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Portrayal of Motherhood in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi is a prolific writer who has used her pen for the causes of the most deprived sections of the society. She has written about the pangs and plights of tribals, women, dalits and other marginalized sections of society. Her novel, *Mother of 1084*, is the depiction of the miserable condition of a mother who tries to search for the causes of her son's commitment towards Naxalite movement during 1970s after his brutal killing. She comes across many layers of hidden things which a mother from upper class may not bother to know in normal situations. She explores that her son was like her who cared for others, wanted equality in the society and therefore he had sacrificed his life. She finds her life akin to the thoughts of her son as she herself is excluded in her own family. She has to bear the oppression of exclusion in her own house. These things have made her stronger and able to understand those causes for which her son has sacrificed his life. Unsympathetic behavior of the husband and some of the children, double standard of morality and civil laws, the gap between the proletariats and the bourgeois, Naxalite movement and its aftermath, indiscriminate brutal killings of Naxalites, lust for materialistic life and hollow prestige among the upper class society are well documented by Mahasweta Devi in her most popular work, *Mother of 1084*.

Keywords: Naxalite, Oppression, Exploitation, Marginalized, Motherhood, Sacrifice.

Mahasweta Devi is known for her powerful literary works which mainly focus on the miseries of the poor tribals and other marginalized sections of human society such as the dalits, the women, the landless laborers and others. Her works are interwoven around the violence and exploitation of the poor, especially the tribals, by those who are in power. She wrote about those people whom British Colonial power had identified as 'natural criminals' because they were not influenced by the cultural domination of the west and remained stick to their indigenous cultural tenets. Indian Government, after freedom, has not done sufficient developmental work for these people and they are still forced to live a life of penury and scarcity. Their lands have been snatched away, their labour power has been utilized against

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them, their women have been raped and they have been looted and murdered brutally by cruel landlords, religious heads and insensitive government officials. She champions the causes of these neglected, downtrodden people who are still compelled to live at the margin of the society. She wrote like an activist to alleviate humanity from its painful conditions. She asserts that, “my activism is the driving force of all my literary activities” (*Badge of All Their Tribes* 14).

Motherhood is a fundamental part of our society. Mahasweta Devi has portrayed motherhood in many of her works in all its grandeur and ugliness. Her mother characters are very much a part of the milieu around them. It is an irony that Indian mothers are deified and marginalized at the same time. They are revered at the cost of their freedom. They are expected to bear every pang of society without any grudge and remain silent about serious issues. Devi injects this illusory veil of deification and exposes its restrictive potential which inhabits women within the historically ordained roles and rejects their individuality. One of the drawbacks of being a woman in Indian society-irrespective of her socio-economic position is this that she is considered an inappropriate creature to be consulted about serious social issues. Devi wants to change this perception of motherhood where it, “is defied, but paradoxically, the myth of mother’s quasi-divine status is premised upon her capacity for voluntary self-sacrifice” (*In the Name of Mother*-VIII). She has depicted a wide array of mothers such as; the deprived yet loving mother, the pious mother, the manipulative mother and the professional mother.

Women come to form a better understanding of society and its evils through Motherhood. It provides them the required strength to sustain themselves and fight for justice even against the toughest human conditions. A mother opposes the institutionalized oppression and blatant power abuse for the sake of her baby. A mother achieves remarkable transition and growth when she faces challenging events. She uses all her ‘mother force’ to combat multiple battles of her life. Many novels of Mahasweta Devi depict the harsh realities of life which a mother has to face in the society while bringing up her children.

Her most acclaimed novel *Mother of 1084* (trans. by Samik Bandyopadhyay) is based on Naxalite movement in Naxalbari area of North Bengal during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this novel, she has portrayed one of the most tumultuous times of Bengal in which distressed tribal communities and landless workers rebelled against the tortures and exploitation of governmental officials, landlords and moneylenders. Naxalite leaders want to uproot all causes of class-division; therefore, they advocate using violence against all those forces which divide human beings into classes. A group of young men, especially students who support Leninist and Maoist ideologies, takes up responsibility to change the social structure of the contemporary society. One of these revolutionaries is Brati (known in the government record as Corpse No. 1084) whose mother, Sujata Chatterjee, is trying to find out how her son had become a part of this movement and why he had to sacrifice his life for it.

