

## Social Realism in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*

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“Life is not arithmetic, and man is not made for the game of politics. For me, all political programmes and creeds should aim at the realization of the claims of man to survival and justice. I desire a transformation of the present social system” (Devi, *Agnigarbha* 8).

Mahasweta Devi deafeningly explains that life is not the calculation in number or any game, it is larger than we expect and richer than we imagine. Generally considered the voice of marginalised and downtrodden, she adamantly wanted to change the face of society making the existence of everyone in society equal. Everyone gets life the same way but they are born in society which becomes their fate. God makes everyone the same and we humans differentiate in the name of class, religion and economy. Devi advocates the transformation of existing laws and social systems that are not able to complete their duties and responsibilities towards common and marginalised people; they are surrounded merely by the toadies in the hands of a few powerful capitalists. She wrote for eighteen hours a day during the peak period of her career and gave a light to the nation about the plight of the people suffering under the democratic-masked authoritarian government. Devi, according to Samik Bandyopahyay, locates and unfolds “illegitimacy . . . spread throughout society,

in the administration, in the cultural-intellectual establishment, in politics, in the existence of a whole antisocial fringe of killers prepared to serve the interests of any organized political force anywhere between the extremes of the Right and those of the Left” (*Mother of 1084* viii). She worked for the rights and empowerment of the tribal people (Lodha and Shabar) of West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh states. She is praised for her vibrant tolerance to oppose the powerful rule that is mostly feared by majority of the male writers of the period. She became the light house of the scattered thoughts of the tribes and the outcome of the situation came to be known as Naxalites. Mahasweta Devi exposes the feudal system which is anti-tribal, anti-women, anti-poor and anti-tiller.

Known as the voice of tribes, her novel *Mother of 1084* is somewhat different, as in this novel, she not only talks about the plight of the proletariat but also covers so many social issues concerned with so called upper-class society which are unknown to common people. The present study aims at exploring all the social issues raised by the author in the novel *Mother of 1084*.

a) A diatribe on decadent society.

Mahasweta Devi, in her attempt to unfold the layers of exploitation of the marginalised, asserts emphatically that, “I believe in anger, in justified violence, and so peel the mask off the face of India which is projected by the government, to expose its naked brutality” (Devi, *Bitter Soil* x) As always projected, the great nation of India has two faces to be exposed and discussed: one being the stylistic and luxurious India that lives in the prosperous cities and the other is the image of India, staggering under poverty, hunger, debt and unemployment. On the 17 of January 1970, the telephone rings during the early hours with the news that Brati has been killed in police encounter. The call is received by Sujata, mother of Brati who is asked to go to Kantapuram to identify her son. Divyanath Chatterjee

bribes the police to conceal the death mystery of Brati from the media. He and his elder son Jyoti seem to be ashamed. They do not go there to save their false prestige. Divyanath does not allow him to take his car as people would recognise his car and will start investigating. The family members are not bothered about the death of the son or brother; they are rather concerned about the false societal status. This shows the hollowness of love and life in front of so called status, and the real face of the government servant who receives bribe to conceal Brati's name. These government servants play a key role in empowering the right-winged capitalist who play with power and dominate the downtrodden. Mahashweta raises these questions thus: With so many young men kills, so many imprisoned, how can you wallow in your complacency...how can you carry on with your puja, concerts, cultural festivals, film festivals, poem fests.

Nandini puts the charges against the numb society. She says that they neither understand their noble cause nor acknowledge their sacrifice. Instead of knowing about their sacrifice, they even forget their efforts. All these questions are unanswered. It hits the mind of audience. This Naxalite movement was failed but she still has the hope of new era. This reveals that, one hand of the society fights for the rights of people, shedding blood and laying down life for the cause, and the other hand of the same society appears ignorant about these sacrifices, they are more concerned for their coerce. DHIMAN ROY: Your wife with Balai... AMIT; Balai's my cousin, and a friend too. Do you know his connections? If you come in his way.... DHIMAN ROY Sir, you're a real liberal (119).

