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THE PERSECUTION OF THE INNOCENT SUBALTERN ON MAHASWETA DEVI'S NOVEL
IN *MOTHER OF 1084*

G.VENKATA MADHAVI

Research Scholar, Dept of English, SPMVV
Tirupathi, India



G.VENKATA MADHAVI

ABSTRACT

Mother of 1084 was initially written as a novel, *Hazar Churashi Ki Ma*, in Bengali and emerged in the special autumn festival issue of the periodical, *Prasad*, in 1973. Later it was translated into several India languages. The novel *Mother of 1084* brought her prestigious Jnanpith and Magsaysay Awards for literature. In the novel she portrays the Naxalite movement in its urban phase in the seventies. She emphasizes that in this movement she saw ideal integrity, selflessness and audacity to die for a cause. She determined as a writer it would be her mission to document it, thinking she saw history in the making. The novel is measured a considerable milestone in her literary career, a watershed novel both in terms of approach and substance, and in expressions of language and style. *Mother of 1084* focuses on the psychological and emotional crisis of a mother who awakens one morning to the heart-rending news that her dear son is lying dead in the police morgue, and is humiliated to a mere numeral – corpse No. 1084. This chapter focuses how mother struggles to understand her Naxalite son's revolutionary commitment; she begins to distinguish her own estrangement, as a woman and wife, from the complacent, hypocritical, bourgeois society her son had rebelled against.

Key words: periodical, crisis, integrity, rebelled, hypocritical.

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focuses on the psychological and emotional crisis of a mother who awakens one morning to the heart-rending news that her dear son is lying dead in the police morgue, and is humiliated to a mere numeral – corpse No. 1084. This chapter focuses how mother struggles to understand her Naxalite son's revolutionary commitment; she begins to distinguish her own estrangement, as a woman and wife, from the complacent, hypocritical, bourgeois society her son had rebelled against. Mahasweta points out: "I set an a political mother's quest to know her martyred Naxalite son, to know what he stood for; for she had not known true Brati ever, as long as he had been alive. (Devi, xii)

Mahasweta Devi dramatized the novel in 1972-73 when the young actor-director, Asit Bose,

was planning to stage it. Mahasweta's script, however, has never been staged though there have been productions of several safe and neutral dramatizations of the novel itself, most of them in Hindi. Unfortunately, these dramatizations fail to catch the essence of Mahasweta's writing. As Samik Bandyopadhyay observes:

The productions have actually represented the Establishment's endeavour to absorb the exposure with which Mahasweta Devi's novel and play challenged them. The play lends itself to the commercial distortions, even though its naturalistic method gave it a dimension that was beyond the reach of the experimental theatre committed to social comment. (Devi x)

The English translation by Samik Bandyopadhyay, often regarded as a communist manifesto, somewhat closely captures the spirit of the original. Set in urban Bengal, the play realistically portrays the climatic phase of the annihilation of the leaders of the masses and its aftermath during 1970s. Keeping out of view the economic and social exploitation in rural Bengal that had drawn landless peasants and tribal to the Naxalite Movement, a process which she explores in depth in her work written soon after *Mother of 1084*, especially in *Agnigarbha*, *Chotti Munda O Tar Teer* and *Sri Sri Ganesh Mahima*.

Mahasweta Devi here "concentrates on the reactions of a cross section of survivors, both those who bear the scars and wounds of those horrible days, and those who had lived through the days of violence in simulated insularity" (Devi xi).

The years 1970-72 witnessed the rise of Naxalite movement in West Bengal. The Naxalites raised their voice against the established order, and started fighting for the cause of the poor, exploited by the landlords, industrialists and bureaucrats. The oppressive and inflexible attitude of these high-headed men forced a group of young men to take up the cudgels against them. The revolt of the farmers of Naxalbari added fuel to the smoldering sense of resentment against capitalist economy. The pique and rancour spread like wild fire among the people of the adjoining areas. They were not only peeved, but they felt aghast at the fact that the different political parties and intellectuals tacitly agreed to

such tyranny and oppression. The influx of refugees from Bangladesh further aggravated the situation. In fact, the intellectuals seemed to be more concerned about the Bangladesh problem than the one ravaging the people within the country.

