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## THE THEME OF SUBALTERNEITY IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *MOTHER OF 1084*

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### ABSTRACT

This story revolves around Sujata, a strong and modern mother, who grapples with the brutal loss of her son Brati. Brati, a rebel, was killed by the state due to his ideology advocating the elimination of class enemies, collaborators, and counter-revolutionaries. His corpse is assigned the number 1084 in the morgue. The narrative unfolds as Sujata reflects on her son's life, from his birth to his revolutionary actions. She meets Brati's close accomplice, attempting to justify his actions and revolutionary mind-set. Throughout the novel, Sujata emerges as a resilient woman who fights against the odds and her story vividly portrays the impact of political upheaval on families and the human stories that emerge from such turbulent times.

**Key words:** Subalterneity, Revolution, Political upheaval, Patriarchy, Annihilation, Ideology

Mahasweta Devi was born in a privileged, middle-class Bengali family on January 14, 1926. She is an extraordinary woman who has written and fought for the marginalized tirelessly for the past six decades. She is a rare fusion of an activist and a writer working for the betterment of subaltern while also protesting against the atrocities of the down trodden by the main stream society. Mahasweta Devi's literary oeuvre comprises of stories which are woven around contemporary social and political realities, a majority of which span a reasonably free time range in independent India, and are located in fictitious or real settings. She is a voracious reader, writer and an activist. She writes for all oppressed people. 'Jansir Rani' in 1956 is her first major work, a fictionalized biography of the women ruler of the princely state in north India who fought against the British in 1857 in the first war of independence. There came a considerable change in her selection of themes for her creative writing in 1965 after visiting Palamau "a mirror of tribal India" as she calls. She started writing for subaltern to improve the living standards of the poor, outcastes, tribal's etc. To her writing and activism come hand in hand, writing is activism and activism is writing. She tries to tear the curtain of darkness with her activist writings. She writes for the people who are neglected by the government and the main stream society. She walked miles and miles on her foot in West Bengal and Bihar to get the firsthand knowledge of the existing conditions. She documents many contemporary issues which are neglected by the media and the government. Tribals and outcastes call her 'Ma' or 'Didi' for her concern and service.

'My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness, a curtain that separates the mainstream society from poor and the deprived. But then why my India alone? As the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our own true faces in the process.' (Mahasweta Devi, Ramon Magsaysay award acceptance speech, 1997)

At the outset, it is essential for us to know what a subaltern is. Literally the subaltern refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. Subaltern is characterized by subordination, exploitation, hegemony by the superior on

the inferior which has become omni-present in the current Indian scenario. The term ‘subaltern’, originally used by Antonio Gramsci for ‘proletariat’ and other working class groups, refers to the condition of subordination in terms of class, gender, caste and age etc. In post-colonial theory, the term Subaltern describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society — a subaltern is a person rendered without human agency, by his or her social status.

*Mother of 1084* deals with the traumatic experiences in the life of a sensitive mother. The setting of the play is Kolkata of the 1970's. The protagonist, Sujata, has been a witness to the horrifying situation during the suppression of the Naxalite uprising in which her own son, Brati, the corpse number 1084, takes part and becomes a martyr. Unable to free herself from the clutches of the patriarchal society, she fails to discover her inner soul. But after one year of Brati's death, Sujata discovers the true cause of her son's death by meeting the people outside her respectable existence who are very close to Brati. In the process of unravelling the soul of Brati, she discovers herself. She feels punished for not knowing her son though they are very close to each other. She decides to continue his mission to uplift the subalterns. So, at the end, she appeals to the audience to fight against the corrupt society which reduced the young rebels to the level of a mere number which is given to the dead only to be identified by their mothers.

*Mother of 1084* appeared as ‘*Hazaar Chaurasi ki Ma*’ in Bengali in the special autumn festival issue of the periodical, Prasad, in 1973. Later it was translated into several Indian languages. It was made into a film starring Jaya Bachchan as Sujata and Anupam kher as Dibyanath. Set in the urban Bengal, the play realistically portrays the climactic phase of the annihilation of the leaders of the masses and its aftermath during 1970's. The play combines the issue of subalterns' Naxalite movement with the agony of a sensitive mother who is forced to part from her dear son in the name of the suppression of the movement by the state.

