

The book cover features a dark, textured background with abstract, glowing light patterns. A prominent diagonal beam of light cuts across the lower half, and a curved, glowing shape is visible in the bottom left corner. The title is printed in large, bold, white sans-serif font.

Imaging New Cultural Spaces

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Edited by

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ARISE PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS

4648/1, 21, Ansari Road, Darya Ganj,
New Delhi-110002

Published by



ARISE PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS

4648/1, 21, Ansari Road,

Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110002

Phone : (011) 23288619, 41563568

e-mail : arise_publisher@indiatimes.com

Imaging New Cultural Spaces

Price:

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First Edition, 2012

ISBN : 978-93-81031-07-0

PRINTED IN INDIA

Published by Arise Publishers & Distributors
Laser typeset at Manas Typesetter and Printed at Radha Offset,
Delhi-110032

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Finding A Voice: An Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*

Dr. S. Kalamani

Mahasweta Devi, one of the foremost literary personalities and a prolific writer of short fiction and novels in Bengali is a deeply political and social activist who has made significant contributions to literary and cultural studies in India. With her powerful and haunting tales of exploitation and struggle, she stands at the intersection of vital contemporary questions of politics, gender and class as a significant figure in the field of socially committed literature. Her unflinching dedication to her literary as well as social cause has moved the highest institutions in the country to bestow on her the greatest awards they have in their keeping. The Sahitya Akademi has recognized her achievement in Aranyer Adhikar in 1979. The Padmashree was awarded to her in 1986 in recognition of her work among the Adivasis. And in 1997, in her 72nd year, the immensely respected Jnanapeeth Award and later the Ramon Magsaysay Award were bestowed on her for her literary achievements.

There have been very few writers who have also been activists. Still fewer are those who have integrated both aspects of their lives with equal seriousness. What Sujatha Vijayaraghavan says regarding the connection between these two is worth notice:

The nation is today unfolding many faces in literature, scarred by the powers of caste, gender, and class politics through new narrative modes that allow many suppressed voices to speak their 'histories from below' as it were. . . . Creative literature is no longer apolitical and the act of writing is, at the same time, the act of righting too, inseparably conjoined with activism. Mahasweta Devi in Bengali, Arundhati Roy in English and Bama in Tamil are a few of the powerful women writers / 'righters' working through regional languages and English from different parts of the country, their writings aligning in common concerns. . . . The works of these writers not only turn the readers' gaze outside the text on the socio political realities of our times but enable a heuristic exercise that forces a reflection upon the ethical and moral biases that constitute part of us. (29-30)

The major themes of Mahasweta Devi's writings are anger and resistance on behalf of the dispossessed, compassion and concern for the women and protest against the materialistic attitude of the hypocritical and bourgeois society.

Written in 1973-74, the sensitive novel *Hajar Churashir Ma - Mother of 1084*, deals with the psychological and emotional trauma of a mother who awakens one morning to the shattering news that her beloved son is lying dead in the police morgue, reduced to a mere number - corpse no.1084. Her journey towards discovery starts at this point of time. Her struggle to understand her Naxalite son's revolutionary commitment, leads to her self-discovery. She begins to understand how she herself has been alienated as a woman, wife and mother from the complacent, hypocritical and bourgeois society against which her son also had rebelled.

The novel is an insightful exploration of the complex relationship between the personal and political. It is also considered a significant milestone in Mahasweta Devi's literary career; a watershed novel both in terms of approach and content and in terms of language and style.

Though Mahasweta Devi does not give any historical

narrative, she explores the politics and passions of the peasant - tribal revolt that turned into a students' revolt against bourgeois values and the academic institutions they sustained. Her objective in *Mother of 1084* expressed in the following manner is given in the Introduction of Samik Bandyopadhyay:

. . . In the Naxalite movement I saw only a further extension of the movements of the past. . . In my work *Agnigarbha* (*The Fire Within*, 1978), located in the rural experience, I produced a work far more important than my *Hajar Churashir Ma*. In the latter I portrayed the Naxalite movement in its urban phase in 1971-74; and against that and a generation gap, 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. (xi - xii)

Mahasweta Devi portrays women as victims of the dominant patriarchy. By bringing an awakening to her own characters, she makes them emerge as enriched women. Sujata starts her journey from the world of ignorance, submission and compromise to the world of awakening and knowledge the entry into which makes her assert her own self. Even though Sujata belongs to the upper strata of society, she still belongs to the category of the oppressed.

Sujata's husband Dibyanath's interest in her was limited only to sexual pleasure. He never showed any concern for her. Even when she went to the hospital for her delivery, he "never accompanied her". When she came back home with her child, "he slept in a room on the second floor lest the cries of the newborn disturbed his sleep. He would never come down to ask about the children when they were ill" (3). When he showed any concern about her health, it could mean only one thing. Sujata learnt to lead her life as a traditional wife, submitting herself completely. She mutely accepted even his extra-marital relationships. "Sujata had a shadowy existence. She was subservient, silent, faithful and without an existence of her own" (9).

