

Historical Realism in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother Of 1084*: A Study

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Abstract:

*After the Second World War (1939-1945) with the declined of empire, frustrated Europe began searching for an identity through dramas of all sorts of levels like "kitchen- sink drama", "absurd drama", "comedy of menace" and so on. The aims of these dramatists were to sensationalize, surprise, shock, to make fantasy or to accentuate the antagonism of the old and the young. The post- colonial authors in India, who were in search of both identity and artistic energy, took interest either in the ethnic and the folk or in the direct and explicit political conscious. Mahasweta Devi's twelve-act play **Mother of 1084**, originally titled "**Hajar Churashir Maa**," is a political analysis that lays behind the brutal massacre of **Brati Chatterjee** and his comrades. The killing of **Brati Chatterjee** and his comrades is a part of the organized brutality of the Naxalities in 1970-71, committed by the police, the party in power, hired goons , and even parties of the Left Establishment acting in unholy collusion. It was a phrase when the urban Naxalities were in utter disarray and retreat, and were entirely at the receiving end. In.the whole gamut of the play *Sujata*, the mother of corpse number-1084, is the most important character. Throughout the story she is presented as a strong woman who fought against the odds. *Sujata* finally understands and accepts the dynamics of grief, ultimate loss and unbearable pain caused by the premature death of her younger son **Broti**. She firmly believes that her son **Broti** was not a criminal; he only refused to accept 'the code of decadent society.' She realizes that "death is the only*

*punishment for those who lose faith in the system.” After **Brati's** death her life is absolutely empty, with no one to live for any more.*

Key words: apolitical mother, noblest idea, Naxalite movement, betrayal, encounters, brutality, nexus, Criminal, ideology.

Mother of 1084 is a political analysis in the 1970s West Bengal. Here Mahasweta Devi does not give any historical account of the Naxalite movement in West Bengal that broke out in the tribal region of Naxalbari, a remote and unknown region in Northern West Bengal in May 1967 when a policeman Sonam Wagdi was killed by armed tribals. The police force in retaliation fired upon the villagers killing nine innocent villagers including six women and two children. The regional movement grew and spread fast, drawing in a wide assortment of elements, including a considerable section of urban youths specially students. *Brati Chatterjee* and his comrades were such students who joined the Naxalite Movement. But with inadequate organizational control and sharp differences in the leadership over both ideological and strategic issues, mounting persecution of the Govt. and above all the establishedment Left's use of state machinery, the movement collapsed in 1974 or so.

Since Naxalite Movement was a bone shaking contemporary movement Mahasweta Devi, as a eye witness and without being indebted to anybody, made an attempt to record the events in her play *Mother of 1084* . As an eye witness and a writer of the most important movement of post- independent West Bengal she maintained two conditions- i) She liked to be true to the historical Naxalite movement in the urban background particularly in Calcutta, and ii) She maintained the demands of art. Instead of presenting loosely knit events of the Naxalite movement of the 1970s she focused her attention on an exemplary integrity, selflessness and the guts of *Brati Chatterjee* and his comrades who died for a cause. The case was

somewhat different .As she saw history in the making she decided as a writer to document it as did Samaresh Bosu, a great Bengali writer, in his short story "*Saheder Maa*" i.e. "*Mother of Martyr.*" As a writer she felt a commitment to her times, to mankind and to herself. In the Naxalite movement she saw a further extension of the movements of the past, especially the "*Tebhaga*", Kakdwip in West Bengal and "*Telengana*" in Andhra Pradesh uprisings. But from an artistic point of view she set an apolitical mother's (Sujata, *Brati Chatterjee's* mother) quest to know her martyred naxalite son *Brati Chatterjee*, to know what he stood for. Death brings *Brati Chatterjee* closer to her through her quest. Again death brings Sujata , Nandini and Somu's mother closer ,whereas death of *Brati Chatterjee* alienates Sujata from her husband , her other living children and above all from her own so called elite society which always betrays common human values.