The indignant protest against the authoritarian system was ruthlessly handled by the government. The upper class remained smugly indifferent. They were not sympathetic towards the cause. They had neither the time nor the taste to pay attention. However the socialist ideology of the movement attracted many young men, both from the higher and the lower ranks of society. Their minds were fired by the splints of idealism. They believed that the revolution would give rise to a new era, would herald in a glorious dawn where inequality would fail to exist.

A revolutionary zeal set in. Vexed at the uprising, the government attempted to curb the movement at an early stage. Police force was used rampantly. This gave rise to violence. Disgruntled parties tried to oust each other. In the process, there was a turmoil in society which was caught in this general riotous turbulence. *Mother of 1084* gives a glimpse of this upheaval that affected the mood of the times. In an interview with Samik Bandyopadhyay in April 1983, Mahasweta Devi herself admitted:

The Naxalite Movement between the late sixties and early seventies, with its urban phase climaxing in 1970-71, was the first major event after I had become a writer that I felt an urge and an obligation to document. (Devi viii)

The unrestrained lawlessness is hinted. The obstreperous condition is subtly brought out through an incident that changes the lives of the protagonist and the people who are still capable of feeling in the claustrophobic environment. The playwright makes the passage from writing historic and domestic fiction to depicting the life-like situations in the contemporary society. As Sujit Mukherjee rightly states, Mahasweta Devi turns, with *Mother of 1084* "to recording the present instead of reconstructing the past" (Devi vii). It is a typical play of documentation in which she seeks the roots of the "revolutionary fervour" of the urban

rebels "in their discontent with a system that upheld a corrupt and insensitive establishment both in the family and in the State" (Bandyopadhyay and Chakravorty vii).

In the play, Mahasweta Devi actually deals with an immediate past event in order to comment on the present as a cautionary tale universalizing human experience - an experience which drove many a mother and son to martyrdom. Though the play, at one level, reads like a mere account of the inhuman suppression of the Naxalite revolt in Bengal, it is a tragedy of an 'apolitical' mother who awakens one day to a greater truth and dies a martyr.

The realistic surface details such as the mass killing of the young activists, the torture scene and the elaborate party scene are provided only to enable us to penetrate that surface to the hidden truth beneath.

Mahasweta Devi moves away from her recurring theme of suppressed tribal characters in the rural settings and moves to the metropolis. She focuses on the elite, the hollowness and insensitivity of the upper middle class, their sophistication devoid of humanism and their blindness to whatever is happening around them is projected in a very natural milieu. The play enacts a single day in the life of the principal character. Sujata, the mother of corpse number 1084, hails from a fairly affluent middle class family.

Though she is a sensitive wife and a loving mother, she is a stranger in her own household where she is reduced to a mere cog. On the contrary, she feels at home in the company of her younger son, Brati Chatterjee, who, unlike her other children, is a man of ideals. And it is his life and activities that Sujata fails to understand which add to the tragic interest of the play.

After Brati's death, his mother Sujata journeys into the past and undergoes a process of self-introspection and wonders whether she herself or her family members or the society is responsible for his death. As she seeks for an explanation of the death of her son, she too finds that the entire social system is cadaverous and as she takes a closer look at the society, she finds no legitimacy for his death. As she seeks for an explanation of the death of her

son, she too finds that the entire social system is cadaverous and as she takes a closer look at the society, she finds no legitimacy for his death.