Sujata suffers due to lack of freedom and recognition in the family. Power does not distinguish between the lower classes and the upper classes. Brati's friend Somu's family suffers because of their poverty. When people suffer to the limit, they would try out various tactics for resistance and survival. The gender discrimination and the discrimination of people as high and low and other such issues are taken up by the writer in the novel.

As Waseem Anwar says, "Devi writes with a mission to launch a compassionate crusade against injustice and inequality" (93). When news of the death of her son Brati came that too on his birthday, Sujata had to go to Kantapukur to identify the dead body in the morgue. The news which shattered Sujata did not affect him at all. He immediately thought of ways to hush things up.

His first concern after the message came was how to keep the news from the people who knew him. Going to identify the body of Kantapukur did not seem that important. Even when Sujata went there, he did not allow her to take his car because "it would not be the right thing to keep his car waiting before Kantapukur. Anybody could identify the car" (7). Dibyanath's behavior on that day had taken him away from Sujata. Though "he lay in a bed next to Sujata's", "he never knew that he did not exist for Sujata from that day when he had placed his own position and his own security before the dead Brati" (8).

Thus, shattering innumerable illusions and dreams cherished by Sujata, Dibyanath went on in his mission of string pulling. When the newspapers reported the death of four young men the next day, Brati's name was not mentioned. Brati's shoes, rain coat, photograph were removed and taken to the room on the second floor according to his instructions.

Sujata's analysis of things after the death of Brati lay bare many facts before her. She knew that as he grew up Brati was becoming a stranger to her. She tries to find out the reasons for his affiliation to the movement and the consequent death. All that he could have been charged with was that he had lost faith

in the social system itself. He did not remain content with writing slogans on the wall but had come to commit himself to the slogans. Brati and his friends who belonged to the new generation were fully aware that the slogans would draw only bullets. But yet their faith in their movement and their hope that they would be able to bring about a change triggered them. The irony of the situation is:

The killers in society, those who adulterated food, drugs and baby food had every right to live. The leaders who led the people to face the guns of the police and found for themselves the safest shelters under police protection, had every right to live. But Brati was a worse criminal than them. Because he had lost faith in this society ruled by profit-made businessmen and leaders blinded by self-interest . . . (19).

Brati had to pay the price of losing his faith in the system. Death was the sentence for this loss of faith.

Sujata and Brati belonged to one party whereas all the others in the family, her husband Dibyanath, son Jyoti, daughters Neepa and Tuli belong to the other party. Their self-centered nature, hypocrisy and materialistic attitude widened the gap between the two groups. Even on the day Brati died, she did not beat her breast in wild wailing; nor did she lean on anyone of them seeking consolation. "She had made up her mind quite early that she would never seek consolation from those who thought first of themselves while Brati lay dead in the morgue" (30).

Brati was quite different from his childhood. He would always listen to reason, he would never be scared or intimidated by threats. He would not act the way they acted. Because of his straight forward nature and openness, the others did not like him; he showed his concern for his mother; he did not like her to suffer patiently. Unlike his father, he wanted her to be an individual with her own way of living. He could not bear the treatment given to his mother by his father. Dibyanath humiliated her on many occasions. But she bore everything passively:

He [Dibyanath] was neither very attached nor indifferent to his wife. The way he say it, a wife had to love, respect and obey her husband. A husband was not required to do anything to win his wife's respect, love and loyalty. He had built a house of his own, he kept servants, and that was enough he thought. He never tried to make a secret of his affairs with young girls outside the house. He felt it was within his right. (45)

Sujata too was a subservient wife. Sujata's rebellion started only after the birth of Brati. Her first act of rebellion was her refusal to be a mother for a fifth time and her second act of rebellion was refusing to leave her job at the bank. She became an employee of the bank when Brati was there to help her husband out of his financial crisis. However, after a few years, when things became better with Dibyanath's firm paying well, he asked her to quit her job. Sujata did not give up her job even though she was not a radical or an independent woman conscious of her rights or one who found it fashionable just to be working. Her gradual understanding of the members of her family separated her from them.

Apart from these, her silence and non-involvement in things concerned with the others in the family are ways of resisting the hollow system that was working against her. Her dependence on pain killers and other sedatives also indicate that she deliberately kept herself aloof from depending on her husband and children because she could not belong to them. This aloofness drew her slowly away from the family. She wanted to know more about Brati through his friends.

For one year after Brati's death till she came to see Somu's mother, she had remained imprisoned within a private grief. Her visit to Somu's mother helped her realize certain things: "It was after hearing Somu's mother's uninhibited, heartrending lamentation, her talk of the boys, that Sujata realized that Brati had not after all abandoned her to the desolation of a private grief. He had bound her to others like her, given her a new family" (57-58). Brati who belonged with the corpses and those grief stricken men and women in life and death had given her

the connection too. With her understanding of Brati she too belonged to them.