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* is a story of a grievous mother Sujata, whose younger son *Brati* was brutally killed by the state because of his ideology, and the corpse number-1084 was kept in the morgue. The news of *Brati's* and his comrades' encountered death were reached to their addresses. Dabyanath, the father of *Brati Chatterjee*, the naxalist rebel, who had the nexus with *Saroj Pal*, the *D.C.D.D.*, requested him to hush up the identity of *Brati Chatterjee* in order to keep his social prestige. Even he did not go to the police station to receive the dead body of her son. Mr. Dabyanath had succeeded in his mission. Next day all the newspapers reported the death of four Naxalites, but the name of *Brati Chatterjee* was not mentioned in any of the reports. But as a mother Sujata could not keep herself aloof from such grievous event, she to go to the police station to identify and received the dead body of her son *Brati Chatterjee*. But the irony is that her husband did not allow her to do so: rather she was wrongly treated by her husband: even she was not allowed to use their car to go to the police station. Sujat was shocked seeing such behavior of her husband. While

she was eager to identify herself with her son *Brati* the other members of her family comprehendingly try to alienate themselves from *Brati*. Being the mother of a rebel Sujata was not allowed to receive the dead body of *Brati*. Being a mother of a rebel she was denied the right of fixing up the date of her youngest daughter Tuli's engagement even after the two years of *Brati's* death. The whole attitude of the members of her family and even the neighbors towards her consists of a feeling of doubt and disgusted mingled with a predominance of the feeling of authority. She discovered that she was the mother of *Brati* only, and she was an alien to her family. She had been living in the house just like a mother of a criminal. The conflict between Sujata and the members of her family was as if the conflict between the coercive mini state and the loving and bereaved mother. At the end of the play Sujata, as mother, has great matured: society above all his own family taught her a lot. She had grown in stature mentally and morally: "Where's the place where, there's no killer, no bullets, no prison, no vans." (Act-xii)² Her appendix may burst, but her voice, the voice of a bereaved mother would suppress by the brutal voice of power.

After *Brati's* death Sujata has been living in her own house just like an outsider. But an awakening comes with Nandini's presence. She realizes that she has always been a non-entity in the house and that she has been rendering behind obedience to convention and custom all these years. Because of Nandini it is now drawn upon her mind that the members of her family are not those she had thought them to be. She has a closer affinity with *Brati*, the convict no.1084 only. She realizes that the art of survival of her family is the systematic denial of *Brati* and her defiance of the family. The portrayal of Nandini means an irremediable conflict between the woman and exiting bourgeois society. She is a strong and well-integrated young woman and has the instinctive ability to make the right choice. She is able to express herself fully although she is pushed to one side, declared incompetent and restricted by customs,

conventions and above all politics. She denies the coercive authority. She is the symbol of the noblest idea of womanhood in the politically controversial world. She wisely explains and clarifies the issues of rebellion, power, betrayal and also revolutionary optimism: "All human loyalties had dissolved by 1970. I wonder how we could be unaware that they could betray us to kill us...we heard that behind an assassination there was someone closely related to the victim- a father, a brother, a rebellion, a friend or an acquaintance... Arrests? Torture? Murder in the name of encounters? A whole generation between sixteen and forty is being wiped out." (Act.ix) ²

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* is a story of Sujata's multiple oppressions within a stifling, familial, patriarchal and feudal order. Turning his back upon this decadent and defunct code, Brati decides to join the Naxalite movement sweeping through the state of West Bengal in late 1960s and early 1970s. His commitment to a particular ideology, wrong or right, has made him rebellious against the state. He has forgotten his familial code. Unaware of his secret mission, Sujata is not even able to dissuade her son from taking the plunge. Dabyanath Chatterjee accuses Sujata for misleading their son Brati, which has led him to become a naxalite rebel. The egoistic nature of the father is understood in his words: "Bad Company, bad friends, the mother's influence." Mahasweta Devi herself explained: "Sujata in *Mother of 1084*, is essentially apolitical. Yet as she reaches towards an explanation of the death of her son (Brati), killing in the seventies (1970s), she too finds the entire social system, cadaverous, and as she takes a closer look at the society, she finds no legitimacy for his death." Mahasweta Devi begins with the exposure of the morality of Chatterjee family, takes Sujata out of its confines to let her meet and interact with other like Nandini or Sumo's mother; Mahasweta Devi brings her back to the family at the end and then lets her make a last desperate effort to accept its norms and adjust to it before she collapses. Her son, *Brati's* death

brings a revolutionary change in her thought and character. “Sujata is transformed into a morally assertive, politically enlightened and a socially defiant individual”¹⁰.