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When Naxalism developed deep roots in Bengal, a considerable section of Bengalis found it helpful to uproot the existing inequalities of society. The movement became very popular among the students in Calcutta and a large lobby of intellectuals was very sympathetic towards the revolutionaries. The apparent reason behind the popularity of this movement was the dissatisfaction of people in government machineries as they felt that their problems are not being addressed properly due to the impotency of government and its multiple agencies. The novel, *Mother of 1084*, is set against the backdrop of the counter-rebellion or retaliation by the state machinery against the Naxalities. The state machinery of India brutally annihilated the students and their sympathizers alike and suppressed the whole movement. Almost more than 5000 students and intellectuals were killed under mysterious conditions in between 1970 to 1980 and a major part of an entire generation of revolutionaries was wiped out.

The novel, *Mother of 1084*, portrays the entire journey of evolution in the life of the mother, Sujata Chatterjee, after the pathetic killing of her son, Brati, during insurgency. Sujata loves and believes in her son to the extent that she never suspected any of his activities. She is absolutely shocked when she is suddenly called upon to recognize her son's dead body in the police morgue where she sees her son's mutilated body along with his other friends. It is here when one of the poignant moments comes when Sujata asks for the dead body of her son but she is denied. She realizes that her son's identity as a human being has been erased and now his dead body is given another dehumanized identity as corpse no. 1084. A mother's heart is torn apart when she seen such a miserable condition of her dead son. This compels people to feel that there still remain people like Brati who live their lives for a cause which is very objective in nature.

Sujata is a very conventional Indian woman who belongs to an affluent family of Calcutta. She works as a bank employee. She is married to Dibyanath Chatterjee who is a chartered account for the last twenty four years. He is one of those rich elites who look down upon women as well as the poor and those who fight for the rights of such marginalized sections of the society. Instead of recovering the dead body, the whole Chatterjee family except Sujata is engaged to save the honour of the family by using their money and power. No one asks what a mother wants. It becomes clear through the flashback memories of Sujata how she has been neglected throughout her life even by her own husband who goes to sleep with the typist girl of his office and deprives his wife of his love. She is usually abused because of one reason or the other. She has never been thought appropriate to furnish suggestions about serious family matters. So, this time when she demands her son's dead body, others in the family do not care to listen to her.

Sujata is a mother of four children; Joyti, Nipa, Tuli and Brati. Among these, Brati is the favorite of her mother whereas others love their father, money, prestige and boyfriends more than their mother. Her philandering husband also loves the material prosperity and

social prestige more than anything. In this house, only Brati and his mother believe in the bond of real relationships and this compels Sujata to explore more about the mission and motives of Brati's life. Her son's demise makes her trace those areas of human life that connects politics with the lives of an average human being. She keeps on asking multiple questions to herself about her son:

I was asleep as if nothing has happened. Why didn't I feel anything when he was dying? Did I know my son the way he was? ...What made him choose a path which has never related our family? (*Mother of 1084*)

Brati's involvement in the Naxalite movement was a kind of jolt for Sujata. For her, he still was a little child. She never realized that her little son had grown into a man with independent thoughts and strong views of his own. Brati's association with Naxalite movement had opened his eyes and he could now better understand various forms of suppression, oppression and exploitation of one by other. He knew it very well that his mother was a neglected woman in the house therefore; he tried to provide every kind of comfort to her. He could have also seen the decadent and defunct familial relationships which filled his mind with hatred. This was one of the reasons which prompted him to join the Naxalite movement as he did not find any other way to save himself and his mother from all structural inequalities of our society.