*Mother of 1084* is a moving story of an apolitical mother. The protagonist, Sujata is one of the victims who witnesses the horrifying situation during the suppression of the Naxalite uprising in which her own son, Brati, the corpse number 1084, takes part and becomes a martyr. Unable to free herself from the clutches of the male dominated society, Sujata fails to realize her own being. But after her discovery of Brati through the confrontation with people outside her respectable existence, Sujata does not remain a passive sufferer. She decides to carry out what her son left unfulfilled. So, in the end, she exhorts the audience to be active and revolt against the establishment that aims at reducing the young rebels to the level of a mere number which is given to the dead only to be identified by their mothers.

If we go into the details of Naxalbari Movement in 1970's, the CPI (M) party participated in the polls and formed a coalition united front government in west Bengal with the Bangla Congress. This led to a schism in the party with younger cadres, including the Charu Majumdar, accusing the CPI (M) of betraying the revolution. On the 25th May 1967 the rebel cadres led by Charu Majumdar launch a peasant's uprising at Naxalbari in the Darjeeling district of west Bengal after a tribal youth, who had a judicial order to plough his land, was attacked by ‘goons’ of local landlords on the March 2nd. Tribes retaliated and started forcefully capturing back their lands.

The CPI (M) - led united front government cracked down on the uprising and in 72 days of the “rebellion”, a police sub-inspector and nine tribes were killed. The Congress government at the Centre supported the crackdown. The incident echoed throughout India and Naxalism was born. Moreover, the origin and seeds of Naxalism in India goes back to Lenin who fought the Russian Revolution. Meanwhile revolutionaries in Calcutta, who had also been running a campaign against revisionism, took up a massive campaign in support of the Naxalbari uprising. The walls of the college streets were filled with posters saying many slogans and the ideals of Naxalbari Movement attracting youth to fight against the unjust in the society.

The protagonist Brati and his team are the members of this Naxalbari Movement who wish to build an egalitarian society. Their determination in bringing a change in the society demanded their lives and the sufferers are the members of their families. The Naxalbari movement, a radical Maoist movement, marks a significant moment in the postcolonial history of west Bengal, as well as in the larger context of India. Mahasweta Devi says:

In the seventies, in the Naxalite movement, I saw exemplary integrity, selflessness and guts to die for a cause. I thought I saw history in the making and decided that as a writer it should be my mission to document it. As a writer, I feel a commitment to my times, to mankind and to myself. .... I set an apolitical mother's quest to know her martyred Naxalite son, to know what he stood for; for she had not known the true Brati ever, as long as he had been alive. Death brings him closer to her through her quest. (*Mother of 1084 xi*)

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* attempts to show the uniqueness of her dramatic vision in blending the domestic tragedy in the life of Sujata with the political scenario in West Bengal of the 1970's. It dragged the lives of many families desperate. The number 1084 may symbolize the number of people killed in the suppression of Naxalite Movement. It can be understood that it is not the story of Sujata alone, but it is the story of many subaltern sufferers victimized in the name of the suppression of the revolt. The play is not just a mere account of the inhuman suppression of the Naxalite revolt in Bengal, but it is the tragedy of an "apolitical" mother who awakens one day to a greater truth in the way of understanding her son who died a martyr. We travel along with Sujata in unraveling the true cause of the death of Sujata's son Brati. She penetrates deep into the thoughts of her son Brati after his death and in this travel, Sujata realizes her own soul beneath.

The play is enacted in a single day in the life of the principal character, Sujatha, the mother of corpse number 1084, sensitive wife and a loving mother who is subalternized and treated as a mere cog in her own household. She could truly be identified as a sensitive human being in the presence of her younger son Brati. Though she is closely related to her son Brati, she fails to understand his true self and the purpose behind his sacrifice which she realizes only after his death. Her travel towards the facts behind the cause of Brati's sacrifice continues until the end of the play where Sujatha awakens her own soul and finds satisfaction in Brati's memories. The play is divided into twelve scenes with an outstanding and uniform structure. The beginning of the play introduces us to the identification of corpse 1084 and in the middle towards the discovery of Brati and the end with Sujatha's passionate appeal to the people.

