

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *MOTHER OF 1084*

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Abstract

In the seventies, the Naxalite Movement started gaining momentum and as the decade reared its end the Naxalites were looked upon as the greatest scourge of the society. Newspapers, reporters, artists, painters, poets all feel silent and feared even the mention of the word Naxalite but Mahasweta Devi saw in the movement, a history in making and decided that as a writer it would be her mission to document it. As a writer she felt a commitment to her times.

The focus of the present paper is, on the one hand, to present the Naxalite Movement and its consequences and the violence resulting from it; on the other the plight of the woman who had to bear the consequences of the movement and the terrible politics which was played behind the scene. The rising anger and the suffering of the people were caused by the violence and murders. "Violence of any kind is harmful and unacceptable to the civilized society. It dethrones peace and harmony, togetherness and unity."¹ The biggest sufferers of this movement were the women who lost their near and dear ones, shattering their life forever.

Keywords: Naxalite, Protest, Feminism, Violence, Oppression, Resistance, Activism, Humiliations, Suppression.

Mahasweta Devi is a well-known Indian woman writer of the twentieth century. She is known for her fiction, short stories and plays which give voice to the voiceless, the downtrodden, and marginalized. She takes up the Naxalite Movement to reveal the deep rooted problem of the marginalized sections of the society like the tribals, the downtrodden who united to bring a change in the society. She as a committed social activist realistically portrays the poverty, hunger, oppression and corruption in the society.

The history of the eastern states in the 1960s and 1970s is the essential background of the novel, *Mother of 1084*. As all the writings of Mahasweta Devi are dramatic representation of political realities so is this one. In the spring of 1967 the peasants of Naxalbari, a village in West Bengal, aided by the intellectual Left in love with the communist ideology, staged a successful rebellion against the landlords, who were supported by the system and the establishment. The

Naxalite movement spread to the other parts as well. When East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) moved towards a rupture from West Pakistan, the Naxalites in India formed political alliances with the secessionists in East Pakistan. However, when the Indian army moved to help Bangladesh, Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi took this opportunity to quell all possible Naxalite revolts. While Naxalite can be seen by historian as ruthless terrorists, Mahasweta Devi's focus is on the young intellectuals who were drawn to the cause because of their idealism and on the peasants and tribals, who were drawn to it, because they were victims of centuries-old oppression. "Its author does not lament on the failure of the movement but discovers and unravels the social complexities".²

The novel which is being dealt in this paper, *Mother of 1084*, is an English translation of Mahasweta Devi's Bengali novel *Hazaar Chaurashir Maa*, and was written by Mahasweta Devi in 1973-74 and translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay in English language in 1997. This is a very sensitive and thought-provoking novel centered on a young, idealistic, intellectual student, Brati Chatterjee, who is treacherously betrayed to the police by a mole in his revolutionary group. Brati is identified only as Corpse Number '1084'. His father, Dibynath Chatterjee, bribes the police and hushes up the death from media, unwilling to be associated with the revolutionaries. The novel is a story of his mother's reconstruction of Brati's other life, his true life. She sets out on a journey to discover that what made her dear son reduced to be a mere number, *1084*. And during this journey a parallel is drawn by the novelist of her personal life and that of her Naxalite son.

Violence is one of the major factors dealt by the novelist as the Naxalites had to face inhuman treatment by the police. In order to suppress the movement, the policemen tortured the Naxalites and murdered them brutally. The brutal killing and violent actions were for the common people also, to show them the power of police and the disastrous results of being involved in the movement. On the parallel to the Naxalite violence one can notice the domestic violence which was taking place in the same house of Dibyanath Chatterjee on his wife, Sujata, by him as well as by his family members.

Sujata, the protagonist of the novel, recalls her past. Two years ago, it was seventeenth of January, Nineteen Seventy, Brati, her dearest son's, birthday, then telephone rang, she picked up the receiver, there was a call from Kantapukur, she was asked to go there and identify her dead son. The mother who was preparing for her son's birthday was shocked to hear the news of his death. In this state of shock, her husband, Dibyanath, told her that he will not allow her to take his car to Kantapukur because people will come to know about it and it would be a matter of great shame for him. He had died for Sujata when he placed his own security before his dead son.

