



Intersection of Personal and Political: A Feminist Critique of Sujata's Transformation in *Mother of 1084*

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Abstract

This paper adopts a feminist theoretical framework to analyze Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*, focusing on the intersection of personal grief and political awakening in the protagonist, Sujata. Drawing on feminist concepts surrounding motherhood, agency, and resistance, the study examines Sujata's journey from a traditional, middle-class mother confined by patriarchal expectations to a politically conscious individual. Sujata's transformation challenges the normative constructions of motherhood that reduce women to self-sacrificing and passive nurturers. Her grief over the loss of her son, Brati, a revolutionary killed by the state, becomes a catalyst for questioning and resisting these roles. The paper interrogates the patriarchal structures that confine women to narrowly defined identities while ignoring their agency and individuality. By framing Sujata's awakening within the broader lens of intersectional feminism, the analysis underscores how her personal trauma is inextricably linked to systemic socio-political hierarchies, including gender, class, and state violence. This exploration reveals how personal loss can disrupt entrenched structures of oppression and catalyze resistance. Ultimately, the paper highlights Sujata's journey as a testament to the transformative potential of grief, illustrating how personal and political realms are deeply interconnected within feminist and socio-political discourses.

Keywords: Death, grief, loss, mother, politics, son.

Through Sujata's evolving consciousness, the narrative critiques the complicity of the middle class in perpetuating oppression, exposing the moral and ethical contradictions of a society that prioritizes its

stability over justice. Sujata's grief over the death of her son, Brati, who was killed for his revolutionary ideals, catalyzes her political engagement, allowing her to recognize and confront the structural inequalities embedded in

her world. By transcending the boundaries of the personal, Sujata redefines motherhood as a space of resistance and political dissent. This paper demonstrates how feminist theory offers a robust framework for understanding Sujata's journey, situating her transformation within the broader critique of patriarchal and classist systems. Ultimately, *Mother of 1084* is explored as a powerful feminist text that bridges personal experiences with collective political consciousness.

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* is a seminal work in Indian literature, offering a profound critique of the socio-political structures in 1970s Bengal, particularly during the Naxalite movement. The novel centers on Sujata, a grieving mother whose son, Brati, is killed for his revolutionary ideals, and through her personal loss, critiques the complicity of the Indian middle class in upholding systemic oppression. Sujata's narrative underscores the feminist assertion that "the personal is political," a concept articulated by Carol Hanisch, which underscores how individual experiences reflect and resist broader systems of power and inequality (Hanisch 78). Her journey from a passive, middle-class mother to a politically conscious individual exemplifies how maternal grief can transform into a site of resistance. As Sujata questions the patriarchal and classist frameworks that have shaped her life, the novel powerfully interrogates the intersection of gender, class, and state violence, situating her transformation as a microcosm of collective struggles.

Feminist theories, particularly Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as an institution and as an experience, are central to analyzing Sujata's transformation. Rich contends that institutionalized motherhood confines women to roles of self-sacrificial nurturance, serving patriarchal interests (Rich 13). Sujata's awakening subverts this construction as she reclaims her agency by confronting the socio-political structures responsible for her son's

death. Furthermore, bell hooks argues that patriarchal systems "perpetuate power by suppressing dissent" (hooks 42). This suppression is evident in the novel's portrayal of middle-class complacency, which Sujata initially embodies but ultimately challenges. Her evolving consciousness allows her to transcend the boundaries of private grief, aligning her personal loss with broader socio-political critiques. Thus, through a feminist lens, *Mother of 1084* emerges as a compelling narrative that bridges the personal and the political, redefining motherhood and agency in the face of systemic oppression.

