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# ILLUMINATING MULTIPLE OPPRESSIONS IN THE PLAY OF MOTHER OF 1084 BY MAHASWETA DEVI.

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**Abstract:** Mahasweta Devi's play *Mother of 1084* (1973) tried to expose the exploitation of an essentially unorganised people whose lives are deep-rooted in history and to offer a vivid portrayal of the rural underclass along with their suffering. Her work analyses subaltern politics and their unending struggle to bring to light their exploitation. Mahasweta Devi, the champion of the downtrodden, was continuously occupied with the diverse struggles and was a part of several organisations despite the travails of her advancing age. She took up these diversified roles throughout her life and the zeal in her was alive until her last breath.

**Keywords:** Exploitation, Marginalisation, Binary Oppositions, Subjugation, Sublarity Etc

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**Introduction:** Paying tributes to Mahasweta Devi, Enakshi Chatterjee observes in her review that *Hajar Churashir Ki Ma (Mother of 1084)* was born out of the agony and tragedy of the naxalite movement. This period from 1956-1974 is important to understand her career. It points to various levels existing simultaneously and finding creative expression. "The sixteenth century social scene inspired by the poet Mukundaram, her absorbing interest in history, the world of fantasy, delighting a part of her which is eternally a child and the grim reality of the troubled seventies when mindless killings were taking place, all some how contribute to her philosophy" (Chatterjee, 1997:14).

Her recurring theme and the motivating force of life invariably was to fight against exploitation of the tribals, women, landless labourers and the poor. The world of her plays is structured wholly on the distinctive binary oppositions – the conflict between the haves and the have-nots, the oppressor and the subjugated, simple innocence and cultural opportunism. Here she raises her voice against the corruption and the cruel system .

In a sense, the play *Mother of 1084*\* analyses Sujata's multiple oppressions within a suffocating , male dominant and feudal household . However, it could also be treated as a story of how Sujata transcends her cloak of social decorum and refined smokescreen only to find out the secretive, primeval, subversive set-up of the Naxalites and that of her beloved son, about whom she hardly knew anything when he was alive. At another level, it is also a narrative of how an 'apolitical mother,' eventually pushed into a corner, is obliged to accept the basic human necessity to process or re-process her ideological, moral and political position in a grossly egotistic, absolutely commodified world of 'bhadrals' such as the Chatterjees. It is only in the process of organising or defining one's ideological, political and moral position that an individual could possibly hope to heal several afflictions of suppression, or prepare himself or herself to fight the dynamics of 'subjugation' at collective or personal level, thus clearing the way for self-liberation.

Mahasweta Devi takes up the political climate of West Bengal to raise her voice against the established order and fight for the cause of the poorest of the poor who are exploited by the industrialists, bureaucrats, and landlords. The exploitative and suppressive attitude of these powerful men compelled a group of young men to resort to an armed uprising against them. The young men who fought this oppression were eliminated ruthlessly by the government agencies. Mahasweta Devi takes up this socio-political background as her subject matter and explores it from the subaltern point of view. The individual stories projected as the stories of subalterns are the significant factors in the play *Mother of 1084*. The characters of Sujata, Brati, Somu the friend of Brati and Nandini, Brati's girlfriend, all come under this category. To bring out the intensity of the subaltern shades, she organises the main events which happened in the life of the principal character Sujata who lost her most beloved son to the Naxalite movement. *Mother of 1084*, initially titled *Hajar Churashir Ki Maa*, is primarily such a 'narrative of healing,' placed tactically within the structure of Mahasweta Devi's corpus of work. At first, it was written as a story in 1972 for the periodical *Prasad* and modified for the stage in 1973 by the writer herself. Later it was transformed into a full-fledged novel a year later in 1974. In its flight of rapid metamorphosis from a drama into an extended narrative, *Mother of 1084* has, captivatingly enough, sought to reverse the conventional type of revision, in which it is often drama that emerges or evolves out of a familiar or popular myth. The revolutionary potential of this narrative is, therefore, inscribed in the very process of its creation. It is not without a reason that Mahasweta Devi described it as a narrative about 'the awakening of an apolitical mother.'