Sujata discovers that Brati had rebelled because he was not happy with the way things were. He found that hypocrisy and corruption was rampant throughout society - in the administration, in the police, in the politics, in cultural-intellectual establishment and in fact, in every individual belonging to a particular class. He had lost faith in the social system itself which did not care for moral and human values, he wondered why only the corrupt and immoral people occupy the highest position in the society and people who care for morality and their country are killed.

Exactly two years after the death of her favourite son, Brati, coinciding with his birthday, Sujata gets to know of the facts behind his sacrifice. As Sujata probes deeper into the causes of her son's death, she realizes that the killers in the society, those who adulterated food, drugs and baby food, had every right to live, the leaders who led the people to face the guns of the police and found themselves the safety shelter under police protection had every right to live but Brati and his friends, who wanted to reform the society had no right to live. She wonders whether her son or his killers are criminals and discovers that his son was the criminal because he had lost faith in this Indian society ruled by profit mad businessmen and leaders blinded by self-interest and protested against injustice.

The learning process continues till the end of the play involving her in a series of encounters with the people whose cause Brati championed. The mother, Sujata becomes aware that death was the sentence reserved for every one of them, for all those who had rejected a society of spineless opportunist timeservers masquerading as artists, writers and intellectuals. The men who rejected the Parties of Establishment were killed in a ruthless manner and to kill these faithless men one did not need any special sanction from the court of law or the courts of justice.

At the end of the play Sujata, shorn of all prejudices, finds herself drifting towards a kinship with her son's ideology as she bursts out angrily at

the apathy of the audience. Divided into twelve scenes, *Mother of 1084* is a neatly structured play beginning with the identification of Corpse no. 1084 and moving on to Sujata's discovery of Brati. Her passionate appeal to the people forms the ending of the play.

Mahasweta Devi moves the time-scale backward and forward by presenting the past and the present in alternating scenes, very much in the manner of a memory play. The stage is free of superfluous theatrical properties which give the playwright great freedom to present different situations more by suggestion than by scenic displays.

Furthermore, it allows her to be more faithful in her portrayal of the contemporary realities. Besides, the playwright uses the 'tape' to great advantage. The tape as a device not only assures the smooth flow of the action in the play but also provides an alternative to the dramatic device of soliloquy which is often resorted to by the playwright to acquaint the audience with what is going on in the character's mind.

The stage directions of the play indicate that it is the seventeenth of January, Nineteen Seventy. The telephone rings as the early morning glow spreads over half the stage, the other half remains in the darkness. Samik Bandyopadhyay plays with the light and darkness in order to highlight the dual role of life. The dramatic device hints at the fact that the happy household shall soon be engulfed in the shadow of sorrow.

The most dominant character in the play is Sujata Chatterjee. She is one of those victims whose kith and kin had been done away with in a confrontation with the people in power. In fact, with Sujata, the playwright seeks to bring to light the darker areas of life where the persecution of the innocent continues unabated. Having felt alienated from her corrupt household, Sujata takes up a job in the bank. Although it is two long years since Brati was killed, her mind is filled with his memories. Not unusually, at times, Sujata tries to find a fulfillment in his death which she has never dared to claim for herself.

Brati, the younger son of Sujata, like other youth, disillusioned with the present social system –

a system that harbours many evils which thrive on the gullibility of the innocent people, responds accordingly to the People's Movement sparked off with the peasant revolt in the rural West Bengal and spread to the metropolis when the urban intelligentsia, out of a sense of remorse, decides to take part in it "for their guilt in acquiescing in the perpetuation of a system of exploitation from which they had reaped benefits for generations" (Samik Bandyopadhyay viii).

Brati was killed because he had come to place such absolute faith in the cult of faithlessness. Brati had decided for himself that freedom could not come from the path society and that state followed.

He did not remain content with writing slogans on the wall; he had to commit himself to the slogans and this was his offence. His firm conviction in the right cause, his courage and his selflessness, his exemplary integrity and his irresistible passion, led to his death.

