



SOCIAL CONCERNS IN MAHASHWETA DEVI'S *MOTHER OF 1084*

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi is known not only for her political writings but her tremendous contribution towards landless laborers in eastern India where she worked for years. Her close connection with these communities gave her a deep insight to understand and write about these grassroots-level issues, thus making her a socio-political commentator of the marginalized community. As an eminent Bengali writer and social activist, writing in the mid-1900s, she did not shy away from pointing out the injustices prevalent in society. This paper deals with her novel titled 'Mother of 1084' and depicts the helplessness of a mother who gets acquainted with her son's ideal after his death. The trauma of the tragic death of her son haunts her throughout the novel and makes her an aggrieved mother. The novel honestly depicts the trauma and psychological disturbances of a mother who has lost her son. 'Mother of 1084' at one end openly criticized the brutality of the government and the police in counteracting the Naxalite movement, while on the other end highlighted the political consciousness of a mother. It portrays many aspects of Indian society as well as the political state of West Bengal in the seventies where youth were ruthlessly suppressed by the government. The present paper also explores how she belongs to a male-dominated society that considers women as an object of sex, neglected and subjugated



beings, and how she revolts against the traditional established system and trembles the base of that rotten society.

Keywords: Naxalite Movement, Suppression, Bereaved Mother.

Introduction

Mahashweta Devi is one of the leading writers of post-modern India. Translated into many languages, her works have won her international acclaim and prestige. Her voluminous writings, cemented by her activism, have made her a celebrated writer of social commitment. Committed to the cause of tribals, peasants, landless laborers, bonded slaves, and oppressed women, Mahashweta Devi has penned to raise the voice of these downtrodden people. She edited a Bengali quarterly, *Bortika* which was a forum for the poor peasants, tribals, agricultural laborers, industrial laborers, and even the rickshaw pullers who, at that time, had no voice or space to represent themselves. Devi used the imaginary space of fiction to begin a conversation about and conversation with the very real people on the ground that had been neglected all this while. She not only voiced their opinion but also revolted against the authorities. Like Shaw, she used drama not merely for faithful documentation of contemporary social evils, but also as an active medium for revolting against authority and other social constraints. She has used drama as a tool or weapon against the oppressors.

Objectives



- to explore the grim situation which led to the rise of Naxalites
- study the transformation of a weak mother into a revolutionary
- how ideologies define a person's personality
- to explore the value of sacrifice

The novel, 'Mother of 1084' was written during the period when the Naxalite movement was waving across the country, especially in the north-eastern parts of India. The movement was especially violent in the states of Orissa, Bengal, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh. The Naxalite movement was strong in these places due to the large number of people suffering because of the feudal system and the predominantly agrarian economy. The Naxalite movement began in 1967, by a group of armed peasants in Naxalbari, a small village located in West Bengal. The attacks that happened during this time led the Naxalites to become enemies with the government. It was the time when the tribes, the peasants, and the marginalized people were criminalized by the government and which made them rebels. The political disturbances in Bengal were mainly because of the conflicts between Naxalites and the ruling government's policies.

The novel presents a political analysis that lay behind the inhuman massacre of Brati Chatterjee and his companions. The killing of Brati Chatterjee and his comrades is a part of the organized brutality against the Naxalites in 1970-71. The massacre is committed by the police, the party in power, hired goons, and even the parties of the Left Establishment acting in an unholy collusion. It was a phase when the urban Naxalites 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 significant personality. All through the novel, she is presented as a woman of



strong will who struggles against all odds. Sujata finally understands and accepts the dynamics of grief, unbearable pain, and ultimate loss caused by the premature death of her younger son Brati. She firmly believes that her son Brati was not a criminal. He was reluctant to accept the Hindu code of a corrupted society. She understands that 'death is the only punishment for those who lose faith in the system'. Her life is empty after Brati's death and she is left with no one to live for anymore.

The flaws of the bureaucratic system giving preference to the elite class and injustice to the poor gave rise to Naxalite ideology opting for the path of non-violence. The real sufferers in the conflict between the government and the Naxals were innocent and sinless mothers who lost their sons without knowing the reason. Such tragic situations compelled Mahashweta Devi to write this novel.

