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Death as a Marker of Caste and Class in Twentieth Century Select Bengali Texts

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Abstract

This article examines how death, ostensibly the universal equalizer, becomes a site of entrenched inequality when mediated by caste and class in twentieth-century Bengal. Drawing on Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Abhagir Swargo* (1926) and Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver* (1978; trans. 1997), the study explores how literary representations of funerary rites and bodily disposability expose the persistence of social hierarchies even in death. The analysis is situated within a wide theoretical framework, incorporating insights from Michel Foucault, Achille Mbembe, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu, Louis Althusser, Mary Douglas, Arnold van Gennep, and B. R. Ambedkar. In *Abhagir Swargo*, the denial of cremation to a lower-caste woman underscores caste as a determinant of posthumous dignity. In contrast, *Breast-Giver* reveals how class exploitation reduces a Brahmin woman's life and death to mere disposability once her reproductive labour ceases. Together, the texts demonstrate that caste and class operate differently yet converge in stripping marginalized women of dignity in death. By linking these narratives to contemporary realities—including caste-based cremation denials and pandemic deaths—the article argues that death is not a neutral biological end but a socially inscribed process that mirrors and reproduces structural inequalities.

Keywords: Death, Class, Caste, Exploitation, Equality, Hierarchy, Representation, Identity

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1. Introduction

Death, as the inevitable cessation of life, remains one of the most enduring enigmas of human existence. Across cultures and historical epochs, it has been understood not only as a biological end but also as a deeply social and symbolic event. Philosophers, anthropologists, and cultural theorists have repeatedly drawn attention to the way death unsettles the boundary between the universal and the particular: while every living being must die, the experience of death and its attendant rituals are mediated by social structures such as religion, caste, class, gender, and race. Michel Foucault reminds us in *The History of Sexuality* that “one might say that the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (138). Death, in this sense, is not simply natural but also political, for regimes of power designate whose deaths are rendered meaningful and whose are rendered insignificant. Achille Mbembe extends this argument in *Necropolitics* when he asserts that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (11). These formulations alert us to the fact that the moment of death is never socially neutral but embedded within relations of power.

Equally, death unsettles the binaries through which societies stabilize themselves. Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* insists that “death is never present... it dislocates time, it puts the present out of joint” (xviii). Mourning is not simply about closure but about the spectral remainder of the dead, who continue to haunt the living and thereby reveal the incompleteness of social narratives. This haunting complicates the neat social boundaries that funerary rituals try to enforce. Similarly, Emmanuel Levinas identifies death as “the absolute alterity” (*Time and the Other* 48), a confrontation with radical otherness that resists assimilation. Yet, as Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Life*, while death may confront us with the universal fragility of existence, not all lives are grieved equally: “We are not only constituted by our relations, but also dispossessed by them” (23). Grievability becomes a measure of whose lives, and therefore whose deaths, are recognized within a community.

The interplay between the inevitability of death and its social mediation is particularly relevant to Bengal in the twentieth century, a space where the rigidities of caste hierarchy and the stratifications of class intersected to produce varied experiences of life, dying, and afterlife rituals. Funeral rites in Bengal are not mere acts of mourning but crucial moments where social hierarchies are reaffirmed. Who is permitted a cremation on a pyre, who is relegated to burial by a riverbank, whose death is celebrated as auspicious, and whose is marked by silence—these questions are structured by caste and class. In Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Abhagir Swargo* (1926), the lower-caste protagonist Kangali struggles to cremate his mother according to proper rites, only to be reminded that “everyone nowadays wants to be Brahmin or Kayet” (Chattopadhyay 112). The remark exposes how death itself becomes policed by caste boundaries. By contrast, in Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast-Giver*, the death of Jashoda, once useful as a wet nurse, passes almost unnoticed:

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she is already socially “dead” when her body ceases to produce milk. As Spivak notes in her introduction to *Breast Stories*, Jashoda is “at once a worker and a mother, a machine and a saint” (xxi), and her eventual irrelevance underscores how class exploitation renders certain deaths unworthy of communal acknowledgment.

Anthropological accounts provide crucial frameworks for understanding these ritualized hierarchies. Arnold van Gennep’s seminal *The Rites of Passage* suggests that death rituals are “rites of separation” that ensure the deceased is not only removed from the community of the living but also reintegrated into a different symbolic order (146). Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, reminds us that the dead body often functions as “matter out of place” (44), requiring elaborate ritual management to restore social order. In Bengal, this management is far from uniform: caste and class dictate whether the dead body is a site of reverence or of pollution, whether it is worthy of fire or relegated to earth.

