Dang Quoc Minh Duong

Women's Breast Symbols in Vietnamese Folk Literature

Abstract. This article explores the symbolic representations of women's breasts in Vietnamese folk literature through a multidisciplinary approach combining literary analysis, cultural studies, and gender perspectives. Although breast imagery is relatively scarce in Vietnamese traditions, it conveys rich and layered meanings. The paper categorizes these symbols into three main groups: the sacred breast, the erotic breast, and the aesthetic breast. These appear respectively in myths, jokes, and beauty ideals — associated with motherhood, desire, and feminine charm. Drawing on sources such as folk songs, proverbs, and legends, the study shows that breast symbolism reflects both reverence and ambivalence toward the female body. It offers insight into Vietnamese cultural values and gender perceptions as expressed in oral literature.

Keywords: Vietnamese folk literature, breast symbolism, sacred breasts, erotic breasts, eroticism in folklore.

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Символы женской груди во вьетнамском фольклоре

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются символические представления о женской груди во вьетнамском фольклоре. Исследование проведено с помощью междисциплинарного подхода, объединяющего литературный, культурологический и гендерный анализ. Хотя образ груди относительно редко встречается во вьетнамской традиции, он имеет многослойное значение. В статье символы груди подразделяются на три основные группы: священный, эротический и эстетический. Они появляются в мифах, шутках и идеалах красоты, связанных с материнством, желанием и женским очарованием. Опираясь на такие источники, как народные песни, пословицы и легенды, исследование показывает, что символизм груди отражает амбивалентность по отношению к женскому телу. Оно дает представление о вьетнамских культурных ценностях и гендерных восприятиях, выраженных в устной литературе.

Ключевые слова: вьетнамский фолькор, символика груди, священная грудь, эротическая грудь, эротизм в фольклоре.

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Introduction

Hoang Phe defines the noun "breast" as having three meanings, with the relevant meaning being "a body part located in the chest of a person, or in the abdomen of an animal, with a small protruding nipple in women or animals" [Hoàng Phê 2022: 1130]. The female breast is an organ that secretes milk to nourish infants. Anatomically, the breast is one of two prominent parts located in the upper abdomen of primates. In women, the chest area acts as a mammary gland, producing and secreting milk to provide nutrition for infants. The breast is covered by subcutaneous fat covers and surrounded by a network of ducts that converge at the nipple, giving it its size and shape. At the end of the milk ducts are lobules, or alveolar clusters, where milk is produced and stored in response to endocrine signals.

Throughout history, literature and art have often mentioned this body part in relation to women, with various concepts and emotions. In Greek and Roman mythology, the mother's breast was seen as a symbol of nurturing and power. In ancient Egyptian civilization, the breast was considered a symbol of femininity. Archeologists have unearthed stone steles engraved with many images of breasts used to represent women and femininity. The crown of the Egyptian goddess is shaped like a round breast, symbolizing strength, fertility, purity, and innocence. During the Renaissance, eroticism became more prevalent in paintings that depicted the sacred act of breastfeeding. However, these paintings differed from previous depictions of saints in one significant aspect: the breast was portrayed as both an "erotic signal in art" and a "reference to pure pleasure." Yalom [2022] dedicated a research monograph *A History of the Breast* to this topic, which has been translated into Vietnamese and published in Vietnam.

Tran Hau The Yen stated: "After reading the entire book and admiring the depictions of breasts from Asia, Europe, and Africa, I felt a sense of sadness because there is not a single image or text mentioning breasts in Vietnamese art" [Trần Hậu Thế Yên 2023]. It is true that images of breasts are not commonly found in Vietnamese visual art. Do Anh Vu discussed the scarcity of breast images in Vietnamese folk literature in his article "Life's Chest." He also offered his own interpretation, stating that this scarcity is a result of "historical necessity, when individual consciousness and personal liberation were not yet promoted in this country and had to wait until the influence of Western culture" [Đỗ Anh Vũ 2017: 43].

