outside, or harass the maid-servants, she won't have a voice to object. Going out because they can't get it at home—this is just. If Jashoda becomes the infants' suckling-mother, her daily meals, clothes on feast days, and some monthly pay will be enough. The Mistress is constantly occupied with women's rituals. There Jashoda can act as the fruitful Brahmin wife. Since Jashoda's misfortune is due to her son, that sin too will be lightened.

Jashoda received a portfolio when she heard her proposal. She thought of her breasts as most precious objects. At nights when Kanganalicharan started to give her a feel she said, 'Look. I'm going to pull our weight with these. Take good care how you use them.' Kanganalicharan hemmed and hawed that night, of course, but his Gopal frame of mind disappeared instantly when he saw the amounts of grains-oil-vegetables coming from the big house. He was illuminated by the spirit of Brahma the Creator and explained to Jashoda, 'You'll have milk in your breasts 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 came to you as a midwife?'

Jashoda realized the justice of these words and said, with tears in her eyes, 'You are husband, you are guru. If I forget and say no, correct me. Where after all is the pain? Didn't Mistress-Mother breed thirteen? Does it

hurt a tree to bear fruit?’

So this rule held. Kangalicharan became a professional father. Jashoda was by *profession* Mother. In fact to look at Jashoda now even the sceptic is convinced of the profundity of that song of the path of devotion. The song is as follows:

Is a Mother so cheaply made?  
Not just by dropping a babe!

Around the paved courtyard on the ground floor of the Haldar house over a dozen auspicious milch cows live in some state in large rooms. Two Biharis look after them as Mother Cows. There are mountains of rind-bran-hay-grass-molasses. Mrs Haldar believes that the more the cow eats, the more milk she gives. Jashoda's place in the house is now above the Mother Cows. The Mistress's sons become incarnate Brahma and create progeny. Jashoda preserves the progeny.

Mrs Haldar kept a strict watch on the free flow of her supply of milk. She called Kangalicharan to her presence and said, 'Now then, my Brahmin son? You used to stir the vat at the shop, now 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?'

Kangalicharan's intellectual eye was thus opened. Downstairs the two Biharis gave him a bit of chewing tobacco and said, 'Mistress Mother said right. We serve the Cow Mother as well—your woman is the Mother of the world.'

From now on Kangalicharan took charge of the cooking at home. Made the children his assistants. Gradually he became an expert in cooking plantain curry, lentil soup, and pickled fish, and by constantly

feeding Nabin a head-curry with the head of the goat dedicated to the Lionseated he tamed that ferocious cannabis-artist and drunkard. As a result Nabin inserted Kangali into the temple of Shiva the King. Jashoda, eating well-prepared rice and curry every day, became as inflated as the *bank account* of a Public Works Department *officer*. In addition, Mistress-Mother gave her milk gratis. When Jashoda became pregnant, she would send her preserves, conserves, hot and sweet balls.

Thus even the sceptics were persuaded that the Lionseated had appeared to Jashoda as a midwife for this very reason. Otherwise who has ever heard or seen such things as constant pregnancies, giving birth, giving milk like a cow, without a thought, to others' children? Nabin too lost his bad thoughts. Devotional feelings came to him by themselves. Whenever he saw Jashoda he called out 'Mother! Mother! Dear Mother!' Faith in the greatness of the Lionseated was rekindled in the area and in the air of the neighbourhood blew the *electrifying* influence of goddess-glory.

Everyone's devotion to Jashoda became so strong that at weddings, showers, namings, and sacred-threadings they invited her and gave her the position of chief fruitful woman. They looked with a comparable eye on Nepal-Gopal-Neno-Boncha-Patal etc. because they were Jashoda's children, and as each grew up, he got a sacred thread and started catching pilgrims for the temple. Kangali did not have to find husbands for Radharani, Altarani, Padmarani and such daughters. Nabin found them husbands with exemplary dispatch and the faithful mother's faithful daughters went off each to run the household of her own Shiva! Jashoda's