The twentieth century in Bengal provides fertile ground for studying these dynamics. On one hand, colonial modernity, with its attendant reform movements—most notably the Brahmo Samaj—sought to question entrenched caste practices and imagine new ways of community. On the other hand, these efforts often remained partial, as caste rigidity and class exploitation persisted within the social fabric. Post-independence transformations introduced new vocabularies of social justice and development, yet caste and class continued to govern access to resources, recognition, and dignity in death.

This article therefore examines death as a marker of caste and class in twentieth-century Bengal through two canonical literary texts: Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Abhagir Swargo* and Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast-Giver*. By bringing these narratives into dialogue with philosophical and anthropological theories of death, the study demonstrates that death, far from being the great equalizer, becomes a site where inequalities are reproduced and inscribed with renewed force. Methodologically, the study combines close textual analysis with socio-historical contextualization, deploying the insights of Foucault, Derrida, Mbembe, Butler, Levinas, Bourdieu, Althusser, Ambedkar, van Gennep, and Douglas to interpret how death is mobilized as both a site of resistance and a mechanism of subjugation. Ultimately, the argument is that in twentieth-century Bengal, death cannot be abstracted from social hierarchies but must be seen as a mirror that reflects and reinforces the structures of inequality shaping everyday existence.

2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding death as a marker of caste and class requires a multi-layered theoretical framework that engages with sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and political theory. Death is at once a biological event and a social fact, and as such, its meaning must be approached through the structures that produce social difference and the power relations that determine whose deaths matter. This section brings together insights from Pierre Bourdieu, Louis Althusser, B. R.

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Ambedkar, Judith Butler, Emmanuel Levinas, Achille Mbembe, Arnold van Gennep, and Mary Douglas to map how caste and class hierarchies inscribe themselves even at the moment of death.

2.1 Caste and Class as Social Constructs

Caste and class, while operating differently, both function as systems of stratification that dictate access to resources, recognition, and legitimacy. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*—"systems of durable, transposable dispositions" (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 72)—explains how caste practices and class distinctions are internalized as everyday behaviors. Habitus ensures that ritual actions around death, such as cremation or burial, are not experienced as externally imposed rules but as naturalized expectations. Bourdieu's idea of *symbolic capital* further clarifies why certain funerary rites, such as cremation on a pyre, confer dignity, while others, such as burial by the riverbank, mark exclusion. Symbolic capital, he notes, is "recognized as legitimate competence, authority, and worth" (241), and in Bengal, caste status functions as precisely such symbolic capital, determining access to dignified death.

Louis Althusser complements this analysis with his concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). According to Althusser, ideology functions "by constituting concrete individuals as subjects" (*Lenin and Philosophy* 170). The caste system in Bengal operates as such an ISA: individuals are hailed into subject positions that persist even in death, dictating who may perform which rituals and who is barred from certain practices. Thus, when Kangali's mother in *Abhagir Swargo* wishes for a Brahmin-style cremation, her desire is not merely personal but shaped by the ideological interpellation of caste, which positions cremation as a privilege reserved for the upper castes.

B. R. Ambedkar's trenchant critique of caste in *Annihilation of Caste* sharpens this point. For Ambedkar, caste is "not merely a division of labour, it is a division of labourers" (25). The hierarchy is absolute, producing social death long before biological death. To be denied a cremation fire, as in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's story, is to have one's humanity negated twice over: in life through systemic exclusion, and in death through the denial of dignity. Ambedkar warns that caste is "a notion of graded inequality" (44), and it is precisely this gradation that manifests in the differentiated treatment of corpses in Bengali society.

2.2 Death and Power

Death itself, far from being an equalizer, becomes a site where power relations are exercised. Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* emphasizes that "some lives are grievable, and others are not" (20). Grievability is a political condition: when a community refuses to mourn a life, it signals that the person's existence was never fully recognized. This notion directly informs our reading of Jashoda in *Breast-Giver*, whose death, unmarked by public recognition, exemplifies how class exploitation renders certain lives disposable.