Sujatha Chatterjee is one of those subaltern victims who are forced to succumb to the power of the elite. But Brati, the younger son of Sujatha, like other youth is disappointed with the present social system and fights against it dreaming an egalitarian society. Sujatha's emotional attachment to Brati also emanates because of the fact of their common ideological leanings. Brati smashes the secured wall of his privileged birth when he revolts against the woes of the subaltern. On the other hand, Sujatha is caught in her inner conflict between a sympathetic mother and a silent protester against the immoral life which her household stands for. "With Brati, they've cast me too in the opposite camp. If Brati had been like Jyothi, 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 their camp." (11)

This conflict in her mind is materialized by the indifference of her family members towards the death of Brati. Even the death of Brati is hushed up by Dibyanath Chatterjee to keep his public stature untarnished. His false prestige does not permit him to send his car to his wife for identifying Brati's corpse. Sujatha, after the death of Brati encounters the callous nature of her family and hence tries to, she psychologically fuses herself with the memories of Brati who has sacrificed his life for the noble cause of subaltern upliftment. The very opening scene of the play reveals Dibyanath Chatterjee's character in hushing up the news of Brati's death and his detachment towards his own son to keep his self-respect untarnished in the society. The following opening dialogue illustrates this:

VOICE (off). 460001?

SUJATA. Yes.

VOICE. Dibyanath Chatterjee's house?

SUJATA. Yes. Who are you?

SUJATA. (Surprised). Mrs. Chatterjee.

VOICE. What's Brati's Chatterjee's relationship with you?

SUJATA. Son.

VOICE. Son? Come to Kantapukur.

Sujata (uncomprehending). Kantapukur? (*Five Plays* 3)

On receiving a sudden call to identify her son at kantapukur, Sujata stands shocked and perplexed. What agonizes her more is her husband's apathy, when he refuses to send her in their car. Sujata questions her husband then.

SUJATA. But why? Why can't the car be there?

DIBYANATH. I need the car. I'm going to Chaudhari. You ring up Dutta. Tell him ... why don't you go over straight away? Jyoti, there may be time still. Isn't there a relation of your mother-in-law's in the police? ... Ring him up. Chaudhari must help hush it up. (3-4)

The family members of Sujata are eager to hush up the incident instead of rushing to see Brati. It is very clear that Sujata is the only one in the family who could not understand the situation. Jyothi, Sujata's elder son and Dibyanath are aware of the mass killing in the city but she is unaware of the things going on.

*Mother of 1084* satisfies all the requirements of a successful play by introducing the principal characters in the very first scene, and by also revealing the conflict in the very beginning of the play. Dibyanath, Sujatha, Brati and Jyothi emerge in the beginning and the remaining characters emerge from the story gradually. The gendered subalterns like Sujatha, Somu's mother and sister and Nandini are ill-treated by the patriarchal powers in multiple ways. Sujatha is belittled by her own family, Somu's mother and sister are insulted by the society around, Nandini is looked down upon by Saroj Pal, a callous bureaucrat. Sujatha suffers suppressing her feelings and succumbs to the circumstances by the patriarchal institution silently without revolting against her uncorrupted and unethical husband. She faces all the misdeeds of her husband silently and protests them by going out on a bank job but rarely exhibits her indifference. She silently does all the familial duties without complaining and finds contentment and salvation at the time of spending and sharing moments with Brati who is the only one who shares the ethical and moral values of Sujatha. Ironically, however much they value each other's feelings, Sujatha does not know anything about the cause of Brati's death or the cause he had championed for. In fact, the dramatist here aptly reflects the situation when many members of the upper castes also sacrificed their lives for the noble cause of subaltern upliftment during the Naxalite movement in the 1970's. But the representatives of the ruling elite consider subaltern revolt as a cancerous growth on the body of democracy. Brati, though belongs to the group of elites fights for the subaltern. Hence, there is a conflict between the exploiter and the exploited. *Mother of 1084* presents Brati, an angry, aggressive and revolutionary young man, as a product of a middle-class family who had to witness a certain socio-political scenario, and realized such factors of life and time that played crucial roles to change him gradually. His father epitomized the elite, Bourgeois class and his maltreatment towards his wife, Brati's mother. Brati sees nothing but cowardice, opportunism and injustice everywhere. He sacrifices himself to the Naxalite movement along with his like-minded friends and it is after his death that his mother transgresses traditional patriarchal norms to discover herself and her power within.