worth went up in the Haldar house. The husbands are pleased because the wives' knees no longer knock when they riffle the almanac. Since their children are being reared on Jashoda's milk, they can be the Holy Child in bed at will. The wives no longer have an excuse to say 'no'. The wives are happy. They can keep their figures. They can wear blouses and bras of 'European cut'. After keeping the fast of Shiva's night by watching all-night picture shows they are no longer obliged to breast-feed their babies. All this was possible because of Jashoda. As a result Jashoda became vocal and, constantly suckling the infants, she opined as she sat in the Mistress's room, 'A woman breeds, so here medicine, there blood-peshur, here doctor's visits. Showoffs! Look at me! I've become a year-breeder! So is my body failing, or is my milk drying? Makes your skin crawl? I hear they are drying their milk with injishuns.<sup>4</sup> Never heard of such things!'

The fathers and uncles of the current young men of the Haladar house used to whistle at the maidservants as soon as hair grew on their upper lips. The young ones were reared by the Milk-Mother's milk, so they looked upon the maid and the cook, their Milk-Mother's friends, as mothers too and started walking around the girls' school. The maids said, 'Joshi! You came as The Goddess! You made the air of this house change!' So one day as the youngest son was squatting to watch Jashoda's milking, she said, 'There dear, my Lucky! All this because you swiped him in the leg! Whose wish was it then?' 'The Lionseated's,' said Haldar junior.

He wanted to know how Kanganalicharan could be Brahma without feet? This encroached on divine area, and he forgot the question.

All is the Lionseated's will!

## 3

Kangali's shins were cut in the fifties, and our narrative has reached the present. In twenty-five years, sorry, in thirty, Jashoda has been confined twenty times. The maternities toward the end were profitless, for a new wind entered the Haldar house somehow. Let's finish the business of the twenty-five or thirty years. At the beginning of the narrative Jashoda was the mother of three sons. Then she became gravid seventeen times. Mrs Haldar died. She dearly wished that one of her daughters-in-law should have the same good fortune as her mother-in-law. In the family the custom was to have a second wedding if a couple could produce twenty children. But the daughters-in-law called a halt at twelve-thirteen-fourteen. By evil counsel they were able to explain to their husbands and make arrangements at the hospital. All this was the bad result of the new wind. Wise men have never allowed a new wind to enter the house. I've heard from my grandmother that a certain gentleman would come to her house to read the liberal journal *Saturday Letter*. He would never let the tome enter his home. 'The moment wife, or mother, or sister reads that paper,' he would say, 'she'll say "I'm a woman! Not a mother, not a sister not a wife."' If asked what the result would be, he'd say, 'They would wear shoes while they cooked.' It is a perennial rule that the power of the new wind disturbs the peace of the

women's quarter.

It was always the sixteenth century in the Haldar household. But at the sudden significant rise in the membership of the house the sons started building new houses and splitting. The most objectionable thing was that in the matter of motherhood, the old lady's granddaughters-in-law had breathed a completely different air before they crossed her threshold. In vain did the Mistress say that there was plenty of money, plenty to eat. The old man had dreamed of filling half Calcutta with Haldars. The granddaughters-in-law were unwilling. Defying the old lady's tongue, they took off to their husbands' places of work. At about this time, the pilgrim-guides of the Lionseated had a tremendous fight and some unknown person or persons turned the image of the goddess around. The Mistress's heart broke at the thought that the Mother had turned her back. In pain she ate an unreasonable quantity of jackfruit in full summer and died shitting and vomiting.

## 4

Death liberated the Mistress, but the sting of staying alive is worse than death.

Jashoda was genuinely sorry at the Mistress's death. When an elderly person dies in the neighbourhood, it's Basini who can weep most elaborately. She is an old maidservant of the house. But Jashoda's meal ticket was offered up with the Mistress. She astounded everyone by weeping even more elaborately.

'Oh blessed Mother!' Basini wept. 'Widowed, when you lost your crown, you became the Master and protected everyone! Whose sins sent you away Mother! Ma, when I said, don't eat so much jackfruit, you didn't listen to me at all Mother!'