Emmanuel Levinas, conversely, situates death as "the absolutely unknowable" (*Time and the Other* 48), an alterity that resists domestication by social categories. Yet, the very impossibility

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of assimilating death makes it a potent site for ideological control. Societies attempt to manage the alterity of death by embedding it within ritual systems that reaffirm existing hierarchies. In Bengal, this results in the paradox whereby death is at once beyond human mastery and yet fiercely regulated by caste and class prescriptions.

Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* crystallizes this relation between death and sovereignty: "The state of exception and the relation of enmity have become the normative basis of the right to kill" (12). While Mbembe writes about colonial and postcolonial violence, his formulation resonates with how caste authority in Bengal wields the power to decide whether a lower-caste woman's body is permitted fire or condemned to burial. Sovereignty in this sense is not only exercised by the colonial state but also by caste society itself, which arrogates to itself the right to decide whose death may be dignified.

2.3 Rituals and Symbolism

Anthropological perspectives deepen this inquiry by showing how death rituals are cultural technologies of order. Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* frames death rituals as "rites of separation" that facilitate the deceased's transition from one social category to another (146). Yet when communities deny marginalized groups access to these rites, they withhold symbolic transition, leaving the dead suspended in liminality. Kangali's mother's inability to be cremated according to Brahminical rites exemplifies this enforced liminality.

Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, observes that pollution taboos reveal the "systematic ordering and classification of matter" (44). The corpse, as "matter out of place," threatens social stability unless properly managed. But the definition of what counts as proper management is not uniform: caste and class determine whether a corpse is honored, feared, or neglected. For upper-caste bodies, cremation purifies and reintegrates; for lower-caste bodies, burial often reinforces exclusion. Douglas's framework illuminates how rituals surrounding death in Bengal do not neutralize difference but magnify it.

2.4 Synthesis

Together, these theoretical perspectives reveal that death is neither a natural equalizer nor a purely metaphysical event. It is a socially mediated process shaped by systems of stratification, ideological apparatuses, and symbolic rituals. Caste functions as a mode of symbolic capital, class as a determinant of labour value, and both converge to decide who receives a dignified death. Death thus becomes not only a moment of ontological rupture, as Levinas suggests, but also a site where sovereignty, ideology, and social order manifest most starkly.

By placing these theories in dialogue with Bengali literary texts, we can better understand how narratives such as *Abhagir Swargo* and *Breast-Giver* dramatize the intersection of death, caste, and class. These frameworks will guide the textual analyses that follow, highlighting the ways in which literature reveals the persistence of inequality in the most universal human experience.

3. Historical Context: Bengal in the twentieth Century

The social landscape of Bengal in the twentieth century was profoundly shaped by the interplay of colonial rule, caste hierarchies, and emergent class dynamics. These forces converged in ways that not only structured everyday life but also profoundly determined how death and its rituals were performed, interpreted, and policed. To understand the significance of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Abhagir Swargo* (1926) and Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver* (1997), it is essential to situate them within this historical context, where reformist impulses coexisted with entrenched inequalities.

3.1 Colonial Bengal: Caste Rigidity and Class Stratification

Colonial Bengal retained the deep-rooted caste structures of Hindu society, which the British administration simultaneously disrupted and reinforced. The colonial state's reliance on Brahminical elites as intermediaries in governance bolstered upper-caste dominance while also codifying caste categories through census operations. As Nicholas Dirks argues in *Castes of Mind*, the colonial census "made caste into something it had never quite been before" (43), rendering it an administrative category that rigidified what had previously been more fluid identities. This bureaucratic ossification intensified caste stratification in Bengal.

At the same time, colonial modernity facilitated the rise of a new middle class, or *bhadralok*, composed largely of upper-caste Hindus, who gained access to education, salaried employment, and cultural capital. The *bhadralok* elite came to dominate Bengali public life, and as Partha Chatterjee notes in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, their nationalism was paradoxically "at once inclusive in its rhetoric of freedom and exclusive in its reliance on upper-caste privilege" (62). This exclusivity extended to questions of death and dignity: while *bhadralok* funerals were marked by elaborate rites that signaled both spiritual and social capital, lower-caste funerals were often treated as matters of pollution, stripped of recognition.

3.2 Reform Movements and Social Critiques

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also witnessed the rise of reformist movements that sought to challenge entrenched caste practices. The Brahmo Samaj, founded by Raja Rammohan Roy in 1828, rejected caste distinctions and ritual orthodoxy, promoting a universalist spiritual outlook. Yet, as Sumit Sarkar observes, "the Brahmo critique remained confined to the middle-class elite and rarely touched the actual structures of caste oppression" (*Modern India* 156). This limited reach meant that while reformers debated widow remarriage, women's education, and idol worship, the fundamental question of caste-based denial of funeral rights often remained unaddressed.