In our study of Vietnamese folk literature, we discovered that women's breasts were mentioned in various folk sources. Specifically, they appeared 14 times in proverbs, 10 times in riddles, 22 times in folk songs, once in a fairy tale, and 12 times in jokes. Although the number of sources referencing the "*bong dao* mound" is limited, it still reflects the significance of the breast symbol in Vietnamese folk literature. Through the use of surveying, analysis, synthesis, and interdisciplinary methods, this article aims to explore the portrayal of the breast in Vietnamese folk literature and shed light on the Vietnamese perspective on this symbol of femininity.

Sacred breasts

We use the term "sacred breast" in the same way as Marilyn Yalom, who studied the breasts of goddesses, priestesses, the Virgin Mary, and biblical women who were revered and admired. Breasts are considered sacred because they provide nourishment to sustain human life. Yalom stated: "The lactating breasts of the Virgin Mary and the great goddesses are sacred symbols of all that is good in the universe" [Yalom 2022: 95]. In Greek mythology, the Milky Way was created by the milk of Zeus's wife Hera, who was angry when she discovered that a child not born to her was secretly drinking her milk in order to gain immortality (Fig.1).



Fig. 1. Peter Paul Rubens. "The Birth of the Milky Way". 1636–1638. Open sources.

In Vietnamese folklore, the sacred breast is also mentioned in the legend of Ba Trieu. This story tells of Au, a woman with unusually long breasts, so long that she "often squeezes her breasts behind her shoulders and wraps her back tightly with silk" [Tuyển tập văn học... 1999: 385]. The story "The Basket Breasts" features a girl with extremely large breasts, so large that she had to tie her nipples back to avoid them getting in the way. The common theme in these stories is the unusual size of the breasts, which is seen as extraordinary and sacred because it is associated with a national hero. According to Pham Van Hung, this could be "a remnant of primitive culture, a symbol of the beauty of a time when the image of a woman emphasized her breasts, abdomen, and hips, and they were unusually large. This represents the beauty of fertility, growth and development, and the magnification of body parts from ordinary to extraordinary, from majestic to strange" [Pham Văn Hưng 2019: 120]. Researchers have found that breasts are linked to fertility beliefs in Vietnamese and other ethnic groups. At the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Da Nang, visitors can see many statues of Uma, Laskmi, and Tara, goddesses with round breasts. The altars of Thap Mam (Binh Dinh) and Tra Kieu (Quang Nam) are adorned with breast-shaped decorations between two layers of



Fig.2. Thap Mam Altar. Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture. Open sources.

delicately stylized flowers and leaves (Fig.2). The story "The Basket Breasts" ends with the words: "Her body turned into a towering mountain range where she died. That is Breast Mountain. The mountain still exists today, resembling the body of a woman lying on her back with two high hills rising above her chest. Those are her great breasts" [Tuyển tập văn học...1999: 449].

In Vietnam, there is a fruit tree called the star apple tree. The star apple fruit is about the size of a fist, with green skin that turns light pink when ripe. It has a sweet and delicious taste. According to the story "The History of the Star Tree," the star apple tree is believed to be the embodiment of a mother's desire to nurture and educate her playful son. People say that the foliage resembles a mother's crying eyes, waiting for her child. The branches of the tree droop like a mother's arms, reaching out lovingly to comfort her child. The star apple fruit is also seen as a symbol of mother's milk, as the son in the story drinks it and feels a familiar and refreshing sensation. Therefore, the breast is considered sacred because it is associated with motherhood, nurturing children, and the role of a mother.

In terms of etymology, the English word "breast" comes from the Old English word breost (meaning chest, breast) and the prehistoric German word breustam (breast). It can also be traced back to its prehistoric Indo-European root bhreus, which means growth or germination. The original meaning of the word "mother's breast" suggests that ancient societies recognized the function of breasts in giving life and promoting maturity. This aligns with Yalom's observation: "The beginning is the mother's breast. For most of human history, there was no substitute for breast milk. In fact, until the late nineteenth century, when pasteurization made animal milk safe, the breast was essential for every newborn baby. It is not surprising that our prehistoric ancestors endowed their goddesses with wonderful breasts" [Yalom 2022: 38] The author of *A History of the Breast*, while researching Chinese writing, discovered an interesting detail: the ideogram for mother consists of two stylized square breasts. In modern Chinese work *Feng wu*