Jashoda let Basini get her breath and lamented in that pause, 'Why should you stay, Mother! You are blessed, why should you stay in this sinful world! The daughters-in-law have moved the throne! When the tree says I won't bear, alas it's a sin! Could you bear so much sin, Mother! Then did the Lionseated turn her back, Mother! You knew the abode of good works had become the abode of sin, it was not for you Mother! Your heart left when the Master left Mother! You held your body only because you thought of the family. O mistresses, O daughters-in-law! take a vermilion print of her footstep! Fortune will be tied to the door if you keep that print! If you touch your forehead to it every morning, pain and disease will stay out!'

Jashoda walked weeping behind the corpse to the burning ghat and said on return, 'I saw with my own eyes a chariot descend from heaven, take Mistress Mother from the pyre, and go on up.'

After the funeral days were over, the eldest daughter-in-law said to Jashoda, 'Brahmin sister! the family is breaking up. Second and Third are moving to the house in Belegkata. Fourth and Fifth are departing to Maniktala-Bagmari. Youngest will depart to our Dakshineswar house.'

'Who stays here?'

'I will. But I'll let the downstairs. Now must the family be folded up. You reared everyone on your milk, food was sent every day. The last child was weaned, still

Mother sent you food for eight years. She did what pleased her. Her children said nothing. But it's no longer possible.'

'What'll happen to me, elder daughter-in-law-sister?'

'If you cook for my household, your board is taken care of. But what'll you do with yours?'

'What?'

'It's for you to say. You are the mother of twelve living children! The daughters are married. I hear the sons call pilgrims, eat temple food, stretch out in the courtyard. Your Brahmin-husband has set himself up in the Shiva temple, I hear. What do you need?'

Jashoda wiped her eyes. 'Well! Let me speak to the Brahmin.'

Kangalicharan's temple had really caught on. 'What will you do in my temple?' he asked.

'What does Nabin's niece do?'

'She looks after the temple household and cooks. You haven't been cooking at home for a long time. Will you be able to push the temple traffic?'

'No meals from the big house. Did that enter your thieving head? What'll you eat?'

'You don't have to worry,' said Nabin.

'Why did I have 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.'

'Who sat and cooked?'

'The man brings, the woman cooks and serves. My lot is inside out. Then you ate my food, now you'll give me food. Fair's fair.'

Kangali said on the beat, 'Where did you bring in the food? Could you have gotten the Haldar house? Their door opened for *you* because *my* legs were cut off.

The Master had wanted to set *me* up in business. Forgotten everything, you cunt?'

'Who's the cunt, you or me? Living off a wife's carcass, you call that a man?'

The two fought tooth and nail and cursed each other to the death. Finally Kangali said, 'I don't want to see your face again. Buzz off!'

'All right.'

Jashoda too left angry. In the mean time the various pilgrim-guide factions conspired to turn the image's face forward, otherwise disaster was imminent. As a result, penance rituals were being celebrated with great ceremony at the temple. Jashoda went to throw herself at the goddess's feet. Her aging, milkless, capacious breasts are breaking in pain. Let the Lionseated understand her pain and tell her the way.

Jashoda lay three days in the courtyard. Perhaps the Lionseated has also breathed the new wind. She did not appear in a dream. Moreover, when, after her three days' fast, Jashoda went back shaking to her place, her youngest came by. 'Dad will stay at the temple. He's told Naba and I to ring the bells. We'll get money and holy food every day.'

'I see! Where's dad?'

'Lying down. Golapi-auntie is scratching the prickly heat on his back. Asked us to buy candy with some money. So we came to tell you.'

Jashoda understood that her usefulness had ended not only in the Haldar house but also for Kangali. She broke her fast in name and went to Nabin to complain. It was Nabin who dragged the Lionseated's image the other way. After he had settled the dispute with the other pilgrim-guides re the overhead income from the

goddess Basanti ritual, the goddess Jagadhatri ritual, and the autumn Durga Puja, it was he who once again pushed and pulled the image the right way. He'd poured some liquor into his aching throat, had smoked a bit of cannabis, and was now addressing the local electoral candidate: 'No offerings for the Mother from you! Her glory is back. Now we'll see how you win!'

