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Mother of 1084 by Mahasweta Devi: A search for real home

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Abstract

Home is the place, where human being is provided with the life of satisfaction and tranquility. There are some people who dream to see the society, nation, country to be the home. A concept in the Indian culture, 'Vasudyka Kutumbam' which means 'whole universe is one family' is the perception and the vision of some of great beings on Earth. These human beings, who are the embodiment of virtues, go the extent of sacrificing their life for ideology of the betterment of the world. Noble souls carry noble goals. They strived to see the house and society to be like home.

The play *Mother of 1084* of Mahasweta Devi has Sujata and Brati to be the main characters, who are extremely dissatisfied with the prevalent conditions of the home and the society, and in striving to establish the egalitarian society that is free from greed, injustice, horrors of suppression and exploitation, they have become martyrs. The quest for the establishment of the real home has provided an aspiration for them to live die.

Keywords: Egalitarian Society, martyrs, vasudyka-kutumbam, suppression, alienation, Naxalism.

1. Introduction

The play *Mother of 1084* is the original translation of Mahasweta Devi's Bengali play *Hazar Chaurasir Maa*. In the seventies, Mahasweta Devi dramatized one of her major works *Mother of 1084*, and then four of her finest stories convinced that as plays they would be more accessible to the largely illiterate audience she wanted to reach. It is a play of 12 scenes. The plot is condensed into the scenic space of single day through the device of the mother recalling, a year after the events that followed the morning when she was summoned to identify her son lying dead in the police mortuary. Through the device of dramatic condensation, Devi achieves an admirable effect of concentration in *Hazar Chaurasir Maa* ^[1]. Samik Bandopadhyay's translation of Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* has been looked upon as a Communist Manifesto, but it could be well translated as a study of Suppression. G.P. Deshpande in his *Anthology on Indian English Drama* introduces the play with a brief note:

Mahasweta Devi, very eminent writer of fiction,
Has been active with tribals of West Bengal and Bihar.
In this play she looks at the Urban Bhadrolok Bengal
In the context of the rising people's movement.
She offers us a view of politics which is both
Moving and disturbing ^[2].

Mother of 1084 provides a documentation of the Naxalite Movement of the seventies. This was an important aspect of the political climate of West Bengal. The Naxalites raised their voice against the established order and fought for the cause of the poor who are exploited by the landlords, industrialists and bureaucrats. The oppressive and inflexible attitude of these highhanded men forced a group of young men to take up cudgel against them. The revolt of the farmers of Naxalbari added fuel to the smoldering sense of resentment against capitalist Economy. The pique and rancor spread like wild fire among the people of the adjoining areas.

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They are not only peeved, but they feel aghast capitalist at the fact that the different political parties and intellectuals tacitly agreed to such tyranny and oppression. The influx of refugees from Bangladesh further aggravated the situation. In fact, the intellectuals seemed to be more concerned about the Bangladesh problems than the one ravaging the people within the country. In the words of Nandini,

We are not allowed the use of the press, paper type-lead explain our views. And yet there are all those journals that claim to be sympathetic to our cause. Betrayal. Every supposedly sympathetic piece tries shrewdly and skill-fully to prove use adventurists-romatics. Betrayal. Even when we were being killed; All the writers and all the periodicals were crying over Bangladesh, they had nothing to say about West Bengal. And the same ones now write lamentations about us (9.21)

The indignant protest against the authoritarian system was ruthlessly handled by the government. The upper class was completely indifferent. They were not sympathetic towards the cause. They could neither spare time nor the interest to pay attention.

In the words of Samik Bandyopadhyay, in *Mother of 1084*, Sujata, mother of corpse number 1084, can find a moral rationale for son's revolt only when she can piece together exactly two years after the killing, a part of her son's life she had never known. Unaware in her situation of life of the politics of economic deprivation and exploitation, the more she can see 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 can 'find' her son and holds him to herself only when she can find in his death a fulfillment that she has yearned for and never dared to claim for herself. The one day in the life of Sujata, spent in 'discovering' Brati for the first time in a series of encounters with people beyond her circuit of experience, is spent in forging a connection with Brati or rather with what he strove and died for. Hence it is Sujata's story, not Brati may be Sujata Brati's.