In the novel Bourgeois' is loaded with unnatural relationship in the name of liberation and mutual interest, Divyanath is apparently happily married to Sujata but is in relationship with the typist of his office, whereas Neepa is married to Amit and is in relation with Balai, and thus, love and marriage sound immoral. For the world, these people are elite but if we see from inside, they are full of insecurity, immorality and ambiguity.

The novel *Mother of 1084* is full of incidents where we can feel the anxiety and pain of women in patriarchal society. In front of the society, she is worshipped and given equal status but in reality her existence, opinion and pain does not matter and she becomes the epitome of silence and patience, and her sacrifices and acceptance of everything wrong coming her way make her the best daughter, the best wife and lastly the best mother. Women who fail to do so are considered archaic and obsolete.

In Sujatas's meeting with Nandini, she told Sujata about Anandia who was introduced by Nitu, a prominent activist, as a diligent worker but he was a police informer. Nandini realizes that Anandia had joined the mission with a programme, "a programme of betrayal" (75). Anandia, a two faced mole of society who came as friend and companion in their mission but was actually the reason of their death, he was part of that feudal community who wanted to uproot the branches of their movement. With the two faced society and two faced people around, this group of five friends along with the other Naxal-guerrillas was fighting for the vision and belief they believed in.

#### b) What triggered social displacement

The novel started with the news of Brati's death in Naxal movement, and the decade of seventies in Bengal is remembered for the same. People were fighting against the landlords and beaureocrats who were exploiting common and helpless people, but being from upper class made Brati Naxal. Here the author being the eyewitness of the movement has clearly stated the reason and outrage of the Naxals. It mainly focuses on the political butchering of the opposition voices raised against them.

If we notice the history of India, we would find that the oppression and suppression of the tribes and 'untouchable' categories had been active for long, back from the period of the independence. The higher caste with power and money ruled the lower caste that is drenched

forever in poverty and hunger. When they lack sufficient resources to sustain the life of their beloved ones, they get ready with half-hearted mind to sell them. This was the major card for the ruling hunters to overcome the protests. It still continues in one or the other way. Divide & Rule was a formula maintained by the British rulers which later on was handed over or borrowed by the then existing landlords and their supporting government.

Mahasweta Devi has focused her attention primarily on the tribal communities within India. She dedicated her life to be a champion for the political social and economic advancement of these communities, whom she characterizes as “suffering spectators of India that is traveling towards the twenty first century” (Devi, *Imaginary Maps*, xi) She wrote for the tribal community, for their freedom and right to live and wanted the history to be rewritten for the tribes and the downtrodden. She asked the main stream society to mark the presence of the tribes in the history of the nation, in its freedom struggle and even before that. Only the major classes and their struggle for freedom are represented in the literature and historical works, which intentionally avoids the participation of the tribes and their enormous bloodshed. She wanted the whole nation to understand that the struggle done by tribes was also a major cause for independence for which they have never been appreciated or brought to front stream.

Mahasweta Devi warns the country for creating innocent minds into rebels due to the atrocities done by the governing society. She believed that Naxals were not self-made by their own aggressive inborn mentality but were gradually trained by the negative powers in their youthful mind-set, after having suffered for long and till the end of tolerance. Those negative powers are often the feudal system that scratches to pollute their normal thoughts with extreme hatred. She highlights the social impact of the movement and presents the reality with humanitarian point of view. Here she puts the question mark on the role of

society and the government machinery for sprouting the Naxalite movement in West Bengal of 1970s.

c). Social classification in terms of Economy, Culture and Ethos

In the novel, Mahasweta Devi very aptly introduces the three homes, representing three different cultures, locations and economy and the different ethos of women residing there—Sujata, Somu's mother and Nandini. Their family structures and their economic implications define the individualities of all three women to the point of setting up a hierarchy of self-assertion and independence: from Somu's mother at the lowest rung to Nandini's at the highest, with Sujata at intermediate level. The helpless fear and submission of Somu's mother has foil to resentment, anger of Somu's sister who is also foil to Sujata, offers a more inchoate version of Sujata's own dogged resistance to the power imposed on her by Dibyanath and family. Nandini is the one who knows and decides, while Sujata is in the throes of learning and edging towards deciding.

