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Responses to Violence: A Review of the Women Characters in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*

Abstract: Born on 14 January, 1926 in Dhaka (then undivided India, now in Bangladesh) to artist Manish Chandra Ghatak and social activist Dharitri Devi, Mahasweta Devi grew up in an intellectual environment where she was brought up to take interest in creative writing, music, theatre and films. Gradually, she chose writing as her career and worked as an activist for development of the underprivileged. *Mother of 1084* is one of her most famous work, which was translated into an English play by Samik Bandyopadhyay. It was written on the aftermath of the urban Naxalite movement and its effect on the family members of the deceased revolutionaries. The immediate source of the story was the killing of eleven young men with their hands tied behind them in Barasat in November 1970 and the slaughter of hundreds of Naxalites in Baranagar on 12 August 1971 by the police under the instruction of the ruling party as well as the party in opposition. The paper aims to show the impact of the urban revolt on two bereaved mothers, Sujata and Somu's mother and the survived Naxalite, Nandini and their act of resistance to the patriarchal society of the post- Naxalite movement.

Keywords: Naxalite, chauvinism, patriarchy, mother, violence.

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is one of the most prolific writers India has ever witnessed and she is famous not only as a writer but as an activist fighting tirelessly for the marginalised and the down-trodden. Her works relate to the oppression meted out on the rural tribal communities in West Bengal and on Dalits and on women by the tyrant upper strata of the society. A non-believer in 'art for art's sake', Devi, in her creative works, draws the real structure of the society of her times so that her readers, at any point of time, can interact with the historical process and can visualise the real story in the described perspective. Some of her famous novels illustrating her urge of reviving history are *Jhansir Rani* (1956), a fiction

based on the life of Rani Laxmibai, a queen of a princely state in North India, who gave her life fighting against the British army when they tried to annex her kingdom; *Kavi Bandyoghoti Gayiner Jivan O Mrityu* (1966) portrayed the battle of a lower caste boy in fifteenth-century Bengal; *Andharmanik* (1966), which managed the change in Bengal's social life caused by the Bargi (Maratha cavalry) attacks amid the mid-eighteenth century; *Hajar Chaurashir Ma* (1974), which is one of Mahasweta Devi's most perused works. Written in 1973-74, it outlines the enthusiastic struggles of a mother as she tries to comprehend her child's contribution in the Naxalite Movement. The novel was later dramatised by her and further translated into English as *Mother of 1084* by Samik Bandyopadhyay. *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977) is her reproduction of the works of Birsa Munda, the leader of a tribal community and *Chhoti Munda O Tar Teer* (1979) is based on the initial seven years of the previous century in the historical backdrop of one of the clans of eastern India.

In an interview with Samik Bandyopadhyay on Aril 1983, Ms. Devi said:

Once I became a professional writer, I felt increasingly that a writer should document his own time and history. The socio-economic history of human development has always fascinated me... So I chose to resurrect older periods in history in their immediate physicality, as if they were nothing less than contemporary. The Naxalite movement between the late sixties and early seventies, within 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. (Five Plays vii-viii)

The 'Naxal Andolan', an uprising that started in 1967 in Naxalbari, a village in northern West Bengal, and soon spread to urban places in Bengal until the mid-1970s, originated as an armed movement by a small group of farmers against zamindars and they aimed to forcibly take away their lands from their masters and redistribute those among the landless. They raised their voice against the established order and adopted violent measures against their exploitation by the landlords, bureaucrats and industrialists. Their revolt was supported by the local tribal community and it began to take a larger form. The movement resulted in bloodshed and spread like wild fire in the surrounding areas. What began off as a local uprising at the village level soon started to pull support of the majority of rural and later urban mass. Common people were progressively pulled in to the vision of a class struggle to oust the existing order in favour of the oppressed. The intellectuals did not pay any attention to the problem; rather they were interested in the Bangladesh struggle for independence. And the smug elites remained indifferent to the issue. The result was that the spirit of idealism and

classless society as spread by the movement attracted the youths from both the high and low classes in the urban areas. The deprived classes participated in the movement in the hope of development of their derogatory condition and the high class youths were inspired by the formation of an ideal society as the outcome of the revolution. Simultaneously, the commotion in the society took the shape of uncontrolled unrest. The political party in power and the opposition used the police and their own ways to curb the movement and ruthless measures were adopted. The Naxalites and their families were either destroyed or ousted from the mainstream life.