"For him, the mission of life is to emancipate the mankind from the clutches of the hydra-headed exploitative mechanism and create a classless society where people enjoy equal rights" - E. Satyanarayana observes in *The Plays of Mahasweta Devi* (2010).

"High-caste elites had always needed coercive power to keep low castes, peasants, workers, and tribal groups in place. Elites needed states to suppress revolution" writes David Ludden in his essay *A Brief History of Subalternity*. (Reading *subaltern studies* 9)

Nandini, a crucial member in this revolt who is closely related to Brati narrates the true cause of Brati's death after two years to Sujatha. Sujatha blames herself for not identifying the inner self of Brati despite the intense emotional bonding between them. Brati keeps his true self in secrecy afraid of the familial sentiments which may prevail upon his revolutionary fervor. The predicament of Nandini after the death of Brati is more miserable than dead Brati. She is tortured brutally by Saroj Pal in the name of finding Naxalite activities. She even loses her vision of an eye in the inhuman torture inside the prison walls.

SAROJ PAL (*the same voice*). What was your relationship with Brati Chatterjee? Was he a friend? (*Bends close to her, lights a cigarette, presses the lighted cigarette to Nandini's cheek, she screams.*) What was your relationship with Brati Chatterjee? Was he a friend? (*He puffs at the cigarette, and then presses it again to Nandini's cheek. Nandini screams. The questions and the pattern continue.*) (Scene 10, 33)

Nandini, who is out on parole, reveals the horrors of the torture she faced in the prison and the inhuman suppression of the movement to Sujata. Despite the healing of her physical wounds, her psychological scars never heal. Sujatha realizes that it's more tragic for a living Nandini than for a dead Brati. After discovering the noble cause behind the of her son's death, Sujata decides to continue the movement started by her son by supporting the aspiring youth who dream for a classless society. Nandini is also equally anguished over Brati's death:

NANDINI. I sometimes wonder, shall I forget Brati too someday? I wonder, all those deaths, all the bloodshed, were they all useless? I wonder, all the arrests, the killing and the bloodshed continue, all that for nothing? (scene 11, 34)

This is the voice of an angry young woman who has faced the inhuman torture inside the prison walls and still holds her guts in striving for a change in the society. Her crippled eye does not intimidate her, rather she complains about Sujata's complacency. Nandini says:

"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?" (35)

Sujata is unaware of the facts behind the death of her son and betrayal of Anindiya, a member of Brati's group but worked in favor of Saroj Pal, she gains an insight into true facts to comprehend the entire situation with the narration of Nandini and Somu's mother. She meets Somu's mother in the early afternoon

and Nandini the same day. Somu's mother is the eye witness for the horrible night when Brati, Somu and Bijit, are mercilessly killed by the mob. Somu's mother narrates the incident of that night to Sujata. She says: "There're thousands of them, young men, all homeless. All those families banished from the colony. It leaves one sick at heart even to think of them. I can't think anymore." (12) Her words give us a clarity of the predicament of subaltern youth at the time of the revolt. Even the innocents are killed with suspicion.

At the end of their conversation Somu's mother requests her to stop visiting them as they are warned by the mob to forbid her visits. Somu's elder sister was denied a job in a school due to her relationship with Somu as they are branded a Naxalite family. Here we can clearly sense a bit of an autobiographical element of the author, as Devi was denied a public office because of her interests towards leftist policies. As Sujata belongs to a higher status and Dibyanath Chatterjee could hush up the incident without coming in papers, she could continue in her job and their public stature is untarnished, but it is quite difficult for Somu's mother to lead the life as they are always watched by the mob. Sujata is deliberately denied by both Somu's mother and Nandini to visit them as their life is transparent. This makes Sujata heart heavy with pain as she could find consolation for Brati's death by visiting Nandini and Somu's mother. But they are wary of guarding eyes. Hence, they request Sujata to not visit them again. This adds to the maternal anguish of Sujata and she considers Nandini's words as a punishment for not knowing her son. "I won't go to Somu's mother again. I won't come to you. I won't go to the places where Brati exists. Maybe that's my punishment for not knowing Brati." (Scene 11, 36)

