

MAHASWETA DEVI'S MOTHER OF 1084
(“HAJAR CHURASHIR MA”)

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi, in most of her works, represents the tribal communities. In the novel, *Hajar Chaurasi Maa (Mother of 1084)* written in 1974, however, she depicts the life of a bourgeois woman, Sujata, fifty-two years of age living in Calcutta. Devi says in an interview that this story is about “the awakening of an apolitical mother”. She further explains, “Sujata, in *Mother of 1084*, is essentially apolitical. Yet as she reaches towards an explanation of the death of her son killed in the seventies, she too finds the entire social system cadaverous, and as she takes a closer look at society, she finds no legitimacy for his death [sic].” (p.viii). I have taken this statement by Devi as a vantage point to explain the transformation and self-liberation that Sujata undergoes within the novel. How Sujata is transformed from being an apolitical mother to a political one. How she becomes a socially and politically conscious member of the society. This narrative creates revolutionary ability for Sujata to go against her own belonging. Her husband represents the existing State power and authority and his house is representative of the existing society of West Bengal of 1970s. Sujata represents the oppressed and marginalized sections of this society. How as a woman, who remains on the margins of society, she questions the people belonging to the centre.

I have divided this paper into three sections. In the first section, I have discussed the structure of this novel. In the second section, I have discussed the first two chapters of the novel. I have highlighted and traced the initial stages of Sujata’s transformation. In the third section, I have discussed the last two chapters of the novel, where Sujata is completely transformed.

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I

The entire story unfolds within the time frame of a day. The chapters are divided into the four phases of a day: "morning", "afternoon", "late afternoon" and "evening". The narrative may look linear because of this division, but it is not a linear and chronological narrative. Sujata goes back in time through her reminiscences and this disrupts the linear narrative. As opposed to a linear, clock time, the story shows a different notion of time, time as being circular. The time that Sujata experiences in the novel is not a linear one, but a circular one, that has no starting and no end. She moves in and out of present reality and visits her past through flashbacks and through recourse to her memory.

Each chapter of the novel helps in the further development of Sujata's consciousness, as it helps her to reconstruct her disordered and fragmented life. Every time she glances back at her own past and her son's past by visiting Somu's mother and Nandini, she realizes the uselessness of her present existence.

Sujata is transformed by understanding the revolutionary career of her son, which was always in the dark for her while her son was alive. She now not only understands Brati's commitment to the Naxalite Movement, she also understands the sufferings of people like Nandini and Somu's mother and in this process understands the meaning of her own life. Before Brati's death she had been a dependent, weak, non-questioning and apolitical woman, wife and mother. But after Brati's death she becomes an independent, strong-willed, politically and socially conscious individual.

The novel's action takes place on January 17, the day Brati was born, the day Brati died and the day chosen for Sujata's youngest daughter Tuli's engagement to Tony Kapadia. During the whole day, Sujata travels back to her past by taking the recourse to her memory. This single day 17th January, also brings about complete transformation and self-liberation of Sujata.

II

The novel opens on the "morning" of January 17, when Sujata broods back on the day when Brati was to be born. She remembers how the labour pains had started in the bathroom, how she alone had to pack her bag, call for a taxi and had to rush to the hospital. She is reminded of the jealous and hostile nature of her mother-in-law and the cold behaviour of her husband. They did not care about her critical condition. Now she clearly saw the solitary existence she had been living in Dibyanath's house. She realizes the lusty nature of her husband, how he did not