Other reformist voices, including those influenced by socialists and Ambedkarite critiques in the later twentieth century, did raise more direct challenges to caste discrimination. Ambedkar himself emphasized that caste oppression extended into every dimension of life, including death: "The Hindu does not regard even death as putting an end to the relationship of caste" (*Annihilation*

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of Caste 37). This insight resonates powerfully in the Bengal context, where lower-caste communities were often denied access to cremation grounds or wood for pyres, as dramatized in *Abhagir Swargo*.

3.3 British Policies and Contradictions

The British colonial administration further complicated matters by both reinforcing and destabilizing caste norms. On the one hand, policies of indirect rule entrenched caste by privileging Brahmin intermediaries. On the other hand, legal reforms, such as the abolition of *sati* in 1829 and subsequent laws around widow remarriage and inheritance, disrupted orthodox practices. These reforms, however, were selective and often paternalistic, failing to dismantle the underlying structures of caste-based inequality. Death rituals remained one domain where colonial intervention was minimal, leaving intact the power of caste communities to regulate access to dignified funerals.

3.4 Post-Independence Shifts

The decades following independence in 1947 introduced new vocabularies of democracy, equality, and social justice. Land reform initiatives, affirmative action policies, and the rhetoric of caste abolition created possibilities for marginalized groups to demand recognition. Yet caste and class hierarchies remained deeply entrenched. As André Bêteille notes, “modernization in India has produced change, but also continuity; hierarchy persists under new guises” (*Caste, Class, and Power* 14). In Bengal, while the Left Front government’s land reforms in the 1970s offered some redistribution, social hierarchies continued to manifest in everyday practices, including funerary rituals.

Class stratification also sharpened during this period, especially with the decline of agrarian livelihoods and the growth of urban labour markets. Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast-Giver* captures this shift, showing how economic exploitation of women’s bodies through reproductive labour reduces them to expendable commodities. In such contexts, death is no longer framed primarily through caste but through class: Jashoda’s death goes unrecognized not because of ritual impurity but because she has ceased to be economically useful.

3.5 Continuities and Relevance

Taken together, the historical trajectory of twentieth-century Bengal reveals both continuity and transformation. Caste rigidity continued to dictate access to dignified death, as seen in the denial of funeral rites to lower-caste individuals. At the same time, class exploitation emerged as a distinct axis, whereby death marked the disposability of labouring bodies. Literature from this period reflects these tensions, offering a lens through which we can trace how structural inequalities persisted even in the face of reform, independence, and modernity.

4. Textual Analysis I: *Abhagir Swargo* by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Abhagir Swargo* (1926) dramatizes the stark reality of caste oppression in Bengal by showing how even death does not dissolve social hierarchies. The

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story centres on the simultaneous deaths of two women: the wife of the upper-caste Brahmin Thakurdas Mukherjee and the lower-caste Bagdi woman, known only as Kangali's mother. While the Brahmin woman's funeral is conducted with grandeur, marked by auspicious rituals and the symbolic authority of the pyre, Kangali's mother's final wish—to be cremated in a similar manner—leads her son into conflict with a society determined to enforce caste boundaries even in death.

4.1 Narrative Summary

The narrative juxtaposes two funerals to highlight social disparity. Thakurdas Mukherjee's wife dies as a married woman, and her cremation is framed as auspicious. The spectacle of her pyre becomes, for Kangali's mother, a vision of transcendence: she imagines her own ascension to heaven through the same ritual. She asks her son Kangali to ensure that she, too, is cremated rather than buried, believing this will erase caste divisions in the afterlife. Kangali's attempt to fulfil this wish leads him into conflict with villagers, who deny him wood for the pyre, reminding him that Bagdis are meant to bury their dead. Thakurdas himself remarks in disdain: "Everyone nowadays wants to be Brahmin or Kayet" (Chattopadhyay 112). In the end, Kangali can only burn a few sticks of hay near his mother's face before her burial, symbolizing the futility of resisting caste in death.