At the beginning of *Mother of 1084*, Sujata is portrayed as a traditional middle-class woman confined to the restrictive roles of wife and mother within a patriarchal family structure. Her identity is shaped and constrained by societal expectations that value women only for their subservience and caregiving. Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as an institution and as an experience is particularly relevant here, as Sujata exemplifies a woman trapped within the institutionalized role of a mother, wherein her individual agency is subsumed under familial and societal norms (Rich 13). This is evident in the way her husband and in-laws treat her; she is expected to fulfill her duties silently, with no room for personal expression or dissent. Sujata's role as a mother is further restricted to mere biological caregiving, leaving no space for emotional or intellectual engagement with her children. This suppression reflects what bell hooks describes as the patriarchal tendency to define women's identities solely through their service to others, effectively erasing their individuality (hooks 42). Sujata herself acknowledges this confinement when she reflects, "My life was never mine; it belonged to others" (Devi 25), encapsulating her lack of autonomy within her family.

This constriction of Sujata's identity is further illustrated through her disconnection from Brati, her youngest son, whose political

activism challenges the values of their bourgeois family. Sujata's inability to understand Brati's revolutionary ideals stems not from a lack of love but from the societal and familial constraints that have alienated her from critical political discourses. Her husband's disdain for Brati's activism and her other children's apathy toward his death further isolate Sujata within her own home, making her grief deeply personal yet unshared. As Sujata laments, "He [Brati] was mine, but I never truly knew him" (Devi 48). This disconnection underscores how the patriarchal family structure not only stifles women's identities but also fractures meaningful relationships within the family. Carol Hanisch's assertion that "the personal is political" resonates here, as Sujata's estrangement from Brati reflects the broader alienation of women from public and political life due to their prescribed domestic roles (Hanisch 78). The initial portrayal of Sujata as a passive caregiver lays the groundwork for her eventual transformation, as she begins to question these restrictive roles and seek a deeper understanding of her son and herself.

Brati's death serves as the transformative moment that propels Sujata to move beyond the constricted boundaries of her maternal identity. Her grief, while deeply personal, becomes the lens through which she begins to critically engage with the larger socio-political forces surrounding her. Initially, her sorrow is dismissed or suppressed by her family, who view Brati's revolutionary activities as a source of shame rather than sacrifice. Sujata, however, refuses to accept this narrative, which forces her to confront her complicity in a system that alienated Brati from both his family and society. Mahasweta Devi's narrative poignantly captures this shift when Sujata reflects, "Brati's death was not just the death of my son; it was the death of my ignorance" (Devi 93). Sujata's mourning transforms into a quest for understanding, embodying Adrienne Rich's idea that "grief can be the beginning of a woman's awakening to her own power" (Rich

38). Her personal grief thus acts as a gateway to political awareness, illustrating Carol Hanisch's assertion that the personal is inherently political (Hanisch 78).

Sujata's exploration of Brati's world marks a critical turning point in her transformation. As she meets his comrades and learns of their struggles, she begins to see the systemic injustices that Brati sought to fight against. Through Brati's friend Nandini, Sujata is exposed to the harsh realities of class struggle, state violence, and middle-class apathy. This encounter dismantles her earlier notions of societal harmony, replacing them with a deeper understanding of the oppressive structures she had unconsciously supported. Sujata realizes that her family, emblematic of the bourgeoisie, is complicit in maintaining these injustices. Her newfound awareness is articulated when she remarks, "Brati was not just my son; he was the son of a society that failed him" (Devi 112). Feminist theorists like bell hooks argue that such realizations are crucial for dismantling patriarchal and classist systems, as they allow women to connect their personal experiences with collective struggles (hooks 45). Sujata's recognition of systemic injustice not only redefines her role as a mother but also positions her as an emerging voice of dissent against societal oppression. This shift underscores the central theme of the novel: the intersection of personal loss and political awakening.