huang) literally means "big breasts and big buttocks," praising the fertile beauty of women. By using the breast as the original image of the mother principle, Mac Ngon in this work highlights the magical qualities of all that is great, enveloping, nourishing, protecting, and warming, even the living, unfortunate heart. The above references are consistent with the *Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols* on breast symbols. Accordingly, the breast is a symbol of "protection and moderation (...) Breasts are associated with feminine origin, that is, with a degree or moderation (...) Breasts are primarily a symbol of motherhood, tenderness, peace, and trust. With milk, the first food, the breast is associated with images of intimacy, gifts and refuge" [Chevalier, Gheerbrant 2002: 664].

Therefore, through Vietnamese folk songs, we remind those who raise children to cherish milk in gratitude for the nourishment provided by the mother.

Remember to be grateful to the parents Three years of breastfeeding with so much intimacy [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật 1995b: 49] (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3. Folk painting "In Dong Ho Village". Vietnam, Dong Ho Village. 2010s. *Private collection*.

The *Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols* indicates that breast milk represents "prosperity, fertility, and knowledge in an esoteric context; ultimately, as a means of initiation, it symbolizes immortality. ... Milk embodies a yin quality, representing femininity at its finest and is linked to youthful rejuvenation" [Chevalier, Gheerbrant 2002: 664]. In biblical texts, the Holy Land — referred to as the Promised Land of Israel — is frequently described as "the land of milk and honey," suggesting a region characterized by abundance, wealth, prosperity, and divine blessings.

As a result, the breast sign with religious connotations is primarily found in stories, with rare appearances in fairy tales and folk music. Regarding the child, the breast is linked to the role of supplying milk to feed the infant. The sacred breast is also linked with heroes and demigods. But there are just shards of Vietnamese mythology.

Erotic breasts

Initially, breasts were solely linked to motherhood and the nurturing of children. However, in contemporary art and literature, they are increasingly viewed as symbols of desire, primarily for powerful men who perceive them merely as objects of attraction [Yalom 2022: 1]. Recent research indicates that men instinctively notice women's breasts first among all body parts, reinforcing their status as objects of male desire. According to legend, a woman's breasts were originally the property of a man. Due to divine intervention, he lent them to her, but ultimately lost ownership, leading to feelings of resentment and regret. Consequently, whenever he sees a woman's breasts, a sense of ownership resurfaces, igniting his interest. The visual impact of a woman's breasts sharply focuses on the retina, and the resulting nerve signals quickly activate the cerebral cortex, inducing excitement.

Numerous jokes depict boys daring one another to touch a girl's breasts. In the narrative "It's Your Father's Grave!", three boys compete to squeeze the breast of an approaching girl. The eldest boy pointed at her chest and inquired, "Ms., what is this?" The girl's face flushed with anger as she retorted, "That's your father's grave!" In response, the young man immediately embraced her chest, exclaiming, "Daddy, when did you die? I'm unaware of how long you've been buried here" [Nguyễn Chí Bền 2014b: 290]. This story illustrates the mischievous antics of young men while highlighting that breasts are their target.

In "Surgery Doctor", a physician exploits his position to grope a sixteen-year-old girl's breast, insisting she must undress completely. Initially, he touches her forehead and holds her hand, but upon noticing her breast is not swollen, he continues to squeeze it, making her feel extremely shy. The doctor persists in his inappropriate actions until the patient's mother questions why he hasn't examined the area of pain. The doctor justifies his behavior by stating: "I squeezed her breast to assess its softness and firmness, and to ensure the medication matches this side. If the sizes are uneven, I fear no one will want to marry her" [Nguyễn Chí Bền 2014a: 403].

Moreover, the joke "Just Saw and Scolded" recounts a father-in-law groping his daughter-in-law's breasts. The tale "Clawing the Tiger's Beard" narrates Mr. Thiem's cunning approach to squeeze the breasts of a district official's wife. Additionally, "Everywhere You Go" describes a man touching his neighbor's breast while she is breastfeeding. In a depiction of youthful playfulness at the Huong Loc communal house in Nam Dinh province during the 17th century, a scene unfolds where a girl holds her boyfriend's penis while he grasps her breast, with onlookers smiling around them [Phan Cẩm Thượng 2017: 71]. In numerous Renaissance artworks, it is common for artists to illustrate a young man resting his hand on a woman's breast, suggesting a sense of possession; the woman, in this context, is the rightful owner of her own body.