The novel focuses on the antagonism and brutality of the government towards the youth who followed the Naxalite ideology which is considered the offshoot of communism. As the focus falls on the murder of Brati, the younger son of Sujatha Chatterjee, who is the representative of a vast number of young rebels who were brutally murdered by the government. At the beginning of the play, we are introduced to the titular mother, Sujata, a mother of four children and the wife of Dibyanath, a chartered accountant. She believes that all her children are happy in their married life but soon discovers that their happy marriages were all a facade. They were not enjoying life and she also realizes that her marriage was also a lie. Sujata comes to realize all this when she finds out that her son was murdered and it changes her role from a typical mother to that of an apolitical mother. After her favorite son's death, she starts following his path to find out what exactly happened to him. The lady who used to live an ordinary life of a housewife turns into a devout



follower of her son's ideologies and thereby discovers her own identity. After meeting the people who accompanied Brati during the campaigns she was inspired by his revolutionary ideas and also turns against the political dictatorship.

Upon examining the incidents in this novel, we can see that Brati was also a victim. We see him as a person with revolutionary ideas who is against the feudal system that made the life of tribal people as well as that of the peasants difficult. The character of Brati is a reflection of Sujatha, who has no attraction to the luxuries and riches of the world. Rather, he was aware of the oppressed minorities of society; the economically deficient and exploited. He fights against the irrational ethics and all those promises that were made by the politicians about the re-establishment of the tribes which excited all those peasants and lead the politicians and the landlords to take advantage of the poor peasants. Even after the family members of Brati became corrupted, Sujatha was a broad-minded revolutionist who had a great dream for the empowerment of the tribes as well as the peasants. The protagonist in this novel, Sujatha, is a suppressed mother who is a representative of the conservative upper-class families run by male dominance. We can observe in many scenes where she is emotionally suppressed and the conflict in the view of her and her family members.

Dibyanath Chatterjee, father of Brati Chatterjee is represented, as an honest representative of the male-dominated society. As soon as he comes to know about the news of his son, instead of rushing to the police station, he tries to hush up the matter. He declines to go and began wanting to shroud Brati's name in the news.

"Jyoti's father had had to pull so many strings to hush up the news that his son had died such a scandalous death."(1).



Sujata is aghast to see the indifferent behavior of her husband. He was least bothered to talk about this matter to his wife Sujata. The following sentences reveal very clearly how much she was neglected by him,

“Sujata: (uncomprehending, in a panic). What will you hush up? What are you talking about?”

Dibyanath: Jyoti, there is no time to waste. He goes out.

Sujata: Jyoti! (Jyoti busy in dialing a number.

He does not reply) Jyoti!

(Reproving). Jyoti! What's Happened? (2)

From the above lines, one can easily conclude that Sujata was neglected though she was the second important member of the family. Dibyanath Chatterjee bothered to consult his son Jyoti rather than his wife, Sujata. Sujata felt shocked when Dibyanath Chatterjee refuses to go to the police station for fear of stigma in society for his son's involvement in anti-government affairs.

In the words of Sujata,

“But that soon? Even before the body's been identified? A father gets the news on the telephone and does not even think of rushing to have a look. All he can think of is that he'd be comprised if his car went to Kantakapur. (3)

Infuriated by the way her family and the state overshadowed Brati's death, Sujata chooses to venture out of her cocoon. After two years, she finds the underground universe of Naxalites,



their beliefs about whom she had pitiful information until her child was alive. In a range of twenty-four hours, Sujata changes from a weak, passive, dependent mother to a severe and solid lady.

The four chapters in the play mark a new stage in the evolution of Sujata's consciousness, as it enables her to re-order her fragmented and chaotic life in search of a cohesive identity. Every time she visits her past or that of Brati, Somu's mother, or Nandini, her long-suppressed personal loss is slowly released into the ever-widening, spirals of betrayal, guilt, and suffering. From a weak-willed, hopelessly dependent, and non-assertive moral coward, Sujata is transformed into a morally assertive, politically enlightened, and socially defiant individual.

In the first chapter, significantly titled '**Dawn,**' Sujata primarily returns to her interior, private world of personal suffering, torture, betrayal, and loneliness. Negotiating the inner time concerning her immediate familial situation, she becomes aware of how she and Brati were not just fellow sufferers but also soul mates.