This incident stirred Mahasweta Devi's creative emotion and in this way the concept of *Hajar Churashir Ma* came to her. In her introduction to *Agnigarbha* (1978), a collection of long stories about Naxalite movement, Devi states: "A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take a stand in defence of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him..." (Five Plays viii). *Hajar Churashir Ma*, the Bengali novel, first appeared in the special autumn festival issue of the periodical *Prasad* in 1973, and later it was published as an individual book in 1974. Devi sets her novel against the background of that dismal period of the demolition of the urban naxalites and its effect on the survivors and their families. In the English translation, Bandyopadhyay retains the essential suavity of style with which Devi frames her play. As Samik Bandyopadhyay notes: "The theme she had chosen this time, according to Mahasweta Devi, was 'the awakening of an apolitical mother.'" (Five Plays ix) The play has, at its base, a grieving mother, Sujata Chatterjee, a middle-aged woman who loses her son Brati in the so-called Naxal Uprising about which she barely has any idea. Her conservative husband, Dibyanath, and her other children, Jyoti, Nipa and Tuli are indifferent to the matter and are in favour of deleting any trace of Brati from their identity as if he had never existed.

At the outset of the play, two of her children are already married, Jyoti to Bini and Nipa to Amit. Moderately all of them were leading cheerful and settled lives. However, as Sujata goes ahead to recognize later, this satisfaction is just shallow. Fundamentally, Sujata makes this and a few other such revelations simply after the startling and puzzling demise of Brati, with whom she has constantly shared an exceptionally intimate relationship. The play opens with a telephone ring on 17 January, 1970, a time before dawn. Sujata wakes up and receives the call only in order to hear the news that his son Brati is dead and his body is in the Kantapukur morgue. Dibyanath and their elder son, Jyoti, hastily make preparations to hush up the news from media. When Sujata asks Jyoti to take her to Kantapukur in their car, her

husband refuses in letting their car go to the morgue. The innocent Sujata is not listened to by both the male members in their house and her silent sobs remains unheard by them,

Jyoti and Jyoti's father...(pause) are rushing about the place to hush up the news...

(pause)... and so I'm all alone... (Five Plays 5).

In the chapter "The Name of the Husband," R.S. Rajan mentions: "Since speech is identified as self-expression, and silence as self-extinction, they are closely tied into the project of subject-constitution. In a further move, since speech is regarded as a right, and the suppression of speech as a denial of that right in a democratic polity, the access to speech has defined social hegemony, just as its lack has defined subalternity in unequal social structures and situations" (Real 80). In this respect, it is seen from the very beginning that patriarchy has reduced Sujata to a nullified existence in her house and like the news of Brati's death, her voice has also been hushed up by them. At the morgue, Sujata identifies Brati's tattered body with tag number 1084 tied to the first finger of his foot. When Sujata asks the O.C. for the body of her son for cremation, she was refused. Unfortunately, 17 January was Brati's birthday.

Two years pass by and on the same date, the telephone rings again in the morning and Sujata receives the call. She learns that it was Nandini, Brati's college mate and lover, who wants to meet her. Tuli's engagement with Tony was fixed on this date without seeking the consent of her mother. Saroj Pal, now the D.C.D.D. of police, who showed no mercy in Brati's matter and did not allow Sujata to bring Brati's body home and who labelled her son as "A cancerous growth on the body of democracy !" (Five Plays 9) was also invited in the party. In fact, there was no one to listen to her opinion. Her psychological pain in the play is symbolised by her pain of appendix which, Sujata says to Tuli, will be operated after her marriage. Here Sujata's noiseless suffering is put parallel to her pain of appendix, both are silent but can be very dangerous if burst. While talking to Sujata, Tuli mentions Brati with repugnance. Sujata, unable to bear it, asks her to pronounce his name with love which Tuli debar. Rightly, has the mother of 1084 assumed:

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 typists like his father, he'd have belonged to their camp. (Five Plays 9)

Brati had no fascination for the extravagances unlike the other members of his household except Sujata. He championed the cause of the down-trodden, their financial hardship and misuse. He challenged the unreasonable morals of each one of those foundations that add to

the burden of the underprivileged. Sujata is also like Brati who is against all sorts of shams of the chauvinistic atmosphere in their house.

Sujata comes to know about the realities behind Brati's death precisely two years after her most loved child's demise. The learning process proceeds till the end of the play where she meets those people who knew Brati more than she did know and whose cause Brati crusaded. At first, she goes to Somu's house. Somu was Brati's friend who also died along with Brati. Sujata exclaims: "I didn't know Brati well enough, Somu's mother knew him better. When I visit her, I find Brati" (Five Plays 9). Somu's mother informed her that Brati had come that fatal evening to convey some messages to his comrades. However, on everyone's insistence, Brati stayed in their house that night which, pathetically, was his last night as they all got killed by the mob. The same evening Sujata meets Nandini who informs her that it was their member Anindya who was actually a spy and his betrayal caused the lethal mishap. Further, she informs Sujata about the torture and the sexual violence meted on her in the prison after she was arrested. Saroj Pal, in the name of interrogation, pressed lighted cigarette on her cheek and the grilling continued. The inhuman torture in the prison had almost blinded her and she is out on parole. However, Nandini is not broken and is stern in her stand against the state machinery. When Sujata comments that everything is over now, Nandini screams:

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. (26)

These words open Sujata's eyes to the fact that the atrocity she is facing in her personal life is almost equivalent to the violence the weaker sections are facing in the society. Thus, Sujata's meeting with Nandini and Somu's mother stirs her awareness to her ignoble and decrepit life, she has been unconscious of. May be now the realisation dawns upon her that if Brati, being her son, can stand against the ills of the society than why cannot she stand against the violence meted on her in her house and this thought draws her into a kinship with her son and his ideals.