Nabin is the proof of all the miracles that can happen if, even in this decade, one stays under the temple's power. He had turned the goddess's head himself and had himself believed that the Mother was averse because the pilgrim-guides were not organizing like all the want-votes groups. Now, after he had turned the goddess's head he had the idea that the Mother had turned on her own.

Jashoda said, 'What are you babbling?'

Nabin said, 'I'm speaking of mother's glory.'

Jashoda said, 'You think I don't know that you turned the image's head yourself?'

Nabin said, 'Shut up, Joshi God gave me ability, and intelligence, and only then could the thing be done through me.'

'Mother's glory has disappeared when you put your hands on her.'

'Glory disappeared! If so, how come, the fan is turning, and you are sitting under the fan? Was there ever an elettiri<sup>5</sup> fan on the porch ceiling?'

'I accept. But tell me, why did you burn my luck? What did I ever do to you?'

'Why? Kangali isn't dead.'

'Why wait for death? He's more than dead to me.'

'What's up?'

Jashoda wiped her eyes and said in a heavy voice,

'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.'

'But of course. You are a portion of the Mother.'

'But Mother remains in divine fulfillment. Her 'portion' is about to die for want of food. Haldar-house has lifted its hand from me.'

'Why did you have to fight with Kangali? Can a man bear to be insulted on grounds of being supported?'

'Why did you have to plant your niece there?'

'That was divine play. Golapi used to throw herself in the temple. Little by little Kangali came to understand that he was the god's companion-incarnate and she *his* companion.'

'Companion indeed! I can get my husband from her clutches with one blow of a broom!'

Nabin said, 'No! that can't be any more. Kangali is a man in his prime, how can he be pleased with you any more? Besides, Golapi's brother is a real hoodlum, and he is guarding her. Asked *me* to *get out*. If I smoke ten pipes, he smokes twenty. Kicked me in the midriff. I went to speak for you. Kangali said, don't talk to me about her. Doesn't know her man, knows her master's house. The master's house is her household god, let her go there.'

'I will.'

Then Jashoda returned home, half-crazed by the injustice of the world. But her heart couldn't abide the empty room. Whether it suckled or not, it's hard to sleep without a child at the breast. Motherhood is a great addiction. The addiction doesn't break even when the milk is dry. Forlorn Jashoda went to the Haldar's. She said, 'I'll cook and serve, if you want to pay me, if

not, not. You must let me stay here. That sonofabitch is living at the temple. What disloyal sons! They are stuck there too. For whom shall I hold my room?’

‘So stay. You suckled the children, and you’re a Brahmin. So stay. But sister, it’ll be hard for you. You’ll stay in Basini’s room with the others. You mustn’t fight with anyone. The master is not in a good mood. His temper is rotten because his third son went to Bombay and married a local girl. He’ll be angry if there’s noise.’

Jashoda’s good fortune was her ability to bear children. All this misfortune happened to her as soon as that vanished. Now is the downward time for Jashoda the milk-filled faithful wife who was the object of the reverence of the local houses devoted to the Holy Mother. It is human nature to feel an inappropriate vanity as one rises, yet not to feel the *surrender* of ‘let me learn to bite the dust since I’m down’ as one falls. As a result one makes demands for worthless things in the old way and gets kicked by the weak.

The same thing happened to Jashoda. Basini’s crowd used to wash her feet and drink the water. Now Basini said easily, ‘You’ll wash your own dishes. Are you my master, that I’ll wash your dishes. You are the master’s servant as much as I am.’

As Jashoda roared, ‘Do you know who I am?’ she heard the eldest daughter-in-law scold, ‘This is what I feared. Mother gave her a swelled head. Look here, Brahmin sister! I didn’t call you, you begged to stay, don’t break the peace.’

Jashoda understood that now no one would attend to a word she said. She cooked and served in silence and in the late afternoon she went to the temple porch and started to weep. She couldn’t even have a good cry.

She heard the music for the evening worship at the temple of Shiva. She wiped her eyes and got up. She said to herself, ‘Now save me, Mother! Must I finally sit by the roadside with a tin cup? Is that what you want?’