4.2 Caste and Funeral Rites

The story illustrates how the funeral pyre is not only a religious ritual but also a marker of social legitimacy. To be denied cremation is to be denied dignity. This aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's idea of *symbolic capital*, where recognition of worth is socially distributed: "Symbolic capital... functions as credit, it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition" (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 179). Kangali's mother lacks such capital, and her exclusion from cremation exposes how caste dictates access to symbolic recognition even at life's end.

Ambedkar's critique of caste sharpens this analysis. He observes that caste "enforces prohibition even in death, for the dead body of a Hindu is not exempt from the rules of caste" (*Annihilation of Caste* 37). This is vividly realized in *Abhagir Swargo*, where Kangali's mother's wish to transcend caste through death is thwarted by ritual policing. The denial of wood for her pyre is not simply a practical refusal but a symbolic act of exclusion, affirming Ambedkar's view that caste ensures graded inequality even in the grave.

4.3 Resistance and Tragedy

At one level, Kangali's mother's wish represents a form of resistance. She attempts to rewrite her social script by appropriating the ritual of the upper castes. In telling her son that in heaven she would sit beside Thakurdas' wife, she imagines death as an equalizer: "There will be no more caste division between us once we ascend to heaven" (Chattopadhyay 115). This aspiration resonates with Judith Butler's notion of precarious life, where individuals "struggle to

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be recognized as a life at all” (*Precarious Life* 22). Kangali’s mother’s desire is precisely such a struggle for recognition, asserting her humanity against the degradations of caste.

Yet the tragedy of the story lies in the futility of this resistance. As Mbembe reminds us, necro politics involves not only the right to kill but also “the subjugation of life to the power of death” (*Necropolitics* 39). Here, caste society wields necropolitical power by dictating the conditions of posthumous existence. Kangali’s mother is denied agency even in her death, her final wish reduced to ashes before it could be fulfilled. The irony is sharp: death, imagined as release, becomes another site of subjugation.

4.4 Comparative Insight: Dalit Autobiographies and Regional Texts

The denial of posthumous dignity in *Abhagir Swargo* resonates with accounts in Dalit autobiographies and regional literature. Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* describes the humiliation of Dalits in ritual spaces, noting that “our dead could not be cremated in the same place as theirs; even death did not bridge the distance” (41). Similarly, Bama’s *Karukku* recalls how Dalit women were denied proper mourning rites, their deaths marked not by respect but by erasure: “Even the dead are not free from caste; their bodies are reminders of pollution” (67). These accounts highlight that what Sarat Chandra depicted in early twentieth-century Bengal was neither isolated nor exceptional but part of a wider pattern of caste-based denial of dignity in death across India.

By juxtaposing *Abhagir Swargo* with these texts, one can see how literature both fictional and autobiographical testifies to the persistence of caste in the most intimate of human experiences. The pyre, often romanticized in Hindu culture as the vehicle of liberation, is here revealed as a mechanism of exclusion. Kangali’s mother’s burial, marked by a token gesture of fire, signifies both her resistance and its ultimate defeat.

Abhagir Swargo thus exemplifies how caste hierarchies penetrate even the liminal moment of death. The pyre, which could symbolize transcendence, becomes instead a site of caste policing, reinforcing Ambedkar’s claim that caste denies equality even in death. Kangali’s mother’s desire reveals the human impulse to resist degradation, yet her denial exposes the futility of challenging entrenched structures through death alone. Sarat Chandra’s narrative, therefore, situates death not as a great equalizer but as a mirror reflecting the cruelty of caste society.

5. Textual Analysis II: *Breast-Giver* by Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast-Giver* (Stanadayini, 1978; trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1997) offers a searing indictment of how class exploitation dehumanizes women, reducing their bodies to sites of reproductive labour. The story of Jashoda, a Brahmin woman who becomes a professional wet nurse to sustain her family, reveals how economic structures can render life valuable only insofar as it is productive. Her eventual death, neglected and unmourned, illustrates the ruthless logic of disposability in capitalist patriarchy.

5.1 Narrative Summary

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The story begins with Jashoda's husband, Kangalicharan, rendered unable to work after an accident. To support the family, Jashoda takes up the role of a wet nurse in the wealthy Halder household. Over time, she breastfeeds dozens of Halder children, who call her *ma*, even as her own children are neglected. Jashoda's body becomes a commodity: her breasts are her labour, her means of survival. But as she ages and can no longer produce milk, she is discarded, suffering from breast cancer without care. She dies alone, ignored by the very family whose children she raised, as well as by her husband.