Devi gives us neat spatial description of the residence where the ladies hail: Somu's mother lived in 'ramshackle' house, with moss on the roof, cracked walls patched up with cardboard, at the farthest end from Sujata's locus, both topographically and socially. Nandini, is a neighbour, socially, culturally and topographically. Sujata's sense of insecurity and precariousness in Somu's mother's house is in contrast to the assurance she gets in Nandini's house despite of her severe tone. Somewhere Sujata finds her close to Nandini socially. These differences changed the way these ladies reacted to their loss. Nandini lost her sight and her love Brati but is determined and full of fire, she is the unquiet one and wants no one to be quite, contrary to this Somu's mother seemed helpless and has accepted the death of Somu as her fate but Sujata, on the other hand, was the combination of both; she is helpless because of Dibyanath and her family, as she cannot even weep and crib about the death of her beloved

son in front of anyone in the family, while on the other hand, she is in the constant journey of knowing her son and the path he was following which lead him away from her.

Mahasweta Devi explicitly makes us realise about the parent-child relationship in each class of society. Sujata's quest takes her to Somu's mother where she came to know that Brati used to spend hours in their house which was in slum and Somu's parents were aware of Somu's view and his participation in the movement and respected it but, on the other hand, the people of upper-class society have no time for their son and are not aware of his ideologies. Perhaps, Brati was aware of the fact that he was in opposition to the value system followed at his house.

Most importantly the state of women in all the classes of society is same, they are dummies nurtured by the society, to be speechless, to be tolerant, to bear and raise the progeny and follow patriarchy. These dummies are taught to get exploited by other dummies and to exploit other dummies in the name of morality, ethics and society. Fate of women everywhere remains the same. Nandini, an upper-class woman, is tortured and made half dead for revealing her thoughts, Sujata from middle class has different ideology unlike the rest of her family, and goes with the flow without uttering a word but suffers every day. Somu's mother is an example of the marginalised and the poor where hunger is above life.

#### d). Self-realisation of the Protagonist

Sujata, the mother of corpse number 1084, can find a moral rationale for her son's revolt only when she together, exactly two years after the killing, a part of her son's life which she had never known. Unaware amidst the situation of her life, in the politics of economic deprivation and exploitation, the more Sujata sees in Brati's revolt an articulation of the silent resentment she has called within herself against her corrupt respectable husband, other children and their spouses and friends the closer she feels to her dead son, and the more

poignantly she feels the loss. In a sense, she is able to 'find' her son and can hold him to herself only when she finds in his death a fulfilment that she has yearned for and never dared to claim for herself. One day in the life of Sujata, spent in discovering Brati for the first time in a series of encounters with people beyond her experience, is spent in forging a connection with Brati or rather with what he strove and died for. Hence it's Sujata's story, a traditional upper-middle class lady and an apolitical mother who wakes up one early morning with the shattering news that her favourite son Brati is lying dead in the police morgue with the dehumanized identity, bearing the corpse no.1084, which left her in bed for months shattered and broken, and moreover, the cold behaviour of Dibyanath and her kids towards Brati inflicted excruciating pain on her.

Sujata's humiliation in her home is evident when she is not consulted in fixing the date of the betrothal ceremony of her youngest daughter Tuli, neither the death nor the birth anniversary day of Brati is observed by anyone of the members of the family. Sujata feels intensely alienated from the members her family at home. During the conversation with Tuli she expresses her loneliness: "SUJATA (Off) with Brati, they've cast me too in the opposite camp. If Brati had been like Jyoti, or a drunkard like Neepa's husband, Amit or a hardened fraud like Tony, or had run after the typists like father, he'd have belonged to their camp" (31).