In the last scene of the play we see Tuli's engagement which is arranged on the same day of Brati's death. No one bothers Brati except Sujata, her soul is restless as it is travelling with Brati and his ideals. Her encounter with Saroj Pal in the party and his information about the mass action in Baranagar makes her perceive Brati in all youth and at all places. In a moment of frustration, she addresses the audience thus: (*Addressing the audience*) Why don't you speak? Speak, for heaven's sake, Speak, Speak, Speak! How long will you endure in silence? Where is the place where there is 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 on the run any longer, Brati, Brati, come back, I found you today, Brati. If the siren screeches again, if the vans race and Saroj Pal chases another young man somewhere, you'll be lost again. (Scene 12, 41- 42)

Sujata continues to speak on Brati's idealism and his relentless crusade for uplifting the subalterns. At the end of the play she faints down on the floor due to the burst of her appendix. During the turbulent period of the Naxalbari Movement in the 1960s, Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* serves as a painful investigation of the socio-political landscape in West Bengal. The play undertakes an in-depth investigation into the elements that played a role in the development of this revolutionary movement and the appeal that it held for the younger generation during that era. Devi offers light on the reasons, ideals, and effects linked with the Naxalbari Movement by utilising complex character depictions and emotive storytelling. Her work is a testament to the power of storytelling.

A radical left-wing movement that intended to address issues of land reform, class exploitation, and social inequality, the Naxalbari Movement had its beginnings in the village of Naxalbari, which is located in the state of West Bengal. The movement gained hold among young people, notably students and intellectuals, who were disillusioned with the socio-economic and political systems that were in place at the time. The attractiveness of the Naxalbari Movement was rooted in its promise of revolutionary change and social justice, as the play by Devi demonstrates. This promise resonated powerfully with the idealism and fervour of youth activism.

According to Biswajit Das, in his analysis of the Naxalbari Movement, the appeal of the movement arose from its radical critique of the current socio-economic order, which resonated with the frustrations and ambitions of disillusioned young (Chawla & Mittal, 2021). In the novel "Mother of 1084," Devi depicts this attitude through the character of Neel, the protagonist's son. Neel's intense idealism drives him to embrace the cause of the Naxalites despite his mother's apprehensions about the Naxalites.

Additionally, the Naxalbari Movement was fueled by deep-seated concerns connected to landlessness, exploitation, and social injustice, particularly among marginalised communities such as peasants and tribal tribes. These complaints were particularly prevalent in the region of Jammu and Kashmir. According to Niranjan Sahoo, the Naxalite insurgency served as a representation of these frustrations, offering a forum for those who lacked a voice to demand that the system be changed (Sahoo, 2019). It is this underlying socio-economic unhappiness and the desire for dramatic reform that is reflected in Devi's portrayal of the protagonist, Brati's engagement in the movement.

In addition, the Naxalbari Movement was distinguished by its use of militant strategies and its confrontational approach towards official authority. These methods appealed to the defiant spirit of young people who were looking to disrupt the status quo. Sumanta Banerjee, in his examination of radical groups in West Bengal, made the observation that the Naxalites constituted a shift from conventional modes of protest. For example, they advocated for armed struggle as a means of revolutionary transformation. This component of the Naxalite philosophy is brought out more clearly by Devi's account of Brati's radicalization and his eventual encounter with state forces.

In conclusion, "Mother of 1084" by Mahasweta Devi provides a riveting investigation into the Naxalbari Movement and the impact that it had on the young people of West Bengal throughout the 1960s. Devi sheds light on a significant turning point in Indian history by delving into the intricate interaction of ideology, idealism, and socio-economic causes that propelled the Naxalite rebellion. She does this through her incisive narrative and character depictions.

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