

Mapping Female Consciousness and Resistance in Mahasweta

Devi's Mother of 1084

Dr Lisa John Mundackal

Associate Professor

Department of English

Vimala College (Autonomous)

Thrissur, Kerala, India

lisajmundackal@gmail.com

Abstract

Mahasweta Devi, renowned for her revolutionary and activist literary vision, has always used her writings to expose social injustices, gender oppression and political violence in postcolonial India. Hers is a unique set of writings, which blend literary aesthetics with social activism. This paper seeks to examine the delineation of female consciousness and resistance in Mahasweta Devi's play *Mother of 1084* through the lens of feminist and subaltern discourse. Set against the socio-political turbulence of the Naxalite movement in 1970s Bengal, the text dramatises the emotional and ideological transformation of Sujata, a middle-class mother whose search for truth after the death of her revolutionary son exposes the violence embedded within patriarchy, state machinery, and bourgeois morality. The study argues that the dramatic structure intensifies the articulation of female subjectivity by foregrounding silence, memory, dialogue, and confrontation as performative acts of resistance. The paper adopts the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism, drawing upon the ideas of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Judith Butler. Spivak's notion of the subaltern provides a critical scaffold for analyzing Sujata's gradual movement from domestic marginalisation to political awareness, while Butler's theory of

performativity helps interpret how gender roles and maternal identity are enacted, questioned, and subverted within the dramatic space. The study explores how personal grief becomes a medium for collective political consciousness. Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates that *Mother of 1084* redefines motherhood as a site of dissent rather than passive suffering. Sujata's awakening emerges as a critique of patriarchal nationalism and middle-class complacency, transforming female consciousness into a powerful mode of ethical and political resistance. The study highlights how the dramatic rendering of the text amplifies women's voices within histories of violence, memory, and social injustice.

Keywords: Naxalite, Resistance, Consciousness, Political, Voice

“A responsible writer standing at a turning point in history, has to take a stand in defense of the exploited”.

-Mahasweta Devi

Political turmoil became a standard feature of West Bengal right after independence. In the 1960s, the political instability increased, with frequent clashes between the ruling Congress party and the Leftist opposition. In 1967, the Left came to power in West Bengal under the banner of the United Front. The intervening years till 1977 saw the birth of the radical Left movement, named after the remote village Naxalbari in the North Bengal foothills. Naxalbari ideology attracted youth and women into its folds, who stayed on even after the movement went underground. During this period, the movement experienced unprecedented state repression through indiscriminate arrests, torture and fake encounter killings. Emergency exacerbated matters. A large number of followers of the Naxalbari movement went into hiding, running from shelter to shelter to escape from the police, rival political parties and factions within the movement itself.

The play *Mother of 1084* explores the intersection of motherhood, political violence, and female subjectivity, and is set against the backdrop of this Naxalbari movement in West Bengal; of that climactic phase of annihilation-the bloody massacres perpetrated by the Party in power, and its agencies like the police and other hired assassins and even the Left Establishment parties, along with its tragic consequences. The text foregrounds the emotional and ideological transformation of Sujata, a middle-class mother whose son Brati is killed in state custody and reduced to the impersonal label “corpse number 1084.” The references to the Barasat killing, Baranagar killing in the play, connect the killing of Brati and his group to one such organized massacres. Mahasweta Devi has said, “Once I became a professional writer, I felt increasingly that a writer should document his own time and history....The Naxalite movement between the late 1960s and early 1970s 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 vii-viii)

The play, to be precise becomes her recreation of a span of history, allowing individuals to evolve their interactions with a historical process. It is not a mere superficial portrayal of the movement as such, but goes beyond this recreation and concentrates on a body of myriad and layered reactions of its survivors. Written in October 1973, *Mother of 1084* is one of Mahasweta Devi’s early works, with Sujatha as its central character. It is the story of her slow progression from silent suffering to a sense of imprisoned guilt within, and eventually reaching a realisation ending with a call to the women in society to awake and arise or be fallen forever. Through Sujata’s gradual awakening, Mahasweta Devi critiques patriarchal domesticity, bourgeois morality, and state oppression. Sujata’s consciousness evolves from passive conformity to political resistance.

The brutal murder of Brati, the radical and forward thinking son of Sujata Chatterjee, causes her to embark on a journey. The journey, which is in fact a quest for truth about her son and his death, soon takes on the shape of a self-examination and self-discovery for Sujata. The play foregrounds two sets of people- those who bear the dark scars of the horrible tortures of those days and those who put on the garb of a ‘simulated insularity’ to shield them through those same days of violence. The latter’s is a world of godmen, pretences and scandals. (One sees a page 3 world, if one could call it that way!) The former’s is a world of rebellion, reacting against the immorality of the latter, and in the process, rejecting the socio-familial system that had nurtured them.