The days would have passed in cooking at the Haldar-house and complaining to the Mother. But that was not enough for Jashoda. Jashoda’s body seemed to keel over. Jashoda doesn’t understand why nothing pleases her. Everything seems confused inside her head. When she sits down to cook she thinks she’s the milk-mother of this house. She’s going home in a showy sari with a free meal in her hand. Her breasts feel empty, as if wasted. She had never thought she wouldn’t have a child’s mouth at her nipple.

Joshi became bemused. She serves nearly all the rice and curry, but forgets to eat. Sometimes she speaks to Shiva the King, ‘If Mother can’t do it, you take me away. I can’t pull any more.’

Finally it was the sons of the eldest daughter-in-law who said, ‘Mother! Is the milk-Mother sick? She acts strange.’

The eldest daughter-in-law said, ‘Let’s see.’

The eldest son said, ‘Look here! She’s a Brahmin’s daughter, if anything happens to her, it’ll be a sin for us.’

The daughter-in-law went to ask. Jashoda had started the rice and then lain down in the kitchen on the spread edge of her sari. The eldest daughter-in-law, looking at her bare body, said, ‘Brahmin sister! Why does the top of your left tit look so red? God! flaming red!’

‘Who knows? It’s like a stone pushing inside. Very hard, like a rock.’

'What is it?'

'Who knows? I suckled so many, perhaps that's why?'

'Nonsense! One gets breast-stones or pus-in-the-tit if there's milk. Your youngest is ten.'

'That one is gone. The one before survived. That one died at birth. Just as well. This sinful world!'

'Well the doctor comes tomorrow to look at my grandson. I'll ask. Doesn't look good to me.'

Jashoda said with her eyes closed, 'Like a stone tit, with a stone inside. At first the hard ball moved about, now it doesn't move, doesn't budge.'

'Let's show the doctor.'

'No, sister daughter-in-law, I can't show my body to a male doctor.'

At night when the doctor came the eldest daughter-in-law asked him in her son's presence. She said, 'No pain, no burning, but she is keeling over.'

The doctor said, 'Go ask if the *nipple* has shrunk, if the armpit is swollen like a seed.'

Hearing 'swollen like a seed,' the eldest daughter-in-law thought, 'How crude!' Then she did her field investigations and said, 'She says all that you've said has been happening for some time.'

'How old?'

'If you take the eldest son's age she'll be about fifty-five.'

The doctor said, 'I'll give you medicine.'

Going out, he said to the eldest son, 'I hear your *cook* has a problem with her *breast*. I think you should take her to the *cancer hospital*. I didn't see her. But from what I heard it could be *cancer* of the *mammary gland*.'

Only the other day the eldest son lived in the

sixteenth century. He has arrived at the twentieth century very recently. Of his thirteen offspring he has arranged the marriages of the daughters, and the sons have grown up and are growing up at their own speed and in their own way. But even now his grey cells are covered in the darkness of the eighteenth- and the pre-Bengal-Renaissance nineteenth centuries. He still does not take smallpox vaccination and says, 'Only the lower classes get smallpox. I don't need to be vaccinated. An upper-caste family, respectful of gods and Brahmins, does not contract that disease.'

He pooh-poohed the idea of cancer and said, 'Yah! Cancer indeed! That easy! You misheard, all she needs is an ointment. I can't send a Brahmin's daughter to a hospital just on your word.'

Jashoda herself also said, 'I can't go to hospital. Ask me to croak instead. I didn't go to hospital to breed, and I'll go now? That corpse-burning devil returned a cripple because he went to hospital!'

The elder daughter-in-law said, 'I'll get you a herbal ointment. This ointment will surely soothe. The hidden boil will show its tip and burst.'

The herbal ointment was a complete failure. Slowly Jashoda gave up eating and lost her strength. She couldn't keep her sari on the left side. Sometimes she felt burning, sometimes pain. Finally the skin broke in many places and sores appeared. Jashoda took to her bed.

Seeing the hang of it, the eldest son was afraid, if at his house a Brahmin died! He called Jashoda's sons and spoke to them harshly, 'It's your mother, she fed you so long, and now she is about to die! Take her with you! She has everyone and she should die in a Kayastha<sup>4</sup>



household?'