5.2 Class and the Body

The story dramatizes the commodification of the female body under conditions of class exploitation. Jashoda herself recognizes the centrality of her body to her family's survival: she warns her husband not to harm her breasts, for "with these I feed not only our children, but our household" (Devi 40). Her body is a site of what Bourdieu would call *economic capital*, yet it is simultaneously devalued as mere reproductive labour. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her introduction to *Breast Stories*, notes that Jashoda "becomes both the saintly mother and the exploited labourer, embodying the contradictions of nationalist and capitalist discourses" (xxi).

In this way, Jashoda exemplifies what Silvia Federici identifies as the hidden foundation of capitalist accumulation: reproductive labour. As Federici argues, "the body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male workers: the primary ground of their exploitation" (*Caliban and the Witch* 16). Jashoda's breasts function as the factory floor of the Halder household, producing nurturance for the elite's children while simultaneously sustaining her own family.

5.3 Death as Disposability

Jashoda's death exposes how class determines the grievability of a life. Once she ceases to produce milk, she is no longer of use to the Halders. Judith Butler's formulation in *Frames of War* is apt here: "A life is grievable only when the loss of that life matters" (15). For the Halders, Jashoda's death does not matter because her labouring body has been exhausted. She becomes a non-subject, a life rendered socially dead long before her biological death.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics clarifies this dynamic. He writes: "In the economy of necropower, the lines between resistance, sacrifice, and disposability blur" (*Necropolitics* 39). Jashoda's body, once celebrated as a saintly maternal figure, is ultimately reduced to pure disposability. Her death illustrates how sovereignty is exercised not through spectacular violence but through systemic neglect—an abandonment that is itself a form of necropolitical power.

5.4 Intersectionality: Caste and Class

What is particularly striking in Jashoda's case is that her caste privilege as a Brahmin does not shield her from class exploitation. Her entry into the Halder household is facilitated by caste respectability: as a Brahmin woman, she is deemed "pure" enough to breastfeed upper-class

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children. Yet this very privilege enables her exploitation, as her labour is appropriated without recognition. Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality is illuminating here: identities intersect in ways that compound vulnerability. Jashoda is simultaneously privileged (as a Brahmin) and oppressed (as a poor woman and labourer), showing how caste and class intersect but do not cancel one another out.

6. Comparative Insight: Feminist and Proletarian Literature

The theme of female bodily exploitation in *Breast-Giver* resonates with other feminist and proletarian texts. Kamala Das, in her autobiography *My Story*, writes candidly about how her body was consumed by others: "I was a prisoner of my body, compelled to give, to yield, to surrender" (74). Similarly, Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* dramatizes how women's bodies are appropriated within patriarchal households, albeit through different dynamics of desire and repression. What unites these texts with Devi's story is their refusal to romanticize motherhood or femininity, instead revealing the body as a site of exploitation under patriarchy and class dominance.

In proletarian literature, parallels can also be drawn with Maxim Gorky's depictions of workers reduced to expendable tools, or with Indian labour fiction such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*, where bodies are consumed by relentless exploitation. Jashoda belongs to this lineage: her body is a site of production, her death an inevitable discard once productivity ceases.

Breast-Giver exposes how class exploitation inscribes itself upon the body, reducing life to a function of labour and rendering death insignificant once usefulness ends. Jashoda's story reveals that while caste can shape access to labour opportunities, it is class that ultimately dictates grievability. Her body, commodified through reproductive labour, becomes disposable once production ceases. Mahasweta Devi thus critiques not only capitalist patriarchy but also the complicity of caste privilege in enabling exploitation. Jashoda's death, unmarked and ungrieved, exemplifies Butler's claim that "not all lives are equally eligible for recognition" (*Precarious Life* 20). Her story compels us to confront the brutality of a system that extracts value from women's bodies only to discard them when they are no longer productive.

6.1 Caste vs. Class in Death

The stories of Kangali's mother in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Abhagir Swargo* and Jashoda in Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver* offer two distinct yet interconnected perspectives on how caste and class mediate the experience of death. At first glance, the two women appear to occupy different positions: Kangali's mother belongs to a lower caste community, while Jashoda, a Brahmin woman, enters the Halder household through caste-sanctioned respectability. Yet, in both cases, death becomes the ultimate site of exclusion, revealing that caste and class, while different in their operations, converge in denying dignity to marginalized women.