Sujata is an excellent example of those urban Indian women who want to bring up her children with care and affection. The socio-cultural milieu of Sujata in *Mother of 1084* is very different from other mother figures in Devi's stories. Her association with the upper class society becomes torturous as she is not given ample opportunities to mourn the death of her son. Her son's attachment with her grows stronger and stronger after his brutal killing because she now sees that Brati was like her, like a mother who cares for everyone, who wants to carry humanity a little ahead by demolishing the various walls between the people. She once says, "If Brati had been like Joyti, or a drunkard like Nipa's husband, Amit or a hardened fraud like Tony, or had run after the typists like father, he'd have belonged to their camp" (*Mother of 1084*). However, Brati does not belong to any of these and therefore; she belongs to his mother.

It is heart-wrenching to see how a mother responds her baby and protects it from all the odds of the world. Sujata becomes more aggrieved when she comes to know about the dark realities of the world in which her son had been living. Her inability to change the brutal systems to protect others' sons from being killed and its resultant restlessness worsens her condition even more. She knows that her son did not die a coward's death. Moreover, she knows it too that her son loved her unconditionally, experienced her plights and wanted to save her from the harsh realities of the world without even letting her know about it. This sense of being the mother of such a brave and sensitive son provides her strength to protest against each kind of oppression of marginalized sections of society. She now resists the

exploitative, hypocritical ways of her husband and denies accepting her inappropriate orders. The mother-son relationship becomes stronger after death than during life. In the course of the novel, the death of 1084 becomes a symbol of countless nameless young men and women who are killed by government machineries due to their alleged involvement in revolutionary activities during Naxalbari movement. Sujata too does not remain the mother of only Brati, but becomes the mother of all those men and women who sacrifice their lives for better human life on earth.

The death of Brati awakens her mother from the illusion of upper class cultured life. She now wants to discover what has happened to her son together with other comrades on the night of their brutal killing. She reads his books, notes, visits to his friends' houses and talks to Nandini, Brati's girlfriend to explore unknown territories of her son's life. It is Nandini, an active alive member of the movement who helps Sujata to meet to the soul of her dead son. In Nandini, Sujata finds a revolutionary who goes beyond her personal problems and become an uncompromising fighter against the atrocities of police and other government machineries.

Sujata meets Somu's mother who too is bearing the pangs of her son, Somu's death. The death of Somu has proved to be an irreparable loss for this family as the whole family was looking towards him for their future survival. The way, both the mother wail the demise of their sons is quite contradictory. This contradiction brings the multiple layers of class-division of the society on the surface. Sujata, to some extent, is able to hold her feelings in which she has been trained since her childhood whereas Somu's mother does not know about these complexities and cries uninhibitedly at the loss of her son. With the passage of the time, her plaintive loud crying has turned into sobbing for lifetime. She has to fight with the harsh circumstances of life after the death of her son. Her problems are far deeper than those of Sujata's life because she has to fight for her survival together with her daughters. For Somu's mother, there is no time to live in the past, a comfort which Sujata can avail. The novel captures the sad realities of the movement and comes face to face with her sense of estrangement from the double standards of bourgeois society to which she belongs.

At a certain point in the novel, Sujata suddenly clutches her stomach and wreaths in agony because her appendix bursts during her daughter's engagement ceremony. It is an epiphanic movement in her life. It seems that she wants to implore people to speak out against the injustices-done to the common masses, against the brutal killings of the youths in the hands of unreliable government machinery. The text mainly serves two purposes; one it represents an exceptionally atypical journey of a mother from demure, thoughtful, adoring to angry, confident, almost a rebel who now seeks justice for all. On her way to find out the reasons of her son's commitment for the revolutionary causes, she gets an opportunity to understand the exploitative systems of society and comes to know that she herself is alienated as a housewife and as a mother on account of the prevailing social and cultural values in contemporary society of urban Bengal. Secondly, it depicts her principle concern-the long age

oppression and exploitation of tribals and the landless peasants in rural areas despite the fact that she herself belonged to the educated, upper-class affluent family. The novel ends amidst the oppression and anguish, violence and vices, suppression and suffocation and more than these-with a ray of hope for better tomorrow, at the cost of many innocent as well as revolutionary lives.

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