Folk songs often feature numerous themes related to the groping and touching of women's and girls' breasts. In some instances, these actions are portrayed as the boy's desire, request, or flirtatious behavior. She's sitting at the right door selling areca nuts / Wanting to ask to touch her breasts but afraid of hurting her heart, or Her breasts are as small as young areca nuts / Let me cuddle them if it hurts, I'll pay / Your breasts are only worth a little money / If you let me touch them, I'll pay five times more [Nguyễn Xuân



Fig. 4. Folk painting "Scene of Jealousy". Vietnam, workshops of the village of Dong Ho. XX century. *Private collection*.

Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật 1995a: 127] (Fig. 4). This situation illustrates a young man's admiration for the distressed owner.

Furthermore, numerous folk songs depict charming yet conceited young men. Bright moonlight / Take his cock to go out / Meeting a flock of wild ducks / He took a bow to shoot / Met a girl wearing a red bib / Going with rice / Going to the temple / I'm determined to lose / Put out my hand to touch my breast / Wait a minute, uncle / My basket of rice has fallen / Today is thirty / Tomorrow is the first day / Go to the temple to worship the Buddha / Buddha, turn away / The monk looks away and chuckles / What is the use of the three jewels? [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật 1995c: 115]. Due to the issue of harassment against women, parents frequently caution young girls: Girls should not often go to the boy's house / Afterwards, their breasts will be as big as two coconut shells. This is a humorous folk song: Touching the fairy's breast / Taking money to measure rice / Touching her red breast / Using a basket to catch fish / Touching the girl's breast / Picking up a verse / Going to the church gate / Kneeling to father and mother / I have become human. Even, One hand rang the bell / One hand touched her breast, shocked [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật 1995b: 182].

During the Renaissance period in the West, breastfeeding was generally discouraged among the upper class, who often employed wet nurses for this purpose. To encourage mothers to embrace their nurturing roles, the French physician Ambroise Paré believed that breastfeeding provided both physical and emotional gratification, suggesting that it could even be a source of sexual pleasure for both mother and child. He noted that there exists a sympathetic connection between the breast and the uterus, where stimulation of the nipples can awaken the uterus and elicit pleasurable sensations due to the high concentration of nerve endings in that area [Yalom 2022: 131]. This perspective highlights the emotional experience of the breastfeeding mother. In contrast, the renowned psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud focused more on the infant's experience, arguing that breastfeeding is not only the child's initial activity but also the foundation of their entire sexual development. He stated: "From a very early age, when sucking the breast to the fullest, the child feels a sense of satisfaction from doing so" [Stafford 1998: 125]. Interestingly, in folk riddles, the act of a mother nursing her child is often framed as a familial activity. In folk literature, the imagery of placing the breast in the baby's mouth is sometimes likened to the sexual act of insertion and withdrawal. *One person lies down and the other person sits / Push in happily / When he pulled out, his mouth grinned widely* [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật 1995b: 77]. Consequently, individuals have skillfully incorporated into the narrative the positions of a person reclining, another seated, and the expression of someone who appears "very happy," complete with a smiling mouth, to charm and mislead the audience.

Discussions regarding breast shape frequently involve comparisons to various fruits. Smaller breasts are likened to apples or areca nuts, while larger breasts are often compared to peaches, coconuts, papayas, or melons. *Your breasts are like areca nuts / If you squeeze them, I'll compensate if it hurts*, or *your breasts are like melons / Your hands are like citron, meet together* [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật 1995c: 45]. The Chinese culture also employs a unique method of referring to breasts, using terms such as raisin, apple, cherry, lemon, coconut, pear, mango, watermelon, and banana. These names evoke images of delicious, juicy fruits that stimulate appetites. Beyond their similar shapes, likening breasts to fruit subtly suggests that "*bong dao* mound" is a dish that men can "consume." In the United States, from the 1920s to the 1950s, fruit marketing was often linked to a subconscious association with breasts. Labels on fruit crates frequently featured illustrations of curvaceous women with prominent breasts [Yalom 2022: 308].