The narrative of *Mother of 1084* is remarkably rich in its multi-layered structure and intricacy. Sujata, a middle-aged lady, belongs to a bourgeoisie, bhadrak family of Calcutta. Born into a traditional, wealthy family, Sujata is permitted to complete her B.A. so that it enhances her prospects of marrying into a decent family, but is finally married off to a Chartered Accountant, Dibyanath Chatterjee irrespective of his poor financial condition which is far from encouraging. In the long span of their thirty-four years of married life, Sujata gave birth to four children, two daughters (Neepa and Tuli) and two sons (Jyoti and Brati). Two of her children are already settled. Jyoti is married to Bina and Neepa to Amrit. From the worldly point of view, all of them are leading happy lives. But Sujata, later on, discovers that this cheerfulness is only superficial. Notably, Sujata makes this and numerous other such shocking findings only after the sudden and devastating death of Brati, her younger son, for whom she had always had a special liking. For example, she understands that during the long span of her marital life, she has been living a lie; her husband was an incurable philanderer and cheated on her with his mother's and worse still, his children's tacit approval. When he arranged a petty bank job for her when Brati was hardly three years old, it was not out of any concern for her economic freedom, but basically to help the family overcome a temporary financial crisis. For instance, as soon as they were through with the trouble, he wants her to quit the job, something Sujata simply refuses to do. She also realizes that her children, too, are leading lives very similar to her own. If there is someone who has dared to be different, it is Brati. Resentfully rebellious, right from his childhood Brati has made no secret of his contempt, even disregard, for the value-system and the familial code.

Expressing strong resentment against the society with a corrupt and unacceptable code, Brati opts to join the Naxalite movement extending its activities throughout the state of West Bengal in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ignorant of his top-secret assignment, Sujata is not even able to discourage her son from taking the plunge. During his period of struggle, he gets acquainted with a young girl, Nandini who too is a cadre of the Naxalite operation. He shares his dream of a new social order with Nandini and works for the secret mission. After the brutal treachery by one of his comrades-in-arms, who is captured by the police, Brati and three of his close associates, Somu, Partha, and Laltu, are cruelly slaughtered by the hired goons of the police. Later, the police informed his father to rush to the spot and identify his son's dead body, who has in the meanwhile been deprived of his identity as a human being, and allotted another 'dehumanized identity' as corpse number 1084. Brati's father is not only reluctant to attend, but he also prevents other members of the family from doing so. Being agitated at the attitude of his friends, his family, and the state who have discarded the dead Brati, his mother, Sujata makes up her mind to go

to the morgue, dismissing all pretensions of fake social respectability and the dread of civic censure to the winds.

The play commences on the 'dawn' of January 17, the day Tuli, Sujata's youngest daughter is to be engaged to Toni Kapadia, an exporter based in Sweden. As her son Brati was born on the same day and died hardly two years before on the night of January 16, Sujata cannot help but take a walk down memory lane. Sujata's mind travels back lane to the day Brati had been born. She recollects how she had picked up her basic necessities, rented a cab and hurried to the hospital all alone, with hardly any support from her mother-in-law or husband. Unresponsiveness of her husband, resentment of her mother-in-law and her own isolation in the Chatterjee household knock her down in a single momentary flash. With crystal clear lucidity, it became obvious to her that her husband never loved her and only desired her physically. He was ever eager to impregnate her with child after child relentlessly but was never willing to take up responsibility for her. Immediately after marriage, he entered into a clandestine affair with a typist in his office. Later he rented an apartment for her. Consequently, all her children were born out of a combination of lechery, revulsion, and self-recrimination. But it was rather different in Brati's case. Sujata's heart as a true mother had 'melted with maternal affection' on learning the news that Brati's life was in danger, and thus forming a special attachment with him while she was still carrying him in her womb. He was a scared child, who always clung to his mother for safety and reassurance and was often labelled by his father as 'Mama's boy.' With equal lucidity, she remembers how twenty years later, the news of Brati's death had thrown the sedate and undisturbed life of the Chatterjees into a state of chaos and bewilderment. Disowned by his family, Brati's life ended in a state of shame, to the extent that his family had even refused to perform his last rites and even dumped all his belongings into an attic room, not permitting Sujata even the luxury of expressing her anguish. Now Sujata realizes that her son was not a criminal, but the only crime he committed was that he refused to 'accept the code of a decadent society.' She also realizes that "death is the only punishment for those who lose faith in the system" (27). In the first scene, significantly titled 'Dawn,' Sujata primarily returns to her "interior, private world of personal suffering, torment, treachery, and isolation. Negotiating the inner space or time in relation to her immediate familial situation, she realises that she and Brati were not just fellow sufferers but also soul-mates" (Tariq, 2011:1).