That day, with Brati's death, Brati's father had also died for Sujata. The way he had behaved that day, that moment, had shattered numberless illusions for her. It had burst upon her with explosive force... 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.³

This action of Dibyanath was only one example of being a cold-blooded, corrupt person belonging to the sophisticated society, at many other instances he had behaved like a depraved human being. As a wife Sujata had no expectation from him, for instance when asked by doctor, at the time of Brati's birth, she was amazed to think that she was not expecting her husband to come with her in the sensitive moment like childbirth. She came all alone to the hospital, neither her husband nor her mother-in-law cared for her and in the height of that Dibyanath gave excuse

that his mother is a softhearted lady, she love her very much so she cannot look her in this pain although both of them knew that she had a feeling of jealousy for Suajata because Sujata's father-in-law had died very early and she had only one son, Dibyanath.

Mahasweta Devi has tried to show the hypocrisy of the upper-class and the poor mentality of it. The domestic violence which the protagonist of the novel had to face is presented very skillfully in it by the writer. Mary Wollstonecraft commented on the condition of woman in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that "Women are... so weak that they must be entirely subjected to the superior faculties of men."⁴ The concept of *ardhangini* is prevalent in the Indian society but the real life is far removed from reality. Women are always considered as inferior human beings having no choice of their own, dependent and obedient to their husbands and other family members for everything and every decision of their life. The woman who is obedient, delicate, meek, fragile, weak, and having no spirit of protest is called an ideal woman in this society. So like an ideal woman, a wife and a mother, Sujata had performed all her duties yet she had to face humiliations from her family members. When the economic condition of her husband was not good she helped him by joining a job in a bank but when he became quite wealthy than he forced Sujata to leave her job. They, her family members, could not understand what the need of job was for Sujata, they had no idea that as a human being she also had an identity and wanted her own space but women in the society are not normally expected to do anything for their own sake. It is the duty of every woman to support her family whenever needed but there is no such rule to support a woman to find her own identity or to let her live in her own space. At the time of economic instability of the family Sujata joined the bank job to support her family but when her husband got sufficient money and wealth he pressurized her to leave the job without asking Sujata if she wanted to leave or not. This job gave her some space of her own in her life which leads to the peace of her mind and comfort but nobody had no concern for it. In the same way when Brati had tried to fight for the rights of the others he had been brutally murdered to maintain the so called order in the society. Dibyanath never showed any respect and regard for his wife and also never tried to make secret of his affairs outside wedlock. His ethos was that his wife should be at his feet and his mother agreed with him. For him *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* (Devi 45). He used to say, *I am the Boss in this house* (43). When Sujata refused him for bearing another child, *his sex life outside the house became more active* (47). Brati said to Sujata *father used you like a doormat* (81) on which Sujata had nothing to reply because she was trained to be dependent to her husband. Even Dibyanath's children *considered all his actions part of his virility* (46). In fact, Dibyanath's 'favourite' daughter Tuli used to help her father in his extra marital affairs. This shows the extent to which Dibyanath had imposed his immoral social codes on his children who grew up to accept an artificial atmosphere, *a shiftless, rootless, lifeless society where naked body caused no embarrassment, but natural emotions did*(68). All of them, Dibyanath, her husband, Jyoti, her elder son, Neepa and Tuli, her daughters, had dual nature. They were all very corrupt but for them that were the natural self. Sujata always keeps quiet to avoid any argument. She was a meek woman throughout her life, except at some instances,

Refusing to leave her job was Sujata's second act of rebellion. Her first act of rebellion was when Brati was two. She refused to be a mother for a fifth time.⁵

But this act of protest was not her nature so she had to bear all ill treatments by her family members. Mahasweta Devi considers women as one group among the exploited and under

subjugation. At every step, Sujata, the subjugated woman, had to take permission from her husband; she did not even have the right to buy a sari of her choice when her mother-in-law was alive. As a woman, she did not have any authority regarding her home. She had done all her duties, as a daughter, a wife, a mother but as a woman she could find no space for herself. But being a man, her husband, represented sophisticated society, had all the authority to do anything, like have extra marital affair and enter into illegal relationship with his typist, but nobody could object to it. Sujata did not have an important place in her husband's life but sometimes he showed concerns for her, *whenever Dibyanath showed concern about her health, it could have only one meaning* (Devi 03). Sex was the only reason for the concern of her husband.