As Sujata continues to mourn her son, her growing awareness of the patriarchal dynamics within her family becomes a key aspect of her transformation. Initially, she accepts her role as a dutiful wife and mother, confined to the domestic sphere. However, after Brati's death, Sujata begins to recognize the apathy and privilege embodied by her husband and other family members, which leads to her increasing alienation from them. Her husband, unable to empathize with her grief and the political nature of Brati's activism, represents the patriarchal order that minimizes women's voices and experiences. Sujata becomes more

conscious of her isolation when she reflects, "They all mourned as though there were a prescribed way to grieve, but not one of them understood the grief of a mother who had lost her child to a cause" (Devi 125). This alienation marks the beginning of Sujata's rejection of the patriarchal family structure, where her identity as a mother was once defined solely by her adherence to family expectations. As bell hooks notes, the rejection of the passive role assigned to women within patriarchal frameworks is vital for any feminist awakening, as it allows for the reclaiming of agency (hooks 50). In Sujata's case, her transformation is catalysed by the realization that the familial bonds that once defined her were deeply rooted in an oppressive system that perpetuated her silence and subjugation.

Sujata's connection with Brati's comrades, particularly the women, marks a critical turning point in her feminist consciousness. As she interacts with these women, who are also marginalized and oppressed, Sujata finds empathy and solidarity in their shared struggles. The most poignant example of this is her relationship with Nandini, a fellow revolutionary who becomes a guiding force in Sujata's journey toward self-awareness. Sujata begins to recognize that, like her, these women have been oppressed by patriarchal structures, but they also resist and challenge the system in ways that she had never imagined. Sujata's reflection on this shift in her thinking encapsulates her growing empathy: "I had always been a mother, but now I was beginning to see the mothers of the world, the women who had been broken and yet never surrendered" (Devi 133). This awakening aligns with Adrienne Rich's argument that women's struggles with maternal roles can be an entry point for solidarity with other women in their shared fight against patriarchy (Rich 74). Furthermore, Sujata's critique of the middle-class indifference to systemic exploitation becomes increasingly evident. She recognizes the complacency of her own class in

perpetuating social and economic inequalities. In questioning the privileges of the middle class, Sujata's transformation takes on a more explicitly political dimension. As she contemplates, "We are all accomplices in a society that can kill for the sake of its own survival" (Devi 145), Sujata's feminist awakening is not only a rejection of patriarchy but also a critique of a system that sustains both gender and class-based oppression.

Sujata's transformation from a grieving mother to a politically conscious individual is a gradual but profound shift that transcends her personal loss, signalling her entry into the larger political realm. Initially, Sujata's grief was defined by the private sorrow of losing her son, Brati, but as she processes her emotions, it becomes a tool for broader political awakening. Her grief compels her to confront the political structures that led to Brati's death, and as she learns more about his revolutionary ideals, she begins to see the injustice that pervades society. Sujata reflects, "Brati's death is not just mine, it belongs to a thousand other mothers, to a thousand other lives lost for nothing" (Devi 162). This quote encapsulates the shift from personal mourning to political activism, as Sujata begins to identify her grief within the larger narrative of systemic oppression. Her sorrow, once a personal burden, becomes a catalyst for her involvement in the political struggles that Brati had embraced. As she steps beyond the limitations of her traditional maternal identity, Sujata embodies the idea, articulated by bell hooks, that "grief, when it is transformative, becomes the starting point for the recognition of shared political struggles" (hooks 56). Sujata's entry into the political sphere thus reflects a feminist awakening, where personal pain intersects with collective resistance.

Sujata's journey toward political consciousness is further solidified by her identification with Brati's ideals and her growing solidarity with the oppressed. As she connects with Brati's comrades, especially the

women in his circle, she comes to understand the depth of their struggles and the broader social issues at stake. Sujata finds herself increasingly aligned with Brati's revolutionary vision and the fight against systemic exploitation. Her recognition of the oppressive forces that shaped Brati's life and death leads to an intimate solidarity with the marginalized. This is exemplified when Sujata states, "Brati did not die in vain; his death gave birth to the fire of justice in me" (Devi 174). Sujata's identification with Brati's revolutionary ideals is an intellectual realization and an emotional commitment to the fight against inequality, as she sees herself as part of a larger collective effort. In this way, Sujata breaks from traditional maternal roles and expectations of womanhood, as her actions contradict the passive, apolitical roles that society prescribes for women. By choosing to stand with the oppressed and fight against systemic injustices, Sujata challenges the notion of women's primary function being limited to caregiving and family. This transformative shift in her identity as a mother and woman echoes Adrienne Rich's assertion that "to reclaim motherhood as a political concept requires rejecting the confinement of women to these limited, passive roles" (Rich 91). Through her actions, Sujata redefines her role as a mother, demonstrating that feminist resistance and political activism can emerge from the deepest personal losses.