To a fairly affluent, sensitive, educated, enlightened, working mother like Sujata, her son Brati and his associations with the movement, remain unknown, till the shocking news of his death is reported to her over the phone, when she is asked to go to the police morgue at Kantapukur, to identify her son’s body. Since then, she embarks on a quest; a psychological journey. In the course of the journey she begins to question the conditions she herself lives in, and realizes that the things that her son protested and rebelled against were but the same things that she herself was silently resenting within herself all this while- the complacency, hypocrisy, bourgeoisie values in the modern society- the so-called ‘sham’ (as Tuli calls it, when she talks of Bini’s piety). Sujata talks of this world of smugness when she says, “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 his father, he’ d have belonged to this camp” (11).

In the initial phase of the play, Sujata appears trapped within the repetitive structures of patriarchal domesticity, conditioned to perform the domestic roles of a wife and mother. Her

identity is defined primarily through socially sanctioned roles of wife and mother. Butler's concept of performativity is crucial in understanding this condition. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler famously argues that "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler 25). Gender, therefore, is not innate but culturally enacted through repeated performances. Sujata's existence within the household exemplifies this repetition. She performs emotional restraint, obedience, and domestic responsibility because patriarchal society expects women to embody these traits. Her silence in familial interactions reflects the internalization of these gender norms. Butler further explains that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (34). Sujata's role as the ideal middle-class mother is thus not natural but socially constructed through repeated acts of submission. However, Brati's death destabilizes this constructed identity. Sujata begins questioning the values that previously governed her life. Her grief interrupts the performative continuity of domestic femininity and initiates a process of resistance. She no longer conforms unquestioningly to patriarchal expectations but instead seeks political and moral truth.

In fact, the two categories of character which have dominated Mahasweta Devi's stories in the 1970s, are the mothers bearing the brunt of social and political oppression and the sensitive 'apolitical' individual who suddenly identifies himself with a community out of his personal awareness of the experience of exploitation, and thus grows on to assume the role of a leader of that community. Sujata, a mother who is "apathetic, apolitical and pathetically ignorant" (Monti 88) of her son and unaware of the politics of economic deprivation and exploitation outside of her own life situation, feels a prick within, after her son's death especially after she meets Nandini, Brati's girlfriend and close associate and compatriot, who tells her, that

Brati associated himself with a movement where he held hands with youngsters from different backgrounds but all sharing a common feature-“the children and the parents were strangers to one another” (29). The more Sujata attempts to ‘find’ her son, the more she sees his revolt as an articulation of the silent resentment she has carried within herself; against the patriarchal establishments in and around her. There is some kind of a continuum between Sujata’s cold, growing awareness shaping into resistance or stopping short at the very edge of defiance and the revolving militancy in Brati (xi -xii). She tries ‘discovering’ her son Brati, through a series of encounters with people beyond her usual circuit of experience- Somu’s mother, Nandini- thereby establishing a link with Brati, what he strove and died for.

Sujata is portrayed as a middle class woman; a sensitive wife, loving mother but a stranger in her own household, which reduces her to an “insignificant cog” (Monti 87). The others in the house are often oblivious of her presence. She is very often reduced to the status of a non-existing entity. When she assumes the phone call at the beginning of the play, she is being asked, “Is there no male member around?” (3).

It is Sujata’s silence that pervades all through the play. Her resentment builds to the brim. She knows all about her husband. Brati asks her “Mother, do you know where the Boss goes every morning after office?” (7). Sujata knows where her husband goes. Yet she has no voice. She is torn between the roles of a sympathetic mother and a silent protestor against the immoral tendencies of the members of her own family. She bears the humiliation in silence and discharges the familial duties. She is being choked by the weight of the stifling values enjoined on her by the patriarchal society. She cannot even let out a cry; a wail. Her sorrow is ‘contained’ even at her own son’s death. All her repressed feelings find a symbolic portrayal in the appendix

that ails her. She suffers till the last scene of exhortation, where it is seen to burst thereby letting out all that is within.