Kangali cried a lot when he heard this story. He came to Jashoda's almost-dark room and said, 'Wife! You are a blessed auspicious faithful woman! After I spurned you, within two years the temple dishes were stolen, I suffered from boils in my back, and that snake Golapi tricked Napla, broke the safe, stole everything and opened a shop in Tarakeswar. Come, I'll keep you in state.'

Jashoda said, 'Light the lamp.'

Kangali lit the lamp.

Jashoda showed him her bare left breast, thick with running sores and said, 'See these sores? Do you know how these sores smell? What will you do with me now? Why did you come to take me?'

'The Master called.'

'Then the master doesn't want to keep me.' Jashoda sighed and said, 'There is no solution about me. What can you do with me?'

'Whatever, I'll take you tomorrow. Today I clean the room. Tomorrow for sure.'

'Are the boys well? Noblay and Gaur used to come, they too have stopped.'

'All the bastards are selfish. Sons of my spunk after all. As inhuman as I.'

'You'll come tomorrow?'

'Yes—yes—yes.'

Jashoda smiled suddenly. A heart-splitting nostalgia-provoking smile.

Jashoda said, 'Dear, remember?'

'What, wife?'

'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. How I could, I wonder now!'

'I remember everything, wife!'

In this instant Kangali's words are true. Seeing Jashoda's broken, thin, suffering form even Kangali's selfish body and instincts and belly-centred consciousness remembered the past and suffered some empathy. He held Jashoda's hand and said, 'You have fever?'

'I get feverish all the time. I think by the strength of the sores.'

'Where does this rotten stink come from?'

'From these sores.'

Jashoda spoke with her eyes closed. Then she said, 'Bring the holy doctor. He cured Gopal's *typhoid* with *homoeopathy*.'

'I'll call him. I'll take you tomorrow.'

Kangali left. That he went out, the tapping of his crutches, Jashoda couldn't hear. With her eyes shut, with the idea that Kangali was in the room, she said spiritlessly, 'If you suckle you're a mother, all lies! Nepal and Gopal don't look at me, and the Master's boys don't spare a peek to ask how I'm doing.' The sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes. Jashoda opened her eyes and said, 'Do you hear?'

Then she realized that Kangali had left.

In the night she sent Basini for *Lifebuoy* soap and at dawn she went to take a bath with the soap. Stink, what a stink! If the body of a dead cat or dog rots in the garbage you can get a smell like this. Jashoda had forever scrubbed her breasts carefully with soap and oil, for the master's sons had put the nipples in their

mouth. Why did those breasts betray her in the end? Her skin burns with the sting of soap. Still Jashoda washed herself with soap. Her head was ringing, everything seemed dark. There was fire in Jashoda's body, in her head. The black floor was very cool. Jashoda spread her sari and lay down. She could not bear the weight of her breast standing up.

As Jashoda lay down, she lost sense and consciousness with fever. Kangali came at the proper time: but seeing Jashoda he lost his grip. Finally Nabin came and rasped, 'Are these people human? She reared all the boys with her milk and they don't call a doctor? I'll call Hari the doctor.'

Haribabu took one look at her and said, 'Hospital.'

Hospitals don't admit people who are so sick. At the efforts and recommendations of the elder son, Jashoda was admitted.

'What's the matter? O Doctorbabu, what's the problem?' Kangali asked, weeping like a boy.

'Cancer.'

'You can get cancer in a tit?'

'Otherwise how did she get it?'

'Her own twenty, thirty boys at the master's house—she had a lot of milk—'

'What did you say? How many did she *feed*?'

'About fifty for sure.'

'Fif-ty!'

'Yes sir.'

'She had twenty children?'

'Yes sir.'

'God!'

'Sir!'

'What?'

'Is it because she suckled so many—?'

'One can't say why someone gets cancer, one can't say. But when people breast-feed too much—didn't you realize earlier? It didn't get to this in a day.'

'She wasn't with me, sir. We quarrelled—'

'I see.'

'How do you see her? Will she get well?'

'Get well! See how long she lasts. You've brought her in the last stages. No one survives this stage.'

Kangali left weeping. In the late afternoon, harassed by Kangali's lamentations, the eldest son's second son went to the doctor. He was minimally anxious about Jashoda—but his father nagged him and he was financially dependent on his father.