At one level Brati and his friends were reacting against the immortality of the life style of the urban people and rejecting the social familial system that had nurtured them. The rebellion against the middle class mores need not be an explanation even of the urban Naxalite rebellion, but that would be the one aspect that could rationalize the movement in retrospect to a fairly affluent, sensitive and enlightened mother, who had not known till the shock of an early morning phone call from the police morgue that her favourite son had become part of the movement.

Like Sujata, Brati has no fancy for the luxuries that their rich background is to offer. Being aware of economic deprivation and exploitation, he swears by the cause of the exploited. And he revolts against the senseless ethics of all those institutions that add to the woes of the underdog. It is, however, unexpected of a person like him who is a member of a family which has been built on the mound of corruption which touches the play with a curious mix of the elements of surprise, innocence and youth imminent in life and history.

It is indeed surprising that Sujata, with an innate resentment, like her favourite son, against all the shams that are inherent in the patriarchal institution, fails to take cognizance of the rising tide

of revolt in Brati. Thus, Sujata is caught in the conflict within herself between a sympathetic mother and a silent protester against the immoral life which her household stands for. This conflict assumes an altogether different form when her motherly love is contrasted with the indifference of the members of her family towards the news of Brati's death with which the play begins.

When the play opens, Sujata has been married for thirty four years to Dibyanath Chatterjee who symbolizes an honest representative of the male dominated society. They have four children, two sons, Jyoti and Brati, and two daughters, Nipa and Tuli. Jyoti has already been married to Bina and Nipa to Amrit. In the eyes of the world, all of them are leading blissful lives but Sujata goes on to discover later, that this happiness is only superficial.

Dibyanath Chatterjee, Sujata's husband, is an overbearing and complacent man. He does not hesitate to risk the private sentiments to keep his public stature untarnished. This attitude of his is vividly depicted in the opening scene of the play when they receive a phone call from the police to identify corpse number 1084 which is, in fact, Brati's, who has in the meantime been divested of his identity as a person, and given another 'dehumanized identity' as corpse number 1084.

The indifference shown by Dibyanath and his children is the most characteristic of a section of the people that passes for the elite which indulges in self-care and self-love. The mask of detachment they put on is only a pretext to cover up their misdeeds and escape punishment. *Mother of 1084* satisfies every requirement of a successful first scene. As C.V. Venugopal observes, "A playwright invariably has to be very careful with his first scene if he is to be assured of a satisfactory impression on the audience". (171) So as a well-written exposition, the first scene of the play not only suggests the central conflict but also convincingly introduces the major characters - Sujata, Brati and Dibyanath.

As Sujata looks into Brati's past life, she feels that the seeds of rebellion were sown in Brati's heart in the childhood itself. He watched his immoral and corrupt father who flirted with women. He could not stand his father and all the things and values he held on to. Brati said that there were so

many others who swear by the same things and values and "the class that nurtures these values we consider it our enemy." (15-16) He had strong resentment against all his family members, except his mother, who maintained double standard and tried to be identified with the so-called high class of the society which is so empty and superficial.

Sujata now recollects that her son was never scared false bogeys and listened to reason. He did not let his father or grandmother dominate him. As he grew up, she could see a mind of different cast opening up, a mind of different from all those she had identified with her husband and other children.

In fact, one important feature of the play is that it sets off with characters not already formed but emerging from the play. As such, all the characters, except Sujata Chatterjee, are given minor portions in the play. Even Brati, around whom the entire story of the play is woven, is allotted only a few dialogues and he appears in the beginning as Corpse number 1084. He appears a living character only twice in the play, once in the company of his mother in scene 5 and the second time with his friends in scene 7.

However, Brati and his activities are revealed to us when the principal character Sujata gets herself engaged in conversations with different characters at different places which makes the progress of the play. Sujata is shocked when she finds her husband (Dibyanath) searching out ways to hush up the incident with the fear of stigma in the society for his son's involvement in anti-government affairs.

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