Mahasweta Devi radically transforms motherhood into a site of dissent and ethical awakening. Patriarchal ideology traditionally associates motherhood with passivity and sacrifice, but Sujata's maternal identity evolves into a force of resistance against state violence and bourgeois complacency. Sujata embodies a possibility, by refusing to remain confined within the socially prescribed role of the grieving mother. Her search for Brati's political beliefs and comrades represents an attempt to redefine herself outside patriarchal structures. Her refusal to forget Brati challenges institutional attempts to erase revolutionary memory. The state reduces him to a numerical identity, but Sujata insists on reclaiming his humanity. Her maternal consciousness becomes political because she recognizes that Brati's death is not an isolated tragedy but part of a larger system of oppression. Dialogues, silences, and confrontations externalize Sujata's psychological conflict. Her voice gradually gains authority within the dramatic space, reflecting her movement toward agency and self-definition.

Mahasweta Devi has carefully woven gender and class issues in the play. She brings before us, two mothers, simultaneously grieving over the loss of their sons, but with cultural and class differences dividing them. Sujata says, "Grief had bought Somu's mother and me together one day" (24). When Sujata is a rich educated middle class working woman, Somu's mother is a poor woman left all alone with her daughter, to wail and weep over the loss of their male family members. She says, "I lost my son, my son's father and I, with this tortoise's life of mine, shall live on forever, the two funeral pyres burning within"(22), where the image of the 'tortoise's life' clearly conveying the idea of the sheltered, protected, yet intimidated and burdened lives of women.

For Sujata the whole affair assumes the nature of a psychological quest- sophisticated and complex- ending in her own realisation and awareness. For Somu's mother, it all lies on an emotional level, and she simply cries it all out. In Somu's family's suffering Sujata can hear a reverberation of her own silent scream of torment and desperation. And later, in Nandini's company, her true self is unveiled. Nandini induces the necessary shock into Sujata, which awakens her from her state of stupor. Nandini asks, "How can you be so smug and complacent with so many young men killed, so many imprisoned? How can you wallow in your complacency? It's your 'all's right with the world, let's go on nicely' that frightens me most. How can you carry on with your pujas, concerts, cultural festivals, film festivals, poetry fests?" (34).

Mahasweta Devi in her play attempts to magnify and define the contours of female consciousness, markedly. In the process, she depicts the real and not the ideal. The readers are made to witness the striking resemblance of the feminist with an extremist movement like the Naxalbari. Both are movements from the periphery, against the central power. Sujata is portrayed as a woman of incapacities, nurturing a malady within. She is incapable of reacting. This incapacity forces her to fall into self-introspection later.

The socio-political reality outside becomes embedded in Sujatha's consciousness, as it is one which is linked to her own son Brati and hence is to her concern too. It becomes an awareness-growing experience for her as she embarks on this journey to 'discover' her son, and through him, herself. For Sujata who is a real woman with fears, anxieties and incapacities in the beginning, this journey is an attempt to define herself. Mahasweta Devi's stark, blunt realism is shown in the way she deconstructs the image of the woman protagonist here. When, normally woman writers are in the habit of highlighting the strengths and positives of motherhood, here is

a playwright who foregrounds the incapacities. Sujata is caricatured to a large extent. The ineffectiveness of her role is time and again satirised. But all this irony and satire is in a way, only to make the foundations of realism sturdier. Sujata is placed against Nandini, who has an access to the extremist tendencies in the society and is a part of that fellowship. She is projected as strength and indomitable will, who is seen to say, in spite of the brutal tortures that she was subjected to, at the police station, “but I will never come back to the so-called tidy life. Some day you will learn that I have been arrested again” (35). Nandini’s is a confrontational stance- a true foil to Sujata’s compromising stance, and hence her victimisation and the other tragic consequences that ensue. For Sujata, who begins on a level of compromises, Nandini acts as the propeller. She shakes off (or rather decides to) her smugness when she prepares to leave Nandini’s house, as is seen in her reply to Nandini’s offer to show her the way out.

Nandini: ...Your solitary cell. Come, let me show you the way out.

Sujatha: Never mind. I will find my way out. (36)

These symbolic words portend the future awakening and exhortation that comes out of Sujata.

Although Sujata belongs to the middle class, she occupies a subalter position within her patriarchal family structure. Her emotions and opinions are dismissed by her husband Dibyanath and by the social order surrounding her. She initially lacks the authority to articulate dissent. In the play, Devi exposes the erasure of marginalized voices by showing Brati’s reduction to “1084” after his death. This reflects Spivak’s argument regarding the same repressive mechanisms that operate within societal structures. The state transforms a politically conscious individual into a bureaucratic object. At this juncture, Sujata’s insistence on remembering Brati’s identity becomes an act of resistance against this silencing mechanism. As Spivak argues, “between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the

woman disappears” (102). This insight resonates deeply with Sujata’s condition. She exists within intersecting systems of patriarchy, class hierarchy, and political violence that seek to erase female individuality. Yet her journey throughout the text demonstrates a struggle against this erasure. Through encounters with Brati’s comrades and memories of his ideals, Sujata gradually reconstructs suppressed histories. Her consciousness develops through listening to voices excluded from bourgeois discourse. In this sense, the text partially challenges Spivak’s pessimistic formulation by presenting a woman who moves from silence toward articulation, even if complete liberation remains impossible.