Back home, at the engagement party, Sujata witnesses all the hypocrites of the upper class society making false statements to fortify their status which Sujata hates. Saroj Pal arrives to wish the couple and remarks that he cannot delay as "Mass action begins in Baranagar and Kashipur today." (30) The party progresses and all the hosts and guests dance in the tune of their shamelessness. Sujata unable to take it anymore bursts her grievance:

Where will bullets pierce the wind? Where— again? Where will Brati run to? Where? (*Addressing to the audience*) Why don't you speak? Speak, for heaven's sake, speak, speak, speak! How long will you endure it in silence? Where is the place where's there's no killer, no bullets, no prison, no vans? (*Goes round the stage.*) Where can you escape it all Brati, in Calcutta, in West Bengal, from north to south, from east to west? You can't be in the run any longer, Brati. Brati, come back (Five Plays 31).

From this point onwards, Sujata no longer remains a docile housewife and mother but becomes an active revolutionary like her beloved son. Finally, the appendix bursts which symbolically refers to the rise of Sujata from her mute state to an active state of existence; Dibyanath and the others run up to her which shows that her rising from her state of stupor has shaken them and made them pay attention to her state. It also signifies that she will no longer remain a mere pawn the hands of patriarchy in her house and will have a voice of her own.

Apart from Sujata, Nandini and Somu's mother are the other women characters in the play who are the victims of violence. Sujata suffers from domestic violence as evident in our discussion while Nandini and Somu's mother suffer from social hostility and the violence by the state machinery. But they all in some way or the other are the target of male chauvinism and are made to suffer by the patriarchal society. Somu's mother, completely without voice against the injustice meted out on them and in the sorrow of losing her son and husband later on, only sheds her tears as her protest. But she is not completely broken as she continues to live her life amidst misery with her daughter bearing the flame of a burning soul beneath her tearful eyes. She says: "Quiet sister? How can there be quiet with the mother's heart burning like bodies of fire? My daughter too burns" (Five Plays 10).

Nandini, in the mythological context, is the name of the calf of Kamdhenu gifted to Vashistha by Brahma who could fulfil all his desires. In this play, Nandini, the ideological daughter of a lawyer, plunged into the Naxalite movement not for her benefit but for the fulfilment of the desires and the welfare of the deprived. After Brati and her other associates were killed, she was arrested and inhuman torture was implemented on her psychologically, sexually and physically. As Chitra Jayatilake writes in her article, "Rebels and Biopolitics: Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*": "The spectacle of tying Nandini to a chair alludes to tethering animals and the image of Nandini as an untamable beast shows how detainees are brutalised and dehumanised. Nandini's position is a significant case in point of a cessation of law, for Nandini endures police violence prior to any juridical edict" (76). She was almost

blinded by the abuse in jail. But she is not devoid of hope and reflects on the reason of their failure as “an overdose of romanticism” (Five Plays 19). She hopes to continue her revolt against the system after her treatment is over. Her voice, while narrating her torture in jail, denotes authority, it has the confidence of objection to the advances of the police and her hostility against the state is evident in her scream which symbolises non-cooperation. Therefore, we cannot call her a voiceless victim but an active subject asserting her individuality and devotion in her ideology.

Similarly, Sujata, finally cured of her state of trance makes her final speech, which is very important in the play in numerous ways. Her anger against the lassitude of the audience magnifies her concern about the welfare of everyone as the silence of the common people to the abuses inflicted on them is the cause for the birth and increase of societal inequality and their protesting voice can only diminish these social evils and bring an end to it. Though Brati is dead, she calls Brati aloud and she says that she doesn't want to lose him again. Here, she does not confine herself to being the mother of Brati alone but rises to the stature of a universal mother where she represents all the mothers who may lose their children in the mass action at Baranagar, Kashipur or any other place. And Brati here is not only her son whom she had lost but all the sons who are going to be the victims of the state machinery. In this sense, Sujata Chatterjee is not only the mother of 1084 but she is the mother of all the individuals who fought against the unequal laws of the system and sought the welfare of the down-trodden and strove towards the concept of an ideal society where everyone will be treated equally. This transformation of the mother of 1084 is what Mahasweta Devi hinted as the awakening of an apolitical mother.

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