

**Reclaiming Her /histories), reclaiming Lives: Govind Nihalani's
'Hazaar Chaurasi ki Ma' and Mahashweta Devi's Mother of
1084.**

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Mahashweta Devi's story is about the reawakening of a mother proselytized by the death of her son against the backdrop of the systematic "annihilation" of the Naxalites in the 1970's Bengal. The uncanny death forces the apolitical mother to embark on a quest for the discovery of her 'real' son which eventually leads to her own self-discovery. The discovery entails the knowledge of certain truths or half truths about the particular socio-political milieu in which the characters are located. Sujata conditioned to play the submissive, unquestioning wife and mother for the major part of her life gains a new consciousness about her own reality (as a woman) and her immediate context (the patriarchal / feudal order). She therefore pledges to refashion herself by assimilating her son's political beliefs of ushering in a new egalitarian world without centre or margin. In Govind Nihalani's own words his film is "a tribute to that dream".

The symbiotic relation of the mother and the son which is shown to be more than just blood relation is done full justice by Nihalani. Jaya Bacchan plays to the hilt the traumatized mother (Sujata) who finds herself locked within her "solitary cell" and constantly assailed by the guilt of not knowing her son adequately when alive. The information about her son (Brati) that surfaces by her association with one Somu's mother (Seema Biswas) and Nandini (played by Nandita Das) help her discover Brati his idealism, and shed her complacency about the arrangements of the hierarchised structure that underline every interpersonal (man-woman) and social (class/caste) relationship. The transition of the mother from nurturing impotent rage to finding a voice is impeccably enacted by Jaya Bacchan in this deglamourized role. The nuances and the problematics of the mother-son relationship and the larger culture canvass are dramatized aesthetically by the veteran director. The content

and the form are absolutely in sync. The past and the present constantly intersect and interrogate each other (often violently) to jolt the spectators out of their reverie. The aftermath of the tragedy and the insights gained by her interaction with people close to Brati help her put her present in the right perspective. In the film the epiphanic moment of revelation where the mother acquires a new sense of self / identify is juxtaposed with shots of the maternity ward when Sujata savours the first sight of the new born Brati. The closing scenes where Sujata soliloquies her resolve to celebrate Brati's death anniversary (which coincidentally falls on his birth day) hereafter as only his birthday is an appendix to the same.

The sheer anomie of Brati and his comrades that trigger their rebellion against the establishment is given adequate space within the cinematic vision. In the novel Brati is more a signifier of a 'cause' than an individual. While in the film he is given subjectivity in addition to representing the new generation rebel who is against the bourgeois capitalist society. In many episodes the camera zooms into the private world of Brati in scenes where he plays *ludo* with his mother or share intimate moments with his ladylove over a session of poetry recitation. Brati in the film is more than a statistical figure 1084 of Hazaar Chaurasir Ma.

The film in a way is an extension of the novel and strives to enhance the meaning of 'rebellion' while taking a sympathetic attitude of the Naxalite movement. It attempts to reclaim the erased memories of the cadets who laid their lives to the 'cause' and who were reduced to nonentities by the system that had credited the likes of Brati with only a number in the official records. This individual story is a counter to the oppressive mechanisms of the govt. The articulate protests of Sujata that end the text and which disrupt the daughter's engagement party is channelized into concerted action by the filmmaker. Sujata is shown endorsing her son's ideology and translating it into action when she tries to stop a miscreant from escaping after he has shot a Professor in broad daylight. The anti-establishment sentiments cannot be doused in Nandini even after many years of police torture. She takes up the cause of the tribals in a remote area and finds it fulfilling. The novel highlights the discontent of a certain section (like Brati, Nandini, Sujata) against corruption, hypocrisy, Injustice but the film gives these restless energies a specific direction and legitimizes their angst / rebellion.

It is interesting to see how the story of the text Mother of 1084 is narrativised through a myriad of female voices that comes as a parenthesis to the main action of the plot in which the protagonist is made to pay off with his life in the crusade against the neo-colonial capitalist forces in post-independence India. The chequered history of the movement hijacked as it were by the Bengali middleclass(male) intellegentia however finds a revisit through the text and it's cinematic adaptation. The skewed gendered historiography of the Naxalbari Movement is adequately dealt with by both. Hence the life stories of the three women Sujata, Nandini and Somu's mother serve as a counter –narrative to the hegemonic discourse of history which so far has eclipsed women's contribution to the struggle. The strong visual presences of these women in the film, though disparate in their location of class, education and political consciousness show how deliberately or unconsciously they are an exposition of the “personal as political, and the political” praxis. Whether it is comrade Nandini coaxing the apolitical Sujata.

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.(p29)

Or Somu's mother's outburst against multiple mechanisms of oppression that define women's life

Quiet, sister? How can there be quiet with the mother's hearts burning like bodies on fire? My daughter too burns. It's not easy to give tuition and earn enough to feed two souls, mother and daughter. What can I tell her? With all the attention we paid to Somu, we never had time to her schooling.(p11)

The politics of location invariably implies a relation of structural domination and suppression. Whether it be patriarchy, State or the broader context of power. The text and the film both shed light on the heterogeneity of marginal subjectivities, thus filling up the fissures and gaps in the official historiography.

The postmodern interpretive approach to the film gives an understanding of the plurality of dissent that are contestatory, relational and temporal. The film is a submission to the counter

claim of a unilateral idea of history of the Naxalbari movement as that which is purely a class based struggle. The film by absorbing the past, present and the future into a single frame subsumes history which in this found to be one dimensional. The dissonances between different social groups or even within ideologically allied group(s) elicit different responses to subjectivity and agency. Sujata a marginal figure in the Bhadrakalok patriarchal culture is more privileged than the working class Somu's mother. Brati by virtue of his class moorings is entitled to make important strategies in the party meetings with the result that another subaltern voice that of Laltu is easily muffled within the same peer group that is ideologically founded to espouse the cause of the subaltern. The inherent contradictions in the discourse of the Naxalbari Movement is reflected in the discourse of resistance itself.

The alienation of Brati and later Sujata is acute in a society which smacks of rot right from the bottom of the economic base up to the top of the cultural superstructure. The materialist ideology that regulates the lives of most of the characters is responsible for their smugness making them blind to their illusion of power and wealth. Therefore any alteration of the existing status quo is perceived to be destabilizing and a potent threat to the existing power structure. Brati is looked upon as a deviant and is branded 'goonda' by the police inspector. The father tries to preserve the 'bhadrakalok' image of the family by refusing to send his car to Kantapukur which houses the government morgue. The film vividly picturises the sham that undermines all claims to 'respectability'. The father who keeps a mistress, the monstrosity of police excesses carried out in the name of civil society, the armchair adventurer poet whose poetry flourishes by his reification of the Naxal cause, the elite guests faking cultured sophistication are all exposed including Tuli's would be mother-in-law who makes religion an item in the consumer's itinerary. The slice of society plagued by moral corruption only vindicates the eloquent slogans of 'Naxalbari zindabad' mouthed by Brati and his friends when facing the irate mob who take their lives.

The innovations that Govind Nihalani experiment with never dilute the intensity of the subject matter. It demands rapt attention and heavy emotional investment on the part of the serious cine goers. It leaves the spectator completely saturated and enriched with images of an epoch of political turmoil which affected individual lives and has made the 'personal political'.

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