The trauma induced by her son Brati’s death, functions as the catalyst for Sujata’s awakening. Brati’s death fractures her perception of reality and forces her to confront hidden social contradictions. Sujata’s recollections of Brati and her repeated attempts to understand his revolutionary commitment, is an overt display of her struggle. Memory becomes an act of resistance for her. While the state seeks to erase political dissidents through anonymity, Sujata’s remembrance restores individuality to Brati’s existence. The dramatic structure of the text intensifies this process through flashbacks, pauses, and emotionally charged dialogues that recreate the instability of traumatic memory. Sujata’s consciousness evolves through remembering. Personal grief transforms into political understanding, enabling her to recognise the violence hidden beneath middle-class respectability.

The play dramatises women’s experience. It is a suffering posture that the playwright adopts to showcase this, indicating thereby that suffering often becomes synonymous with women’s experience. Be it Sujata, Somu’s mother or Nandini, suffering defines their lives. Mahasweta Devi gives us an enlarged view of the conflict; crisis; anguish in the mind of the protagonist Sujata, as she recalls the trauma of her son’s tragic death. She interiorises time and

surveys her own mindscape. The play moves in two patterns-linear and circular. Though it is structurally formatted into a day's framework, we witness the constant intrusion of memory. Spatially too, the play is double-layered. On one side there is the political adventure of the vibrant Bengal youth which was cowed down by the government and through that we look into the familial space of the Chatterjees, and the mind of Sujata in particular.

Mahasweta Devi constructs the female consciousness in a circle; as a collage. She creates a sense of unifying experience in the process, where there are no exclusions. There is a perfect blend of the social, political and familial spaces within this circle-a comprehensive space without any place for the concepts of centre or periphery. Mahasweta Devi is bringing the personal to crisis through a political event. In the process she launches a quest for knowledge about the plight of women too. The play revolves around the central character Sujata, and other female characters- Nandini, Somu's mother and so on. It is told from their perspective and hence can rightly be categorized under women's writing. It gives voice to the otherwise 'silenced', 'self-imprisoned' women lot. Sujata's discovery of Brati and his cause finally helps her rediscover her own self and her cause- as a mother, as a woman and as a human being. Realisation dawns on her "that by not trying to forge her relationship with Brati, she too has unwittingly become a part of a complacent and selfish society" (Monti 88). She is haunted by a sense of guilt. However, with that comes the final breakdown and burst out at the engagement party. We see her passionately exhorting the audience, asking them not to be silent sufferers but to respond actively to social reality. She lashes out at the police and brutally complacent and ignorant people of richer and upper middle class. She asks, "Why don't you speak? Speak, for heaven's sake, speak, speak! How long will you endure it in silence? ...Let this 'No' of mine pierce the heart of this city, rise to the skies, be borne on the winds over the whole state to every nook and

corner....Let it tear down the happiness of everyone cooped up in his own happy happiness” (42). Her identification with Brati becomes complete and total. The play therefore is Sujata’s story rather than Brati’s.

Mahasweta Devi presents bourgeois society as morally hollow and politically indifferent. Dibyanath and the social elite prioritize status, comfort, and social respectability over justice or ethical responsibility. Their inability to comprehend Brati’s revolutionary ideals exposes the emptiness of middle-class values. Sujata’s awakening impelled by her son’s death, alienates her from this toxic environment. As she learns more about Brati’s life, she begins rejecting the complacency that defines bourgeois existence. Her growing consciousness disrupts the ideological structures that restricted and choked her for years. Sujata’s resistance helps her reconfigure her own self and identity.

Mahasweta Devi presents female consciousness as a transformative process shaped by grief, memory, and political awakening. Sujata’s journey demonstrates the possibility of resisting and destabilizing repressive structures. Devi transforms motherhood into a politically charged identity capable of confronting oppression and injustice. Sujata’s movement from silence to speech symbolizes the emergence of female agency within a violent socio-political order. The text therefore magnifies female consciousness not merely as emotional awareness but as a radical ethical and political force.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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