

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* as a Journey of an Apolitical Mother

Sadhana Rengaswamy. R

Dr.S.Ambika

Research Scholar

Research Supervisor

Reg: No: 12070

S.T.Hindu College

S. T Hindu College

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam

Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli)

Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli)

Nagercoil

Nagercoil

Abstract

Mahasweta Devi is one of the most important writers writing in India today. she stands with few equals among today's Asian writers in the dedication and directness with which she has turned writing into a form of service to the people. Her writing is disturbing because it shows the reader her or his own true face. Her *Mother of 1084* analyzes the occurrences of failed Naxalite insurgency in Bengal in the 1970s. It shows the larger problem of the nation's suppression of any authentic form of subaltern insurgency. It's a saga of the Naxalite resistance in Bengal through the characters of Sujata and Nandini, her powerful exploration of subjectivity voiced through the female character. It's a tragedy of an apolitical mother. This paper explores how the Naxalite movement brings two subaltern mothers together instead of their class barriers which in turn lead to the awakening of Sujata.

Key words: Naxalite movement, subjectivity, marginalization

The word 'subaltern' refers to someone who belongs to the lowest strata of society. In South Asia, *Postcolonial Studies Group* has become a historical point in giving voice to marginalized women very particularly subaltern women.

The literature that Mahasweta Devi writes and the ideology which she espouses do not bear a conventionally 'reflectionist' relationship. The relationship is far more dynamic and dialectical. Devi's writing and working at the grass-roots are not complementary exercises; they are inevitably organic responses, which cannot be sequenced in easy cause – and – effect schema. Activism is her credo as a writer; it holds her vision, sustains and lends purpose to her literary works. It permeates her aesthetic imagination.

As a Third World Post-Colonial writer, she is not happy simply articulating mere nationalist concerns; her constituency is that of the subaltern. In her stories, Nationalist rhetoric is undone through subaltern local narratives of utter deprivation and exploitation. Her stories are no propagandistic illustrations of ideology; rather the situations speak for themselves, and as they evolve, ideology emanates from them as much as they themselves emanate from it. It is difficult to determine whether ideology precedes her writing, or it follows from whatever she eventually writes. The stories take off with a description of real details, and it is these details which seem to gravitate towards an ideological frame.

The Naxalite movement, a radical Marxist movement, marks a significant movement in the post-colonial history of West Bengal, as well as in the larger context of India. Beginning as an armed peasant movement in 1967 in the Naxalbari area of Northern West Bengal, the movement soon spread in different districts of West Bengal and several other states of India. In the spring of 1967 the peasants of Naxalbari, in West Bengal, aided by the intellectual Left staged a successful rebellion against the landlords, who were supported by the system and the establishment. The Naxalite movement spread to other parts as well. True to her claim of documenting histories, Mahasweta Devi bases several short stories on the theme of the Naxalbari movement. Her much celebrated *Mother of 1084* deals with the idealism and the selfless sacrifice

of the youth as opposed to the greed and selfishness of the upper middle-class gentry. Talking of her character Sujata, Mahasweta Devi says, “. . . I set an apolitical mother's quest to know her martyred Naxalite son, to know what he stood for; for she had not known the true Brati ever, as long as he had been alive. Death brings him closer to her through her quest” (*MO1084* xii).

In her study of Gender and Naxalism, Mallarika Sinha Roy says that though the Naxalite movement has been one of the well-studied political and social events in post-colonial West Bengal, the gender discrimination, particularly the history of women's participation, remains neglected in the historiography of the movement. Mahasweta Devi looks at the movement from the point of view of three women-the apolitical Sujata who belongs to the elite section of the society, Shomu's mother belonging to the lower economic strata and Nandini-Brati's comrade in arms and his love interest.

Devi also creates a situation where multiple voices and opinions can coexist apart from foregrounding gender. The novel aptly mirrors a mother's attempt to interpret her youngest son's association with the Naxalite movement. Inside the parameter of the events of a single day, through the reminiscence of Sujata, mother of the young idealist who is killed in police firing for the political cause of the movement the entire plot of the novel slowly unfolds.

Sujata Chatterjee, an urban woman and a demure wife, has so far accepted the hypocritical norms of the patriarchal society. It is only after her son Brati's death, which compels her to visit the police morgue to see her son's lifeless corpse number 1084, that she begins her personal; journey from an illusioned ignorance, submission, compromise into the realm of awakening and knowledge. Not only does she understand the ideology that snatched her son's life, but also rediscovers her own suppressed self-esteem and learns to assert it. Visiting Brati's

political comrade who survived the struggle and their families, she uncovers the face of her own alienation. The hypocrisy of the hierarchical societal orders her son violently protested against, both ideologically and politically, seems pointless and baseless to her, deserving to be questioned and challenged.

The waves of pain and nausea that envelope Sujata is as real as her inability to make peace with her social circumstances. Her body rebels against the injustice meted out to her son whose only fault lay in the fact that he was a dreamer. He dreamt of a free world for all. But in Sujata's household and by extension the upper-class elite, moral corruption has become a norm. Brati and the likes of him continue to be misfits: Sujata's quiet attainment of selfhood is a result of her meeting with Somu's mother and later with Nandini. It is only when she visits the ramshackle house where Brati had spent his last night, does Sujata realize the cause of his struggle. Somu's mother calls her 'Didi' or elder sister as a mark of respect for Sujata's social status. The class difference is so rigid that Sujata is forced to discontinue her visits yet Brati had managed to break out of the shackles of class and in this status-quoist society and it is where his fault lay.

Nandini, Brati's comrade in arms echoes his sentiments. It is from her that Sujata learns about the idealism of these youths. Years of torture by the police have rendered Nandini semi-blind yet it is through her eyes that Sujata learns about the movement.

A thousand-watt lamp glared at the naked eyes of the person being held in that room. The person in charge sat in the dark. Smoker or not, a cigarette glowed between his fingers. From time to time, the interrogator educated and sophisticated, could ask a civil and harmless question like 'oh, so you're

chatterjee's friend?' and clamp the burning cigarette to the skin of the face naked under the thousand-watt lamp. (MO1084 73)

Nandini also informs her how the state still continues to hound the Naxalites and the press continues to turn a blind eye. Nandini projects the true face of the society to Sujata. She says that they are denied of the simple facilities like printing press and newsprint but at the same time innumerable journals come out and they continue to come out and they express their sympathy towards the cause of the betrayal. But these people never realize that in the process they are betrayed. They just talk for the sake of talking. If they really know the cause and sympathize with them there will be no roundups, firing within the prisons, arrests and betrayal.

It is only after her meeting with Nandini that Sujata realizes the essence of Brati's struggle. Her search was to know the true causes for Brati's involvement in Naxalism. Through her attempt to reach the root of this cause, her own plight is unfolded, against which she emerges boldly. She realizes the falsities of the system. This enables her to voice the power system.

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