6.2 Kangali's Mother: Caste as Posthumous Exclusion

For Kangali's mother, caste is the absolute determinant of posthumous dignity. Her desire for cremation on a pyre is not simply a wish for ritual propriety but an assertion of equality: she

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longs to transcend social barriers in death, believing that in heaven, caste divisions will dissolve. Yet her community's refusal to provide wood for her pyre reveals the inescapability of caste structures. Bourdieu's notion of *symbolic capital* clarifies why: she lacks the legitimacy that confers ritual dignity. As he observes, symbolic capital is "the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate" (*Practical Reason* 119). Cremation, in this sense, is not merely a religious act but a recognition of legitimacy—a recognition she is denied.

Ambedkar's critique resonates here. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he remarks: "Caste is not just a division of labourers, it is a division of labourers graded one above the other" (25). The refusal to cremate Kangali's mother is precisely such a graded denial, marking her body as less worthy of purification and spiritual passage. Her burial is not a neutral alternative but a sign of exclusion, reinforcing Ambedkar's insight that caste inequality persists beyond life into death.

6.3 Jashoda: Class as Disposability

Jashoda's case reveals how class operates differently. Her Brahmin identity grants her access to the Halder household; her breasts are considered "pure" enough to feed upper-class children. Yet once her capacity for reproductive labour ends, she becomes disposable. Judith Butler's concept of grievability is instructive: "We have to ask, for whom is it possible to have a life that counts as a life, or a death that counts as a death?" (*Precarious Life* 20). For Jashoda, her death does not count. The very children she nurtured no longer recognize her, and her passing is met with indifference.

Here, Mbembe's analysis of necropolitics offers another layer. He observes that sovereignty often manifests through the "generalized instrumentalization of human existence" (*Necropolitics* 14). Jashoda's body is instrumentalized to the point where her death becomes irrelevant once her labouring body ceases to function. Unlike Kangali's mother, she is not denied ritual; instead, she is denied social recognition—her existence erased through neglect.

6.4 Juxtaposition: Convergence of Exclusion

Placed side by side, the two stories highlight the distinct mechanisms of caste and class. Kangali's mother is denied the fire that would mark her passage into social legitimacy; Jashoda is denied the acknowledgment that her death matters at all. In both cases, death functions not as an equalizer but as a mirror of inequality. Levinas's claim that death is "the absolutely unknowable" (*Time and the Other* 48) is ironically inverted: while ontologically unknowable, death becomes all too knowable in its social inscription.

The gendered dimension intensifies this exclusion. Both women seek to transform death into an act of agency—Kangali's mother by aspiring to a Brahmin-style cremation, Jashoda by imagining her work as a saintly service ensuring her afterlife. Yet both attempts at agency are thwarted. Their deaths underscore Butler's insight that "our existence proves precarious when that address fails" (*Precarious Life* 130). Neither woman is properly "addressed" in death—Kangali's

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mother because caste denies her ritual address, Jashoda because class denies her social acknowledgment.

Caste and class, while distinct, converge in their power to strip marginalized women of dignity in death. Kangali's mother is buried, her final wish frustrated by the rigidity of caste; Jashoda is cremated but forgotten, her death rendered insignificant by class exploitation. Both illustrate Mbembe's claim that sovereignty is exercised through the capacity to decide whose death is recognized and whose is ignored. In the end, death for these women is not release but confirmation of social hierarchies, showing that the ultimate equalizer is, in fact, the ultimate marker of difference.

7. Contemporary Relevance

Although *Abhagir Swargo* and *Breast-Giver* are products of the twentieth century, their themes reverberate with startling relevance in twenty-first-century India. The persistence of caste and class hierarchies in determining access to dignified death became most visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when cremation grounds, hospitals, and burial sites became contested spaces of inequality. These contemporary realities demonstrate that death, though universal, remains unevenly experienced and recognized.

7.1 Caste and Cremation Denials

Even today, caste continues to shape access to funerary rites. Reports from rural India have documented instances where Dalit families were denied the right to cremate their dead on common grounds, forced instead to use segregated or makeshift spaces. In 2020, for example, a Dalit man in Uttar Pradesh was denied cremation on a village pyre ground by dominant-caste neighbours, echoing the humiliation faced by Kangali in Sarat Chandra's story. Ambedkar's assertion that "the Hindu does not regard even death as putting an end to the relationship of caste" (*Annihilation of Caste* 37) proves chillingly accurate in these cases. Such incidents demonstrate the continuity of caste as a necropolitical regime, where sovereignty is not only exercised by the state but also by dominant communities that dictate who is entitled to fire.