The doctor explained everything to him. It happened not in a day, but over a long time. Why? No one could tell. How does one perceive breast cancer? A hard lump inside the breast toward the top can be removed. Then gradually the lump inside becomes large, hard and like a congealed pressure. The skin is expected to turn orange, as is expected a shrinking of the nipple. The gland in the armpit can be inflamed. When there is *ulceration*, that is to say sores, one can call it the final stages. Fever? From the point of view of seriousness it falls in the second or third category. If there is something like a sore in the body, there can be fever. This is *secondary*.

The second son was confused with all this specialist talk. He said, 'Will she live?'

'No.'

'How long will she suffer?'

'I don't think too long.'

'When there's nothing to be done, how will you

treat her?’

‘Painkiller, sedative, antibiotic for the fever. Her body is very, very *down*.’

‘She stopped eating.’

‘You didn’t take her to a doctor?’

‘Yes.’

‘Didn’t he tell you?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did he say?’

‘That it might be cancer. Asked us to take her to the hospital. She didn’t agree.’

‘Why would she? She’d die!’

The second son came home and said, ‘When Arun-doctor said she had *cancer*, she might have survived if treated then.’

His mother said, ‘If you know that much then why didn’t take you her? Did I stop you?’

Somewhere in the minds of the second son and his mother an unknown sense of guilt and remorse came up like bubbles in the dirty and stagnant water and vanished instantly.

Guilt said—she lived with us, we never took a look at her, when did the disease catch her, we didn’t take it seriously at all. She was a silly person, reared so many of us, we didn’t look after her. Now, with everyone around her she’s dying in hospital, so many children, husband living, when she clung to us, then we had—! What an alive body she had, milk leaped out of her, we never thought she would have this disease.

The disappearance of guilt said—who can undo Fate? It was written that she’d die of *cancer*—who’d stop it? It would have been wrong if she had died here—her husband and sons would have asked, how did she die?

We have been saved from that wrongdoing. No one can say anything.

The eldest son assured them, ‘Now Arun-doctor says no one survives *cancer*. The *cancer* that Brahmin-sister has can lead to cutting of the tit, removing the uterus, even after that people die of *cancer*. See, Father gave us a lot of reverence toward Brahmins—we are alive by father’s grace. If Brahmin-sister had died in our house, we would have had to perform the penance-ritual.’

Patients much less sick than Jashoda die much sooner. Jashoda astonished the doctors by hanging on for about a month in hospital. At first Kangali, Nabin, and the boys did indeed come and go, but Jashoda remained the same, comatose, cooking with fever, spellbound. The sores on her breast gaped more and more and the breast now looks like an open wound. It is covered by a piece of thin *gauze* soaked in *antiseptic lotion*, but the sharp smell of putrefying flesh is circulating silently in the room’s air like incense-smoke. This brought an ebb in the enthusiasm of Kangali and the other visitors. The doctor said as well, ‘Is she not responding? All for the better. It’s hard to bear without consciousness, can anyone bear such death-throes consciously?’

‘Does she know that we come and go?’

‘Hard to say.’

‘Does she eat.’

‘Through tubes.’

‘Do people live this way?’

‘Now you’re very—’

The doctor understood that he was unreasonably angry because Jashoda was in this condition. He was angry with Jashoda, with Kangali, with women who

don't take the signs of breast-cancer *seriously* enough and finally die in this dreadful and hellish pain. Cancer constantly defeats patient and doctor. One patient's cancer means the patient's death and the defeat of science, and of course of the doctor. One can medicate against the secondary symptom, if eating stops one can *drip glucose* and feed the body, if the lungs become incapable of breathing there is *oxygen*—but the advance of *cancer*, its expansion, spread, and killing, remain unchecked. The word *cancer* is a general signifier, by which in the different parts of the body is meant different *malignant growths*. Its characteristic properties are to destroy the infected area of the body, to spread by *metastasis*, to return after *removal*, to create *toxaemia*.

Kangali came out without a proper answer to his question. Returning to the temple, he said to Nabin and his sons, 'There's no use going any more. She doesn't know us, doesn't open her eyes, doesn't realize anything. The doctor is doing what he can.'