The question posed by Somu's mother regarding the authenticity of judgement meted out to people was an eye opener to Sujata. She asks, "Those who died are lost anyway. But those who remain alive won't ever be able to come back home again. What kind of judgement is this, Didi?" (36).

Sujata's alienation from her family becomes complete with what she hears about Somu's father who was a pole apart from Dibyanath, and with her meeting with Nandini. Somu's father tried his best to save the boys failing in which he offered to die first. He ran to the police station in a vain bid to stop the killings.

Nandini who also joined the movement was a striking contrast to the spoilt sisters of Brati. Almost blinded and broken down physically by police torture she held in her heart a deep faith in the future of the movement. Nevertheless, she had a stoic acceptance of the inevitability of betrayal, a betrayal from inside of the movement which caused the death of Brati.

Motivated by Nandini's determination Sujata's journey of understanding and discovery came to an end. She came to realize that her voice of protest against her husband would have endeared her to Brati. The moment of her emancipation started with her realization of the defects of Dibyanath. Hence she was able to confront and challenge Dibyanath for the first time asserting her own self. What Rama Devi says regarding Nandini's role in the self-realization of Sujata is worth noting here: "... in the company of Nandini, the crippled girl who is nearly blinded by the police, and who continues to cherish hopes in human dignity, Sujata's true self is unveiled" (88).

Brati rejected his corrupt and lustful father and hypocritical sisters; Dibyanath never tried to build up a relationship with Brati. He understood that his father used his mother like a doormat. He bribed clients away from other firms. He even went to the extent of threatening his father for his affair with the typist. His description of his brother and sisters is this, "His eldest sister was a nympho, the other sister a bundle of

complexes, impossible to understand, his brother a pimp" (81).

To Brati, his family is a representative of the society he was living in. Hence his protest against the family and society. The silent protest of Sujata gains momentum once she came to understand Brati and his love for her.

Saroj Pal, who was the master mind behind the annihilation of Brati and his friends made his appearance as a special guest at the engagement party of Tuli, on Brati's birthday, coincidentally the day of his death too. He could not come in because he was on duty and Sujata had to receive him. In the dramatic encounter, 'the black car' and 'on duty' his words brought in a rush of associations to Sujata. They according to Samik Bandyopadhyay:

... confirm the information that Nandini had screamed out to her, convey both a promise / hope and a threat, the hope of redemption of accumulated injustice and the threat of state violence in the defence of vested interests; and it is the shock of that insight into potential history - more than anything physical - that drives Sujata to that final 'long-drawn-out, heartrending, poignant cry. (ix)

Sujata will no longer stand the "Dibyanath - Saroj Pal nexus - corrupt power / authority in state / society in its affiliation with corrupt power / authority in family. When she that raised her voice against Dibyanath's presence she would leave the house if he did not get out of the room, "her words hit him like a whiplash Dibyanath went out tamely, wiping the nape of this neck" (93).

Sujata had made her decision. She would not stay there after that night. She would not be the "submissive and unprotesting woman" she had been all along. When she cries 'Brati' at the end of the novel, her "long-drawn-out, heartrending, poignant cry burst, exploded like a massive question, cracking to pieces" "all the contentment in every happy existence" (127).

The title of the novel denotes the number given to a corpse in a morgue - a thousand and eighty four in this case. The number is quite significant because it indicates the lives lost in

the days of naxalite movement in state violence. It also brings out the irony that Sujata's understanding of her son Brati starts only when he becomes a corpse.

Unmindful of Sujata's sentiments, the engagement party of Tuli, the last daughter of Sujata is fixed on the birth as well as death day of Brati. She did not want to partake in anything. Yet to fulfil her duty as a mother and as a wife she came back after meeting Nandini. "Sujata yearned to tell Brati - I can't bear to go down the stairs today, Brati. She longed to say - you would always tell me how difficult it was to be oneself. Brati, if only I could be myself today, and act as my heart dictated!" (106).

When she went down, everyone had settled. People were happily chatting, merry making. When she looked at her son-in-law Amit, she felt sorry for him, because her daughter was not faithful to him:

It was all like a festering, malignant cancer. The dead pretended to live within relationships that were long dead and thus keep up a masquerade of life. Sujata felt that if she went close enough to Amit, Neepa and Balai, the stench of carrion would overwhelm her. They were contaminated and diseased from the very womb. The society that Brati and his comrades had tried to exterminate kept thousands starving in order to nourish and support these vermin. It was a society that gave the dead the right to live, and denied it to the living. . . . (115).

She felt that these people did not have a right to lie whereas people like Brati who were true to themselves and to their cause should have been at least heeded to.

As Jaideve opines, "Mahasweta Devi is the most disturbing writer India has ever produced. She is also our most necessary writer, simply because she lashes us out of complacency in the way conscience is supposed to do. . . . There is . . . no disjunction between Mahasweta's art and her activism. For her art is intervention, an act of retrieving the corpses from beneath the apparently charming - looking national spots as well as of visualizing a better, more humane nation . . ." (148).

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