care about the bringing up of his children and so preferred sleeping on the second floor of the house so that his sleep should not be disturbed. She remembers how whenever he felt that Sujata was healthy again to bear a child, he would impregnate her, without even considering her will. He was never around when she had to deliver the child, and that was the reason why Sujata was angry with the doctor when he had asked her about her husband. As soon as they were married, Dibyanath had started an affair with his typist. But when Brati was about to be born, Sujata had felt a special love for him which she had not felt for any other child of hers. When she realized that her child's life was in danger, she developed a special bond with him even before his birth. Brati was the only child of hers with whom she had a special relationship. If anyone in the whole family could be different, it was Brati. From his birth, Brati was different from all other children of Sujata. He had been rebellious against the discipline and the ideology of his family. Like all other children he would not turn up for breakfast at the given time, and so as a punishment was not allowed to have his breakfast at the dining table. He would then sit on a stool in the kitchen and have his breakfast given to him by Hem (their cook). Till later in life, Dibyanath had scolded the boy and given him the name of "Mama's boy" (p.47). When Brati, had to be given a separate room to sleep, Sujata had insisted to Dibyanath that Hem (their cook) should be allowed to sleep with him, for she knew that Brati would feel scared sleeping alone. Twenty years later when Brati died, the whole family disowned him. Dibyanath had not allowed anyone to claim his body. Instead of grieving for his son, he had made sure that the next day's newspaper did not print Brati's name. He had made sure that his car was not parked outside Kantapukur, the police-morgue where Brati's dead body was laid. Sujata is angry at such behaviour of her husband. She considers him dead from then on. She forgets about the social respectability and goes against her husband, her family and the state itself to claim the dead body of her son. Sujata was not even allowed to cry for her son and express her grief at his death. All the memories of Brati were locked up in a room on the second floor whose keys Dibyanath had kept to himself. All his memories were wiped out from the household, so that the respect of this house could remain intact. The whole family had disowned Brati because he had refused to accept the value system of the present State. He had questioned the decadent and the self-indulgent society. Sujata now realized that her son was not the antagonist of society, but had died because he had "lost faith in the social system" (p.17). In this first chapter named "Morning", Sujata for the first time realized that Brati and she were the excesses in the family of Dibyanath because they could not adjust to the ways of this house and so were suffering equally. They both could not be as "happy" (p.32) as the other members of this household, because they could never be part of the ideology that shaped this household. This first chapter is the beginning of Sujata's realization of being the "other" in this system. From now onwards her transformation begins, even though in this chapter this is only in its initial stage. She starts to become ideologically dislocated. The transformation occurs internally in this chapter.

In the second chapter, "*afternoon*", Sujata visits Somu's house. Somu was one of the revolutionaries of the Naxalite Movement who had been killed along with Brati. Brati had been the part of this house on the night of his death. Sujata visits Somu's mother in order to recollect the last few moments of Brati's life, of which she had never been a part. She learns that this part of her son's life, was never within her range and reach. This kind of household could never be imagined by her, because of her bourgeois background. Sujata could never imagine a world which could be so full of poverty and Somu's house is described as, "a ramshackle house, with moss on the roof, cracked walls patched up with cardboard." (p.35). Sujata comes into contact

with this world of slum dwellers that was degrading and full of filth. The conditions of this household awaken her to another form of reality. She realizes a different possibility of existence. She becomes somewhat jealous of Somu's mother, who was aware of Brati's spontaneous and revolutionary career. Sujata, even though so close to Brati could never be part of this reality of her son. In the Dibyanath household, Brati was someone else and could not be as spontaneous as he had been at Somu's house. In his father's house he could never be himself. In this chapter, Sujata's conviction for transformation becomes more certain. She learns another form of reality and becomes aware of the injustice that was part of the society she lived in. She also becomes aware of the inequality that is so prevalent in this society of hers. The visiting at Somu's house becomes enabling for her social and political transformation. She becomes socially conscious and learns that the world outside her own house is very different.