Sujata, a traditional upper middle class lady and an apolitical mother 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. To be more emphatic and supportive to the context the stage directions are moulded accordingly. They give the indication that it is the 'Seventeenth January Nineteen Seventy'. A telephone rings as an early morning glow spreads over half of the stage; it means that the other half of the stage remains in darkness – the presence of light and darkness indicates the duality of life. This dramatic device is used to hint at the fact the happy house hold shall soon be engulfed in the shadow of sorrow. A voice on the other end of the line brusquely questions her relationship with Brati Chatterji. She is called to Kantapukur to 'identify the body' that is in the dehumanized form. Brati's father Dibyanath refuses to send the car to the police morgue to identify their dead son with the fear of stigma to his family as their son is involved in the anti – establishment's activities. Moreover, taking help of Jyoti, their elder son, rushes to hush up the matter. Brati's father sees to it that all traces of Brati, the rebel, the errant Naxalite, are completely

obliterated so that he can hold up their bourgeois' family name.

Dibyanath Chatterji, a true representative of patriarchal society, least bothered to value the feelings and sentiments of Sujata towards her son and proceeds ahead with his plan of action. This cold attitude of father shocks Sujata a lot. Not only he refuses to send the car, but also ignored her, in spite of her being the second important member of the family.

SUJATA. (Uncomprehending, in a panic)What will You hush up? What are you talkin g about?
DIBYANATH. Jyoti, there's no time to waste He goes out.(1.4).

After two years exactly on the same day that is seventeenth of January, accidentally it is a day of birth and death of Brati, Sujata gets a phone call. It is from Nandini, fellow comrade of in the mission of Brati, who is released from the imprisonment on Parole for medical treatment due to the brutal interrogation of the police. Sujata accepted to meet Nandini. The plight of Sujata is clearly can be comprehended from her words:

SUJATA. Nandini... Yes. This is Brati's mother... O. K. I'll come right at 4'o clock then.... I'm not going to the bank today. It's Tuli's engagement... (3.6)

Sujata is subjected to humiliation in her home because her presence is ignored. She is not consulted in fixing the date of the betrothal ceremony of her youngest daughter Tuli and either the death or birth anniversary day of Brati is observed by none of the members of the family. Because, Tuli's engagement is decided to be celebrated on the day of Brati's birth and death anniversary.

Sujata feels intensely alienated herself from the members of 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 Nepa's husband, Amit or a hardened fraud like Tony, or had run after the typists like father, he'd have belonged to their camp (3.9)

The hypocritical life led by the members of the family is revealed in the words of Sujata. 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. A reader can analyze 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 is secretly languished and given his life. She embarks now on the mission to know her son better, to understand intricacies of the cause for which he has fought. With this intentions she visits Somu's mother and Nandini. Sujata tries hard to come to terms with her loss. But it is a tough fight. She hardly find any sympathetic members of the house around her.

Grief brings the two mothers together. When Sujata meets Somu's mother, the crisis that envelops society comes to them. She is informed how her son has taken plunge into the revolution. The words of Somu's mother express her grief over the loss of her son.

SOMU'S MOTHER. 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 tuitions and earn
Enough to feed two souls, mother and what
Can I tell her? With all the attention we
Paid to Somu, we never had time to look to
Her schooling. And Somu had to leave us
Behind, all at sea! To think of that (She
Break into weeping.) (4.10)

Besides the grief, the other social ailment, gender discrimination is also highlighted. Much prominence is given to the boys in the family rather than the girls. It is a common feature of the patriarchal society. Somu is paid much attention. When they lose Somu it has become very difficult for that family to get survived. This gender discrimination reminds us the story of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande, where the protagonist Sara is discriminated by her own mother and her brother Dhruva is treated as a blessing into their family. Sara, being a girl she is considered as a burden to the family. Her brother's birthdays are celebrated with much joy and fun, filled with rituals and rites when compared to her birthdays. She is treated as a second in preference and special attention is given to her brother^[3].