Breasts as objects of beauty

Breasts play a significant role in defining femininity. Women embody beauty, and as such, breasts are often regarded as one of the most alluring and aesthetically pleasing aspects of a woman, symbolizing beauty itself. Numerous works of ancient Greek art, including the Island of Aphrodite housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris, draw inspiration from the breast to celebrate beauty and the female form. Similarly, Italian Renaissance artists frequently expressed their admiration for the vibrant depiction of breasts, particularly in their portrayals of Venus, the goddess of love.

Vietnamese folk literature features few works that focus on the beauty of breasts, likely due to a cultural preference for modesty. As noted, "People may wear rags, but they are never truly naked. This is especially true for women, who, embodying the yin principle of darkness, must remain covered. Women do not reveal their breasts; they are typically concealed beneath a square cloth bib [Nguyễn Văn Huyên 2016: 204]. Due to a cultural aversion to nudity, explicit descriptions of bare skin are uncommon, resulting in a scarcity of literature addressing nudity or semi-nudity in relation to breasts. However, when examining breasts as objects of beauty from various angles, it becomes evident that there are diverse opinions on the aesthetic appeal of women's breasts. A well-known proverb encapsulating breast aesthetics describes them as square, back-balanced, and

heart-shaped. According to folklore, a woman who possesses these attributes is deemed capable of childbirth and household duties. Hoang Tuan Cong, referencing the work Complete Physiognomy, elaborates on this ideal by stating, "Heart-shaped breasts are considered beautiful" [Hoàng Tuấn Công 2017]. This description highlights that the chest muscles and mammary glands should be well-developed, with firm yet soft fatty tissue, and that the breasts should be symmetrically positioned (Fig. 5). The breasts are adequately sized, exhibiting a soft yet firm texture, with the nipples positioned upward, resembling the hook shape of the character $\frac{1}{4}$. This indicates that the breasts and nipples do not align straight as seen in "beasts." They are not droopy due to lack of development, nor do they resemble "luffa breasts," which are characterized by being small, elongated, and soft due to underdeveloped chest muscles and fatty tissue. The phrase "beat the bottom of the waist" does not literally refer to breasts, but its figurative meaning evokes an image of a tall figure with well-defined buttocks and rounded breasts. Historically, women from certain ethnic groups in the Central Highlands often went without shirts, believing that beauty should be displayed. Today, in beauty pageants, the measurements of the bust are still regarded as significant criteria for assessing a contestant's beauty.



Fig. 5. Annamite young woman completing her toilet. Before 1937. *Open sources*.

From a different viewpoint, folk traditions often highlight the allure of the breast by depicting its decline and degradation over time. Time poses a challenge to all things, including beauty. Regardless of how stunning a woman's breasts may be, they will inevitably lose firmness and shape as they age. This is an unavoidable truth. In folk songs, men are frequently held responsible as the "perpetrators" of this phenomenon. At times, this is presented as a rhetorical question, with the answer already understood by the audience: "One day, I'm busy climbing the mountain pass / For whose sake is the frog's breast and waist open?" In Vietnamese, the expression "climbing a pass" refers to traversing hills and mountains, but it also serves as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Folk songs skillfully employ this inversion technique: they start by stating the reason (for instance, "three times a day climbing the pass") and then feign an inquiry about the reason, ultimately revealing the main character, the husband, at the end. However, it is clear from the outset that he is aware of the "hidden person." The subsequent two folk songs exemplify the effective use of comparison: Unmarried women wear a red camisole with flowers / After getting married, their breasts go out. A girl with one child, others are fascinated to watch / A girl with two children with her breasts curled behind her [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhât 1995a: 137]. This text presents a comparison of breast appearance before and after marriage, as well as the differences between having one child versus two. Both folk songs share a common theme: the first verse highlights beauty and societal standards, while the subsequent verse depicts a decline in breast appearance. Folk literature does not explicitly address the beauty of breasts in unmarried women or those with a single child; however, the implications can be inferred. Besides the two primary factors—husband and time—the changes in breast appearance are also attributed to the children who are breastfed. The folk song reflects a reality: *Breastfeeding* the baby for a while / The mother has run out of milk, the baby cries [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật 1995b: 219]. Consequently, in the West, many affluent mothers historically chose not to breastfeed in order to maintain the appearance of their breasts. This choice was often backed by their husbands.