In the second chapter, '**Afternoon,**' Sujata's visit to the bank to get jewelry from the locker is only a pretext for her to visit the house of Somu's mother. A close associate of Brati, Somu had been killed in the same encounter. More significantly, Brati had spent his night in Somu's house before his mysterious disappearance and death. While Sujata goes to Somu's mother with the specific aim of retrieving the memories of Brati's last few hours, it turns out to be her entry and initiation into another world altogether. It is the world of primitive squalor, filth, poverty, degradation, and subhuman existence that only hovers tentatively on the margins of 'bhadraloks' consciousness. She enters into the little-known world of slum dwellers. The sight of Somu's aging



mother, her disgruntled daughter, and their ramshackle tenement with a straw roof is enough to complete the rituals of initiation.

In the third chapter, titled '**Evening**,' when she visits Nandini, who apart from being Brati's comrade-in-arms was also his beloved. It is Nandini who reconstructs for Sujata all the events leading up to Brati's betrayal and murder. In the process, she also initiates Sujata into the little-known world of the underground movement, explaining to her the logic for an organized rebellion, and giving her a first-hand account of state repression and its multiple failures. It's through Nandini that Sujata is finally able to understand the reasons for Brati's political convictions and his rejection of the bourgeoisie code. All this leaves her so completely bewildered that she openly admits to Nandini, "I didn't know Brati." (4)

In the last chapter of the novel titled '**Night**,' we meet a transformed Sujata, one who is more self-assured, morally confident, and politically sensitive. She decides to leave the house in which Brati never felt at home, where he wasn't valued while he was alive, nor was his memory respected after his death. Having found a soul mate in Brati, she turns her back on Dibyanath and his decadent value system.

We can also see her courage in being a rebel and going against her family when she finds out that her family is not bothered about the murder of Brati. The death of her favorite son leads her to be stronger in her ideologies. This helps her to gain the courage to go against the political system and feudalism which killed her son. We see a mother who is mourning the loss of her son on one side and simultaneously transforming into a strong woman to fulfill the dreams of her son, to make her son's revolutionary ideologies into practical reality. She transforms herself into a



political personality by breaking all the rules of the ideal noble womanhood. Thus, we come to know of the class exploitation in India in 1967 and how minority classes were treated. The learning process involves her in a series of encounters with the people whose cause Brati won over. It continues till she finds herself drifting towards a kinship with her son's ideology. Her confrontation with Somu's mother and Nandhini makes her aware of a side of life to which she has been a stranger till now. Now, she identifies herself with the cause and suffering of people. So far, she has been living a confined life fulfilling her roles of being a housewife and a mother. The death of her son stirs her soul, and she breaks out of her shell, becomes socially conscious from her earlier position as an apolitical mother, and discovers her identity and purpose.

Conclusion

The play serves two purposes. First, it projects two different faces of a mother. Secondly, it explores the grim situation which gives birth to the Naxal movement. The second part explores the elements of 'understanding, loving, angry, confident, and a rebellious one who seeks justice. The climax of the play highlights the irreverent response that a mother's anguish elicits in an unfeeling society. The reason why a Naxal movement gets its roots are mentioned in a few incidents. When their very basic needs are denied, the oppressed are left with no option but to react. The suppressed can bear the suffering only to a certain extent. One may not believe in extending sympathy to people who take other people's life by force, whatever may be the justification. However, it is completely acceptable that the deep-rooted problems of the poor need urgent and immediate attention from all sections of the administration. The rich and the poor, the irony of



their lifestyles and value system are well described. The play explores the value of sacrifice and the ignorance of the powerful.

Sujata finally understands and accepts the dynamics of grief, unbearable pain, and ultimate loss caused by the premature death of her younger son Brati. She firmly believes that her son Brati was not a criminal. He was reluctant to accept the Hindu code of a corrupted society. She understands that 'death is the only punishment for those who lose faith in the system'. Her life is empty, after Brati's death and she is left with no one to live for anymore. We can also see her courage in being a rebel and going against her family when she finds out that her family is not bothered about the murder of Brati. The death of her favorite son leads her to be stronger in her ideologies. This leads her to gain the courage to go against the political system and feudalism which killed her son. We see a mother who is mourning the loss of her son on one side, whereas, on the other hand, she is becoming a strong woman to fulfill the dreams of her son to make her son's revolutionary ideologies into practical reality. We can see her transformation into a political personality by breaking all the rules of the ideal noble womanhood.

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