In the family, mostly, fathers have the command over the family and have the image of the protector which shows the power of his authority. Likewise in the society landlords, rich and upper-class people have this position of control and power which places the poor and the middle class at the lower levels of the society. They believe in controlling all the activities of the society and if anybody comes between their route of power and comfort, willingly or unwillingly, they ruin them, crush them or destroy them totally. Same was the case with Brati (although he belonged to upper class yet was involved in the movement for other's sake) and his friends, they wanted only justice for their people but had to face inhuman behavior by the so called saviors of the society called police. Like Brati, Sujata's personal life was the same, she had a shadowy existence in her house, her husband and mother-in-law had all the authorities. For this Brati asked Sujata, *why are you so passive, Ma?* (Devi 45) and Sujata replied *what else can I do? I was trained to be passive* (Devi 45). She had to bear all the tortures, humiliations, and insults but when she wanted help from her protector, her husband, he behaved like a cold-blooded father and husband as well. He refused Sujata to take his car to identify Brati's dead body, he did not give any true happiness to her and the wounds and scars of his behavior left Sujata in deep sorrow. Only Brati had cared for Sujata when he was alive but after his death all his memories, like his photographs, and other things, were removed from the home because they had become a matter of shame for Chatterjee family. But Sujata found solace in the company of Brati only so every night, secretly, she went to Brati's room and tried to be in union with him and got some comfort in her suffering heart and life. The sufferings of a mother could not be felt or noticed by anybody, neither by her husband nor by her children for whom she had devoted all her life.

Sujata was fed up by all this and to seek some peace of mind and in the search of unknown aspect of Brati's life, she decided to go and meet Somu's (Brati's friend) mother to share her sorrow. Nobody had any concern for Brati's brutal killing except Sujata. Sujata vowed to know the cause of Brati's transformation. Brati, her simple natured son, when he saw the miseries of poor and the problems of the educated but unemployed youth, his heart shook with pain and he left his life of comfort and luxury to help them which lead to his brutal killing. Why he secretly chose the path of terrorism; what is the morale rationale of his rebellion? It is through the socio-political awakening of Brati's mother Sujata that Mahasweta Devi gives us the reasons for Brati's rebellion. In her day-long quest, Sujata, besides realizing that Brati's rebellion may have been caused in part by the disenchantment with the hypocrisy, immorality, repression, and narrow-mindedness detectable in the domestic and social worlds to which his family belonged. And struggling to understand her Naxalite son's revolutionary commitment, she begins to recognize her own alienation, as a woman and wife, from the complacent hypocritical, bourgeois society her son had rebelled against.

At Somu's house, when Somu's mother, told Sujata about Somu's father's attempt to save the lives of Brati, Somu and their friends, she started comparing that "*the two fathers,*

Somu's and Brati's, lived in the same country, but poles apart (Devi 66). One was ready to die to save his son and another had no concern on his son's death, he was busy in *hushing up* the incident by using his political powers. Her husband had blamed her *it's you who taught him to be my enemy* (Devi 15). The family members of Sujata's family were busy in hiding the incident because they felt embarrassed at Brati's involvement in the movement. Here Mahasweta Devi has described two ideologies represented by Brati and his father, one sacrificed his life for others and the other was more concerned about his status and reputation in the society for the sake of which he forgot the brutal killing of his son and was busy removing his name from all the records.