Breasts play a vital role in supplying milk to infants. A man without a beard is devoid of love / A woman without a breast has nothing to feed her children [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhât 1995c: 92]. In traditional beliefs, fuller breasts are viewed as an indication of a woman's ability to bear children and provide milk for their nourishment. A Vietnamese saying encapsulates this idea: "Large breasts signify a robust baby," suggesting that ample breasts, akin to a supportive pillar, are beneficial for raising children. This implies that mothers with larger breasts are likely to produce more milk, which in turn supports the health and growth of their infants. Consequently, children of mothers with such attributes are often perceived as healthy and well-nourished. In this context, a larger breast size is regarded as the ideal standard for motherhood, while smaller breasts are often associated with a lack of vitality. Women with flat breasts, big hips/Shrunken ass and bloated stomachs, give but don't receive [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật 1995a: 81]. The examples and analysis presented indicate that beauty is linked to functionality in this context. Additionally, the perception of Vietnamese women's breasts differs from Western ideals. During the Renaissance, society categorized women's breasts into two distinct types: those of upper-class women were typically firm to attract male attention, while those of common women tended to be fuller, reflecting their role in nurturing both themselves and their children (Yalom 2022: 132).

To celebrate the region, there are two proverbs that refer to a location known as Do Son: *Co Am vagina / Dong Du orange / Do Son breast* and *Van Cu chicken / Do Son breast* [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật 1995c: 208]. Do Son is a location in Hai Phong Province. According to local folklore, the women of this area are often noted for their attractive physiques, particularly their breasts. This is attributed to their involvement in physically demanding activities such as fishing, rowing, and net pulling. As a result of their labor and possibly genetic factors, the women of Do Son are said to possess firm, rounded, and aesthetically pleasing breasts.

In Sino-Vietnamese, the term for breasts is "nipples." When asked about breasts, individuals often refer to them as flowers: *Born at one time with the body / But hidden / On spring day the flowers bloom / Sisters invite each other to play outside* [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật 1995a: 54]. In Vietnamese culture, flowers are seen as essential and positive symbols, representing the idea that people are the flowers of the earth.

From a gender viewpoint, flowers frequently symbolize a lovely and elegant girl, akin to a beauty queen. The term "flower" embodies beauty and nobility, deserving of admiration and reverence. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, flowers have been reimagined in various forms within folk and literary traditions, taking on names like twin mountains, areca chamber, and "*bong dao* mound" [Đỗ Lai Thúy 1999].

Ultimately, by examining the breasts, we can estimate their age and aesthetic appeal at various stages of development. This includes the depiction of a young girl beginning to experience puberty, marked by changes in her breast development: *That girl is beautiful* and cumbersome/Even though she's nice, but... bee stings, or On her head she wears a square scarf/Looking down at her chest, her breasts are still as small as young areca nuts [Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật 1995c: 136].

Conclusion

Breast imagery and symbols are not frequently found in Vietnamese folk literature. However, the analysis reveals that this symbol carries a profound sacred significance. The sacred breast is linked to revered heroes within the realm of legends. Breasts serve to nourish children, both physically and emotionally. Additionally, the breast symbol has sexual connotations, appearing in various jokes, folk songs, and riddles. As objects of male desire, breasts often become the targets of unwanted touching, groping, and even possession. The sexual aspect of breasts is illustrated not only in the act of breastfeeding but also in their representation as fruit, something consumable. These two interpretations of the breast symbol are further enriched by the notion of beauty: breasts are deemed beautiful due to their sacredness and association with fertility. The allure of the beautiful breast captivates men, and its beauty is also acknowledged through its name.

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