7.2 Class, Healthcare, and the Pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis also made visible how class stratification determines access to healthcare and dignity in death. Images of mass cremations in Delhi, where bodies of the poor were burned without names, contrasted sharply with private funerals of the wealthy. Butler's idea of grievability—"not all lives are equally grieved" (*Precarious Life* 20)—was exemplified in this disparity. While the deaths of celebrities and elites were widely mourned in media and social networks, the anonymous deaths of migrant workers and slum dwellers were recorded as statistics. This recalls Jashoda's fate: once she ceased to be productive, her death ceased to matter. The pandemic revealed the same ruthless calculus, where class dictated whether a life and death were acknowledged.

7.3 Literature, Film, and Cultural Memory

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Contemporary literature and film continue to grapple with these inequalities. Dalit autobiographies such as Y. B. Satyanarayana's *My Father's Will* recount experiences where death rituals were denied to marginalized communities. Films like Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013) and *Sairat* (2016) also depict how caste restrictions pervade intimate spheres, including mourning and burial practices. In Bengali cinema, Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* (1962) portrays the dispossession of refugees after Partition, where both life and death are precariously suspended by class displacement. These cultural texts underline that denial of dignity in death is not a relic of history but an ongoing structural violence.

7.4 The Global Dimension

The pandemic also revealed that these dynamics are not confined to India. Across the world, marginalized groups suffered disproportionately. In the United States, African American and Latino communities faced higher death rates due to systemic inequalities in healthcare access, resonating with Mbembe's claim that necropolitics involves "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (*Necropolitics* 27). Thus, the issues raised by *Abhagir Swargo* and *Breast-Giver* resonate globally, pointing to a universal pattern of inequality in death.

The persistence of caste- and class-based inequalities in funerary practices, whether in Bengal's rural villages or in global crises like COVID-19, underscores the contemporary urgency of the themes explored in these texts. Death continues to be mediated by structures of inequality, confirming that the struggles of Kangali's mother and Jashoda are not confined to literary allegory but remain part of lived realities. Their stories, reanimated in the present, remind us that the demand for dignity in death is inseparable from the demand for justice in life.

8. Conclusion

This study has examined how death, while universal, is mediated by the social hierarchies of caste and class, using Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Abhagir Swargo* and Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver* as case studies. Both narratives reveal that the moment of death, far from erasing differences, becomes a site where inequality is reaffirmed. Kangali's mother's burial exposes how caste denies access to dignity in death, while Jashoda's unacknowledged passing illustrates how class exploitation renders lives disposable once their productive capacity is exhausted.

It is crucial to remember that these stories are not merely literary fictions but representations of the societies in which they were written. Chattopadhyay's story reflects the rigid caste structures of early twentieth-century Bengal, where funeral rites functioned as markers of social legitimacy. Mahasweta Devi's narrative, composed later in the century, embodies the anxieties of a society grappling with economic stratification, capitalist exploitation, and the commodification of women's bodies. Both works, in their different registers, testify to the persistence of social exclusion across historical contexts.

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Philosophical and anthropological insights sharpen this recognition. Ambedkar's insistence that caste continues even after death, Bourdieu's idea of symbolic capital, Butler's notion of grievability, and Mbembe's concept of necropolitics together demonstrate how systems of power operate through death itself. Funeral rites, as van Gennep and Douglas suggest, are not neutral acts of mourning but cultural technologies that reproduce hierarchies. By reading these literary texts alongside such theories, we see how narratives of death illuminate broader structures of domination.

The persistence of caste- and class-based exclusions in contemporary India, from caste-based cremation denials to the COVID-19 crisis, demonstrates that the concerns raised in these stories remain pressing today. Death continues to reflect the inequalities of life, reminding us that dignity in dying is inseparable from justice in living.

Future research may build on this study by exploring how gender further complicates the politics of death, comparing regional literatures that represent similar exclusions, or analysing Dalit writing that directly confronts the denial of funerary dignity. Such work would deepen our understanding of how societies mark death not only as an end but also as a continuation of inequality. Ultimately, these stories reveal that in Bengal, as elsewhere, death is not the great equalizer but the final inscription of social hierarchies. The struggles of Kangali's mother and Jashoda thus remain emblematic of the continuing battle for dignity, equality, and recognition—even in death.

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