Nabin said, 'If she dies?'

'They have the *telephone number* of the old Master's eldest son, they'll call.'

'Suppose she wants to see you. Kangali, your wife is a blessed auspicious faithful woman! Who would say the mother of so many. To see her body—but she didn't bend, didn't look elsewhere.'

Talking thus, Nabin became gloomily silent. In fact, since he'd seen Jashoda's infested breasts, many a philosophic thought and sexological argument have been slowly circling Nabin's drug-and-booze-addled dim head like great rutting snakes emptied of venom. For example, I lusted after her? This is the end of that intoxicating bosom? Ho! Man's body's a zero. To be

crazy for that is to be crazy.

Kangali didn't like all this talk. His mind had already *rejected* Jashoda. When he saw Jashoda in the Haldar-house he was truly affected and even after her admission into hospital he was passionately anxious. But now that feeling is growing cold. The moment the doctor said Jashoda wouldn't last, he put her out of mind almost painlessly. His sons are his sons. Their mother had become a distant person for a long time. Mother meant hair in a huge topknot, blindingly white clothes, a strong personality. The person lying in the hospital is someone else, not Mother.

Breast *cancer* makes the brain *comatose*, this was a solution for Jashoda.

Jashoda understood that she had come to hospital, she was in the hospital, and that this desensitizing sleep was a medicated sleep. In her weak, infected, dazed brain she thought, has some son of the Haldar-house become a doctor?

No doubt he sucked her milk and is now repaying the milk-debt? But those boys entered the family business as soon as they left high school! However, why don't the people who are helping her so much free her from the stinking presence of her chest? What a smell, what treachery? Knowing these breasts to be the rice-winner, she had constantly conceived to keep them filled with milk. The breast's job is to hold milk. She kept her breast clean with perfumed soap, she never wore a top, even in youth, because her breasts were so heavy.

When the *sedation* lessens, Jashoda screams, 'Ah! Ah! Ah!'—and looks for the nurse and the doctor with passionate bloodshot eyes. When the doctor comes, she

mutters with hurt feelings, 'You grew so big on my milk, and now you're hurting me so?'

The doctor says, 'She sees her milk-sons all over the world.'

Again injection and sleepy numbness. Pain, tremendous pain, the cancer is spreading *at the expense of the human host*. Gradually Jashoda's left breast bursts and becomes like the *crater* of a volcano. The smell of putrefaction makes approach difficult.

Finally one night, Jashoda understood that her feet and hands were getting cold. She understood that death was coming. Jashoda couldn't open her eyes, but she understood that some people were looking at her hand. A needle pricked her arm. Painful breathing inside. Has to be. Who is looking? Are these her own people? The people whom she suckled because she carried them, or those she suckled for a living? Jashoda thought, after all, she had suckled the world, could she then die alone? The doctor who sees her every day, the person who will cover her face with a sheet, will put her on a cart, will lower her at the burning ghat, the untouchable who will put her in the furnace, are all her milk-sons. One must become Jashoda<sup>7</sup> if one suckles the world. One has to die friendless, with no one left to put a bit of water in the mouth. Yet someone was supposed to be there at the end. Who was it? It was who? Who was it?

Jashoda died at 11 p.m.

The Haldar-house was called on the phone. The phone didn't ring. The Haldars *disconnected* their phone at night.

Jashoda Devi, Hindu female, lay in the hospital morgue in the usual way, went to the burning ghat in a van, and was burnt. She was cremated by an

untouchable.

Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone.

1987

### Notes

1. Underclass Bengali pronunciation for 'crutches'
2. Actresses who have stereotyped the role of the self-sacrificing, long-suffering Indian wife and mother in commercial Hindi cinema.
3. Caste-Hindu widows become vegetarians in West Bengal as a sign of lifelong mourning.
4. Underclass Bengali pronunciation for 'blood pressure' and 'injections.'
5. Underclass Bengali pronunciation for 'electric.'
6. Second caste in rank, immediately below the Brahmin.
7. The mythic mother of Krishna and in that sense the suckler of the world.