In the words of Sujata, hypocritical life led by the members of the family is revealed. The person who stands for the ideals like Brati and Sujata are subjected to alienation, both these characters are not contended with the conditions of the home. We can analyse the irrational discrimination to which Sujata is subjected at home. Sujata feels that she has failed as a mother, she is unable to understand Brati and his vision for which he secretly languished and gave his life. She embarks now on the mission to know her son better to understand



intricacies of the cause for which he fought. With this intention she visits Somu's mother and Nandini, Sujata tries hard to come to terms with her loss but it is a tough fight.

During the conversation with Somu's mother she recollects her affectionate and intimate relationship with her son Brati. As they play Ludo they discuss many small happenings of the day-to-day life. Brati casually hints at the indiscreet relationship between his father and the typist, but he mentions it in such a gentle manner so as not to offend her delicate sensibility. His caressing act of moving aside a wisp of hair from his mother's forehead speaks volumes of love towards her. This tender homely scene is jerked by a sudden phone call, it brings the news of a severe betrayal. The fun loving, affectionate son is immediately transformed to a terse, alert man of action. It is ironic that Sujata fails to connect her son with the Naxalite Movement, raging in the contemporary society. It shows that the simple, trusting mother has ample faith on her son. She expects that he will confide to her all his secrets. She can hardly believe that her son is mature and grown up enough now to take part in such a big movement which demands skilful and strategic and manipulated plan of action. She is highly introvert, and keeps herself undisturbed by the external world. This indifferent and passive attitude to the external world keeps her in the world of ignorance, especially about her son's inclination towards the growing Naxalism, though she loves him so dearly, as he is the one who is practically the succour for her existence amidst the material minded and selfish members of the family. Therefore, she takes a lot of time to realize her son's noble perception and commitment towards the society who not only struggles to protect his mother, but also those people who are subjected to atrocities afflicted in the society. In this noble endeavour he has to sacrifice his life. Moreover, in protecting the lives of his fellow comrades, he has to give up his life. Sujata pays her visit to Nandini and this visit provides her clear perspective on the movement in which her dear son took a dynamic part.

Her horizon of thinking is reformed to self-grief after the recognition of the solemn anguish of Nandini. She learns the reason for the failure of the movement and revolution

Further Nandini reveals her discontent over the indifferent society. It is really pain to see that most people are least bothered about the deprivation of the minimum amenities to the marginalized strata of the society. The noble hearts who have become martyrs in revolting against this inequality, are never acknowledged. Eventually Sujata realizes and accepts the dynamics of grief, ultimate loss and unbearable pain caused by the premature death of her son Brati. She firmly believes that her son Brati cannot be labeled as a criminal, the only factor is that he denied accepting 'the code of decadent society'. These people were labeled as rebels and are killed and encountered ruthlessly 'A cancerous growth on the body of democracy' In the words of Sarojpal. who is greatly honored by the state government by getting quick promotion in recognition of his heroic role in the suppression of the Naxalite revolt. She realizes death is the only punishment for those who lose faith in the system. After the death of Brati her life is absolutely empty with no one to live for any more. In the last scene of the play 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. Having found a soulmate in Brati, she turns her back on Dibyanath and his decadent value system.

Corpses, stiffened corpses, all of you... Did Brati die to let you carry on in your cadaverous existence, enjoying and indulging in all the images of the world...Do the living die, only to leave to the dead to enjoy? No! Never....Let this No of mine pierce the heart of the city... to every nook and corner. Let it set the past, the present, and the future tremble. Let it tear down the happiness of everyone cooped up in his own happy happiness. (127)

With this outburst, Sujata collapses possibly forever as the appendicitis of her body and of her mental anguish is burst. She can no more cope up with the 'stink' that overpowers her.

The play starts with a flash back, the pain of childbirth and ends with the pain of a ruptured appendix. A woman's most primal, creative suffering precedes the beginning of Sujata's self-discovery; the pain of a diseased organ symbolises the end of her journey.

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