Nevertheless, Somu's mother appreciates the honest commitment Brati has in the mission he has opted. When Brati comes to know that a mole has leaked information of the movement, he has been to them to warn about the imminent threat. They are all hunted down. Somu's mother is all praise for Brati who has sacrificed his life in order to save the lives of fellow comrades. Because, he has been there like an angel to save the other boys. Despite his efforts, the boys were killed in police encounter. Now for this, Sujata finds solace in the fact that though her son is criticized by the members of the family, as unworthy Naxalite, he is praised by the others. He is not regarded as a miscreant in the hierarchy. But this sort of oneness between Sujata and Somu's mother is not long lasted as Somu's sister discourages the visits of Sujata to their house. Because Somu's sister is threatened by the crowd who killed Somu and it has become very difficult for them to get survived because of the visits of Sujata. As she is the sister of a Naxalite, she is denied of the opportunity of the job to earn their livelihood. In the words of Somu's mother

SOMU'S MOTHER. It hurts, sister. But we can't
Annoy them and stay there. Somu's sister never
Got a job in a school. She's always in a temper.
She rages at me, all this for that one son of yours!
They won't let me work to earn food for my stomach
(8.17)

During the conversation with Somu's mother she recollects her affectionate and intimate relationship with her son, Brati. As they play Ludo, they discuss the many small happenings of the day to day life. Casually Brati 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 Naxal 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 skillful and strategic and manipulated plan of action. She is great introvert, and keep herself undisturbed by the external world. This indifferent and passive attitude to the external world has kept her in the world of ignorance, especially about her son's inclination towards the Naxalism, though she loves him so dearly and who is practically the succor for her existence amidst the material minded and selfish members of the family. Therefore she has taken 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 that are 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 has taken a dynamic part. Her horizon of thinking is from reformed from self-grief to the recognition of the solemn anguish of Nandini. She learns the reason for the failure of the movement and revolution. Many youth are tempted by money, power and job and these factors enabled them to join this revolutionary movement and these temptations are meaningless to the zealous fighters. Some persons like Anindya are recruited in this movement by the honest, conscientious and diligent worker like Nitu, and their integrity is unquestioned Nandini thinks that their belief is meaningless. '*No, no it was an overdose of romanticism*' (19) but unfortunately these recruiters are the police informers and mislead the fellow recruiter by exhibiting the fake enthusiasm and earnestness.

NANDINI. Money jobs, and power didn't mean a
Thing to us. But these were the temptations that
Seduced those who had joined us only to betray
Us. You should not underestimate the power
Of those temptations. (Pause) That's why I never
Wondering (19)

Nandini says that Anindya joins this revolutionary movement with his own programme, as they have their own programme. And his programme of betrayal. That programme was their cause. While narrating this to Sujata she cherishes the moments she spends with Brati before they involve in the movement. Then she continues to narrate how she is taken into police custody, put behind bar in the solitary cell. She is subjected to various tortures physical, mental torture even to the extent of sexual assault.

NANDINI. (Takes off her glasses, puckers her
Eyes, puts her glasses on again)
My right eye is blind from the gleam of
Thousands watts lamps. There's a little
Sight left in the left eye (26)

Thus she lets Sujata to realize that it has been more tragic "for a living Nandini than for a dead Brati". Nandini was

exposed to the extreme savage treatment by the so-called representative of the state government Sarojpal, the Police Officer, when puffs at the cigarette, and presses it again to Nandini during interrogation. This context provides a very good evidence of the state government repressive methods to suppress the Movement. Nandini was more depressed. It can be understood when she utters the following words