In Scene II, titled 'Afternoon,' Sujata going to the bank to get jewels from the locker is only an excuse for her planned visit to the house of Somu's mother. A close companion of Brati, Somu's life is extinguished in the same encounter as that of Brati. Furthermore, notably, before his unexpected, mystifying disappearance and later demise, Brati had spent the last of his living hours in Somu's house. While Sujata approaches Somu's mother with the precise plan of retrieving the reminiscences of Brati's last few hours, it turns out into a situation when she is initiated into an altogether different world, which is simply beyond the scope of her comprehension. It is the world of primeval unpleasantness, dirt, penury, subhuman and degraded existence that only exists tentatively on the periphery of the bhadrakok's consciousness. Breaking free of the shackles of her sequestered, though unprotected existence in a false, pretentious world of the bhadrakoks, Sujata enters into the little-known world of the marginalised. The sight of Somu's aging mother, her discontented daughter and that of their dilapidated tenement with a straw roof is enough to complete the rites of initiation. While talking to her, she is jolted into a discovery that Somu's mother had known 'the spontaneous, tingling laughter' of Brati, something she was denied despite being his biological mother. It was only in the company of his comrades that Brati retrieved his spontaneity and innocence albeit for a brief while, as he more or less maintained a studied composure in the presence of his family members. Once the healing progression is over, it remains to be established how far Sujata could go now in re-organising her prime concerns and restructuring her life. In the last scene of the play titled 'Night,' we observe a changed Sujata, one who is more composed, psychologically self-assured, politically assertive and receptive. She does not make a decision to go away from the house in which Brati never felt comfortable, where he was not appreciated while he lived, nor his memory treasured even after he died. Having discovered a soul-mate in Brati, she turns her back on Dibyanath and his degenerate value-system.

The play plainly serves two purposes. First, it projects two different faces of a mother. Secondly, it explores the grim situation which gives birth to the Naxal movement. The second part explores the elements of 'understanding, loving, angry, confident, and a rebellious one who seeks justice'. The climax of the play clearly highlights the irreverent response that a mother's anguish elicits in an unfeeling society. The reason how a Naxal movement gets its roots is clearly mentioned with a few incidents. When their very basic needs are denied, the oppressed are left with no option. The suppressed can bear the suffering only to a certain extent. One may not believe in extending sympathy to people who take other people's life by force, whatever may be the justification. However, it is completely acceptable that the deep-rooted problems of the poor need urgent and immediate attention from all sections of the administration. The rich and the poor, the irony of their lifestyles and value system are well described. The play explores the value of sacrifice and the ignorance of the powerful. All her writings are about real people and real issues. Every woman goes through different phases during her life-time as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother. The blissful state of motherhood is a blessing, a way of life. It allows a woman to articulate her total self with tender feelings. But life is not fair weather, and motherhood is not always a blessing for the women in a male-dominated society. They believe that women are particularly destined for motherhood. Women are supposed to bear children and rear them. But the patriarchal structure misuses this role as an instrument to subjugate women as a whole. Many women writers have depicted female characters who are averse to motherhood.

The play presents a political analysis that lay behind the inhuman massacre of Brati Chatterjee and his companions. The killing of Brati Chatterjee and his comrades is a part of the organized brutality against the Naxalites in 1970-71, committed by the police, the party in power, hired goons, and even parties of the Left Establishment acting in unholy collusion. It was a phase when the urban Naxalities were in utter disarray and retreat and were entirely at the receiving end. In the whole gamut of the play, Sujata, the mother of corpse Number 1084, is the most significant personality. All through the play, she is presented as a woman of strong will who struggled against all odds. Sujata finally understands and accepts the dynamics of grief, unbearable pain and ultimate loss caused by the premature death of her younger son Brati. She firmly believes that her son Brati was not a criminal. He was reluctant to accept the Hindu code of a corrupted society. She understands that 'death is the only punishment for those who lose faith in the system'. Her life is absolutely empty, after Brati's death and she is left with no one to live for anymore.

#### References:

1. Devi, Mahasweta, *Water Tran; Five Plays*, Samik Bandyopadhyay, Seagull, 2002. All subsequent references to the play are from this edition.

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