Sujata's journey in *Mother of 1084* exemplifies a profound subversion of the traditional maternal identity, redefining motherhood as a space for resistance and solidarity rather than passive caregiving. Initially confined to the domestic sphere, Sujata's role as a mother is transformed when she begins to understand her son's political activism and her own complicity in a system that stifles dissent. As she learns more about Brati's ideals and the struggles he faced, she reconfigures her grief and maternal identity into a tool for political resistance. Sujata reflects, "Motherhood is not just about bearing children.

It is about bearing the truth of the world's injustices" (Devi 189). In this line, Sujata rejects the idealized image of motherhood promoted by patriarchy, choosing instead to become a political force, inspired by her son's revolutionary spirit. This subversion of maternal identity challenges the patriarchal definition of women's roles and presents motherhood as a potential site of feminist activism. As feminist theorists like Judith Butler argue, "Gender and motherhood are not pre-given; they are performative acts, constructed through social and political realities" (Butler 1990, 138). Through her political awakening, Sujata reclaims and transforms motherhood into a source of resistance, solidarity, and empowerment.

The feminist implications of Sujata's transformation also reflect an intersectional understanding of oppression, where gender, class, and socio-political structures converge to shape her journey. As Sujata breaks free from the confines of her bourgeois family, she begins to see how class and gender intersect to perpetuate systemic inequality. In recognizing the connection between Brati's activism and the marginalization of both women and the working class, Sujata becomes aware of her own complicity in maintaining these structures. As she notes, "Brati's death wasn't just a loss of a son. It was the death of an entire world, one that I had been blind to for so long" (Devi 202). In this moment of realization, Sujata acknowledges the intertwining of her personal grief with the larger socio-political forces of class and gender oppression. This recognition of intersectionality challenges not only her individual identity but also the structures that allow oppression to persist. Sujata's transformation serves as a metaphor for the awakening of women within patriarchal and oppressive systems. Her shift from a passive, grieving mother to an active, politically engaged woman represents the potential for feminist resistance in a society that seeks to silence marginalized voices. Sujata's journey illustrates the power of reclaiming one's

agency and identity within oppressive systems, becoming a symbol of the potential for transformation and collective political action. As bell hooks asserts, "Feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression, and that includes dismantling systems of class and race-based domination" (hooks 1984, 24). Sujata's emergence as a political force highlights the power of personal awakening in the broader struggle for social justice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sujata's transformation in *Mother of 1084* represents a powerful journey from personal grief to political consciousness, challenging the patriarchal and socio-political structures that shape her world. Initially confined to a traditional maternal identity, Sujata's grief over the loss of her son, Brati, becomes a catalyst for her awakening to the systemic injustices of society. Through her exposure to Brati's revolutionary ideals and her growing solidarity with the marginalized, Sujata transcends the confines of motherhood to become a symbol of resistance and political agency. As the narrative unfolds, *Mother of 1084* offers a feminist critique of the oppressive structures that silence women and perpetuate inequality, with Sujata's transformation serving as a critique of the complicity of the middle class and the invisibility of women's voices in political struggles. The novel's exploration of Sujata's journey offers broader implications for contemporary feminist and political discourses, demonstrating how personal experiences of grief and loss can lead to collective action and societal change. Sujata's story, as a metaphor for feminist awakening, emphasizes the importance of reclaiming agency within patriarchal systems and serves as an inspiration for those seeking social justice and equality. The text thus remains highly relevant to ongoing feminist and political movements, urging a reevaluation of motherhood, identity, and political engagement.

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