NANDINI. I sometimes wonder, shall I forget
Brati too some day? I wonder, all those All
The bloodshed, were they all useless? I
I wonder, all the arrests, the killing and the
Bloodshed that continue, all that for nothing (25)

Sujata makes a vain attempt to reassure Nandini, as it is very tough for Nandini to get comforted – ‘*No. No. No. No. It was never quiet, nothing is quiet. Nothing is changed*’ (25). Thousands of young men rot in the prisons without trial. Those are denied for the status of political prisoners to be given. They are subjected to inhumane treatment. Torture is still continued with more secrecy. In such a complicated situations it is infact impossible to conduct themselves to be quiet and calm. Further Nandini reveals her discontent over the indifferent society. It is really pain some to see that many people are least bothered about the depravation 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 he denied to accept ‘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!*’ (9) 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 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.

Bounded by a sense of moral responsibility, she does go through all the rituals and ceremonies connected with Tuli’s engagement, but during the party, she maintains stiff, studied silence. Her insistence on wearing a plain, white sari for the party is also a significant gesture. In the betrothal ceremony of Tuli, while talking to Mrs. Kapadia, Dibyanath accuses Sujata for misleading their son Brati which has led him to rebel. “*Bad company, bad friends, the mother’s influence*” (29) Dibyanath is the man of such concept, that it is exclusively the responsibility of the woman to bear and rear the children. But it is general perception in the society that father and mother play an important and equal role in bringing up the children. It is very ridiculous to see that when the children get spoiled, complete blame is thrown on mother. Women have always been treated like beasts of burden and an object for pleasure. She remains calm as a sacrificial animal with moist eyes ready to accept whatever

life has in for her. We find how men in the veil of discrimination take women for granted. Her husband’s accusation that she is responsible for Brati’s death accelerates the process of recognition of her psychological moorings. She now feels relieved of the burden of guilt she has all along been bearing. In such recognition. What pains Sujata is the indifference shown by the people to the cause and to the sacrifice of youths like Brati, Neetu, Somu and the like. She points to the audience and says:

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. (31)

With this outburst, Sujata collapses on the stage 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.

At the end of the play the metamorphosis of Sujata can be perceived by the readers where she has raised herself to be a Universal Mother, In her journey of discovery of her favourite son Brati, she comes to know with the reality of the death of one thousand and eighty four rebels. In her attempt to understand the sad and violent realities of the Naxalite movement, this mother comes face to face with her sense of estrangement from the double standard- ridden bourgeois society to which she belongs.

The plight of Sujata reminds us the play *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller, where mother whose evasion of responsibility for a decision in wartime which led to the loss of twenty-one lives says, “*Sure he [Larry] was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess, they were, I guess they were*” (3.89) [4], Sujata identifies herself as the mother of all youths who step unknowingly into the trap laid by the vested interests.

The true picture of Patriarchal Society is delineated by Mahasweta Devi, where woman are treated as second sex since the dawn of the civilization. Since ancient times, man has acquired and occupied a superior status to woman in the society. Her decisions, needs, and wants are always misinterpreted. It is really noteworthy point to examine in this context about the great universal dramatist, the father of English literature, who has great philosophical approach commented on women in his *Hamlet* one of the famous tragedies *Frailty, thy name is woman!* [5] Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* has highlighted the victimized position of a woman in the society and she opines ‘*one is not born, but rather becomes a woman*’ [6]

Thus the play *Mother of 1084* can be read as the play, that attempts to explore the real home against the suppressive measures employed in the home, society as well as state level. Even in the play *Water* of Mahasweta Devi, we come across the same situation. The people who are championed for the cause of the marginalized, who look forward for the

egalitarian society in which the concept of inequality does not have any place, are labeled as Naxals and brutally massacred by the Government. When the Dalits-Tribals raise their voice against injustice, against vicious landowners and money-lenders like the Pujari, are branded as Naxalites and tortured and ruthlessly encountered... As Dhura puts it: '*The cry of Naxals extremism is only to justify the harassment on us*' (99) ^[7].

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