The parallel journey between Sujata's personal life and that of her Naxalite son, lift her to another level of recognizing her own existence, her real self was revealed with his son's true identity in front of her. After the awakening of her soul, she was then able to understand the reason of her son's involvement in the movement as well as the hypocrisy of her family members, who themselves were very corrupt in their lives but always had a mask on their faces to be called as a sophisticated gentleman and ladies. The callousness of the family members of Sujata's family is revealed truly when they unmindfully decided the date for Tuli's engagement on the birth and death anniversary of Brati. Nobody had thought even once about it, or about Sujata, what she wished for? These two years, after Brati's death, were torturous only for two persons, one is Sujata, who lost her dearest son, and other was Nandini, Brati's true companion and beloved. Both of them have faced a troubled life in the absence of Brati. Sujata was suffering from the agony of her ignorance to her son's commitment to a cause, and Nandini, after Brati, had only one aim to complete the unfinished effort of Brati, although she had lost her eyes in the torturous treatment by police yet her determination was strong and firm.

In the evening, at the ring ceremony party of Tuli and Toni, one can see the hypocrisy and double standards of the sophisticated society, ladies were showing their vanity and all were busy in showoff of one kind or the other. At this party, Saroj Paul (Deputy Commissioner, Detective Department) "special friend of Toni" was also invited. He was the same person who was responsible for Brati's brutal killing. He could not gather enough courage to come inside because he knew, he *would have to face her* ^(ix) and so he returned from outside by saying he was "on duty." This word 'duty' reminds Sujata that he is again going to slay another Brati and a havoc arises in her mind which leads her to a fatal fall. They have crossed all the limits to fulfill their so called 'duty' to restrain the movement because they wanted to set a model for other Naxalites as a warning against the system. They had arrested many of them and their treatment was very brutal. At the time of Brati's encounter, Police lured one of their friends (of Brati's group) called Anindya and he passed the message of Brati to them and as a result they were caught by the police. They had killed Brati so brutally that his mother was not able to touch his face after his death when she went to see him in the morgue.

As the novel is divided into four stages of the day: morning, afternoon, late afternoon and evening, it also gives the reader the idea of Sujata's life as well. In the morning she remembered the incident which took place two years ago, the brutal killing of his dear son Brati, in the afternoon she went in the quest of her son i.e. to know about unknown aspect of her son's life through Somu's mother, in the late afternoon she met Nandini, who told her the emotional, caring and sensitive nature of Brati who had died to save his friends and in the evening we find Sujata in the party. Finally she was trying to adjust herself in the happy atmosphere of the corrupt family and almost gained control over her emotions but lost her control when she heard the voice of the same officer who was the cause of Brati's brutal killing. And his words, I am 'on

duty' tear her heart and she died in the end. Here if we want to explain violence than we can say that the purpose of domestic violence is typically to control and intimidate, rather than just to injure. And in the case of Sujata the same thing happened, every person of the family expected that she should behave like a statue having no emotions and showing no anger or revolt against anything.

Her husband treated her like a lifeless creature with whom he expects to play and satisfy his desires and in return she should not demand anything. The material aspect of the life and money were the only things which were necessary for him. He neither showed any respect, nor gave Sujata, her place as the woman of the house throughout her life. Like her husband, her children were also corrupt and selfish as they came to her only for their selfish motives.

Hence, throughout the novel, it is the violence and its aftermath which Mahasweta Devi locates. Highlighting the plight of a woman, the novelist had tried to give the picture of a woman's life, who was not treated as a human being rather member of her family treated her like a non-existing entity. Sujata was the woman of the house but they gave no significance or her real place in the house. She never demanded anything for her, the only thing which she looked-for was true love but till the end of her life she did not obtain it.

Women are still treated as puppets and are subjected to emotional abuse. They often suffer from depression, which puts them at increased risk of committing suicide. The only way left for Sujata to be away from her family was to leave this world. From the very beginning of the novel, we get to know the urgency of her Appendix operation, yet she did not have any desire to live her life anymore so she continuously refuses to get operated and ultimately it bursts out in the end and she met her unfortunate fate. It was not an accidental death rather a self-chosen fate to get relief from all the sufferings and pain of this world. Women do not have enough courage to fight against the domestic violence explicitly because all of them are her own; so generally they choose the easiest way of escaping the problem by committing suicide and the same was the fate of Sujata.

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