The whole play centers around Sujata, the mother of corpse number -1084. Mahasweta Devi presents Sujata as a symbol of the noblest idea of motherhood. Sujata is never politically ambitious as was Lady Macbeth who might sacrifice her own child for political purpose. She is not like Sophocles's Antigone, who defied the frowns of a monarch and upheld the banner of justice. In point of personal bereavement Sujata has some similarity with Maurya of J.M.Synge's “Riders to the Sea.” Like Maurya, Sujata is not a mere private mother; she is a universal mother like Mrs. Meldon in St. John Ervine's One-Act-Play “*Progress*”, whose child becomes a victim. Like Eddie, Broti was an urban student. As Eddie had joined The Second World War, Broti had joined the Naxalite movement in Calcutta in the 1970s. Sujata can not forget the dastardly killing of her son Broti because of an ultimate act of betrayal. She is earnest in finding a moral rationale for her son's rebellion: “If Broti had been like Jyoti, or a drunkard like Neepa's husband Amit, or a husband fraud like Tony, or had run after the typists like his father, he'd have belonged to their camp.” (Act- iii)² Sujata is a woman on the wrong side of fifty. Being a patient of acute appendicitis and being a housewife without her own earning she is entirely dependent on her husband Yet as a mother she maintains her motherliness in all sorts' of opposition. It is Sujata's affection for Brati which alone sustains her dreary existence. Broti's murder makes her colourless, lightless and joyless. She never moves to a world of fantasy nor does she preach sermons on political follies and vices as Mrs. Kapadia does: “The Swami says, there's no death. It's only the body that dies, the soul lives on.” (Act-xii)²

Sujata never takes the task of lashing at contemporary political events. She faces the Dabyanath- Saroj Pal nexus, the corrupt power, authority in state, and authority in family. She

learns that Saroj Pal, the D.C.D.D., is the mastermind behind the annihilation of *Brati Chatterjee* and his comrades. For Sujata, the black car and the threat of the state violence in the defense of vested interests bear the political shock that drives Sujata to that final long-drawn out, heartrending poignant cry: "You can not be on the run longer Brati... corpses, stiffened corpses, all of you!...Did Brati die so you could carry on in your cadaverous existence ... Do the living die, only to leave the world to the died to enjoy? No, Never!" (Act-xii)² .Sujata finally understands and accepts the dynamics of grief, ultimate loss and unbearable pain caused by the premature death of her younger son Broti. She firmly believes that her son Broti was nota criminal; he only refused to accept 'the code of decadent society.' She realizes that "death is the only punishment for those who lose faith in the system." (P.27)² Now she herself says "now that Brati is dead. I, too, wouldn't like to go living." After Brati's death her life is absolutely empty, with no one to live for any more.

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* is a social document of the Naxalite movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s West Bengal. Mahasweta Devi, in an interview in 1983, points to this movement as the first major event that she felt "an urge and an obligation to document."¹¹ As an eye-witness she saw exemplary integrity, selflessness to fight or die for a cause. Mahasweta Devi in her story has tries to visualize the reality of 1970s West Bengal in an artistic way keeping the reality alive. She highlights the social impact of the movement and presents the reality in a humanitarian point of views. Here he puts the question marks on the role of society and the Government machinery for the sprout of the Naxalite movement in 1970s West Bengal. She also criticizes the way of controlling and demolishing the underground movement. Both as a writer and as a social activist, Mahasweta Devi has always positioned herself neither fully within the domain of her 'bhadrakok,' bourgeoisie background nor within the space of extremists. She

has always tried to negotiate the troubling questions arising from the clash and conflict between the familiar, civilized society and the state. She criticizes the contemporary society with its barbarian outlook and lack of popular sympathy for the rebellions.

Methodology:

The work is mainly based on secondary source of information, such as published documents, books, autobiography, journal, etc. My methodology in this paper is partly structuralist and partly post-structuralist, as I approach narratives first to construct and classify and then deconstruct them.

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