III

In the third chapter the "*late afternoon*", Sujata visits Nandini who was one of the living revolutionaries of the Naxalite movement and was also Brati's girlfriend. It's through Nandini that Sujata learns about the Naxalite movement, its causes and aims. Nandini tells her how Brati and other revolutionaries had been killed and how they had been betrayed by one of the comrades. She also informs Sujata about the internal workings of the movement and how the revolutionaries were fighting against the existing world order which had become repressive and destructive for the poor and oppressed sections of society. During this revolutionary existence, along with Nandini, Brati envisioned a world that would have all "political games ended" (p.86) and where all human beings would be happy and equal. By speaking to Nandini, Sujata learns the reason for Brati's rebellion against the decadent system of his father's house and in turn his rebellion against the existing political and social ideology of West Bengal. Sujata tells Nandini that "I've just begun to realize how little I knew Brati." (p.80). The transformation that had only been in its initial stages in the previous chapters comes to a full circle in this chapter. The political and social consciousness that had started developing at Somu's house becomes more developed and apparent here. Now Sujata has completely become a member of society who is both required to be politically as well as socially conscious. She has become completely ideologically awake. Now she no longer remains an apolitical mother. The internal as well as external transformation is complete. This will become more apparent in the next chapter of this novel. The new Sujata who has become self-liberated will now speak and act (signalling her external transformation). But this will happen only in Dibyanath's house (representative of existing world order that has become decadent). And so Sujata now leaves Nandini's house and returns to her own house to enact her transformation there.

Only in chapter 4, "*evening*" do we see a new Sujata who has now completely transformed (politically as well as socially). This transformation is reflected in her thoughts as well her actions. As soon as she enters the house, Dibyanath scolds her for being late. She for the first time speaks up and leaves Dibyanath shocked. She confronts him for being an irresponsible man, husband and father. She makes him aware that it was he who was on the wrong side from the beginning. She openly questions his libertine relationships. He was able to maintain such relationships through the encouragement of his mother and his children (particularly Tuli). It was he who had been adulterous and disloyal to her. She had done her bit of duty really well and so he had no right to question her. Dibyanath had no answer to all these questions and so is left with no other option but to leave "out tamely, wiping the nape of his neck." (p.95). She not only

questions Dibyanath, but also questions other family members. When her daughter Tuli asks her for her entire jewellery, Sujata gives her all the jewellery she had got from Dibyanath, but refuses to part with the jewellery her father had given to her. She becomes more assertive and determined now. Sujata even rebukes her daughter Neepa for her behaviour. Her whole body and soul instructs her not to take part in Tuli's engagement, but out of her moral duty, she decides to be part of this ceremony. Even though Sujata had now become completely transformed still she decides to fulfil her moral responsibility towards her family. She decides to fulfil the role that had been allotted to her by the society she lived in. She wears a white sari for the ceremony, signalling her transformed self. Her appendix bursts out and she dies. She could no longer remain alive in the house of Dibyanath as she now realized the hypocritical and repressive nature of this household. Brati had died because of loss of faith in the existing system and so she had to die. She had no other option apart from dying because she was very weak and old. Only death could help her to unite with Brati. Death was the only possible resistance that Sujata could take up.

CONCLUSION

I think by giving such an ending to the novel, Mahasweta Devi shows us that within this kind of society, a woman could only resist by dying. She remains on the periphery from the beginning to the end. Being on the boundaries of the society, she could see the loopholes in the networks of this society. It is true that Brati had rebelled against the existing social order, but Mahasweta Devi decides to make Sujata, a woman, the protagonist of this novel. It is so, because sooner or later Brati could have become an agent of change, but being a man he could himself become an agent of power in a couple of years. If the Naxalite movement was not able to overthrow the existing social order, sooner or later it could itself become a repressive and tyrannical regime. The revolutionary politics works in such a way. The revolutionary soon tastes the glory of power and in the process turns out to be a dictator himself. And so Devi had to create Sujata, a woman to be her protagonist as Devi herself was aware that Sujata could never be an agent of change within that patriarchal society. If she could not be the agent of change in the society, so she could not be an agent of power and hence could never become a dictator. And for her to take the centre-stage Brati had to die. And to complex the situation further, Devi shows us that Sujata could become a politically and socially conscious being only after the death of her son Brati. Before his death she never tried to understand the society around her. Only after his death does she understand the hypocrisy of the existing world order. And hence, his death also becomes an enabling experience for her.

Work Cited

Devi, Mahasweta. *Mother of 1084*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997. Print.