

Mahasweta Devi's Mother of 1084: The Traumatic Journey of a Mother in Search of Self-Identity

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Abstract:

Yagati Chinna Rao, a Dalit historian, writes—

“The crucial significance of history in postcolonial societies lies not only in the ‘retrieval of the past but also in constructing identities.’ Historical enterprise in our country is thus confronted with an apparent crisis in the very selective appropriation of the past. Thus history-less communities pose a challenge both in terms of history writing and reconstruction of a broader social base for rebuilding the nation state. Thus, the study of such excluded groups is of immense relevance on account of the inherent radical democratic identity of their movement that offers a critique to the project of the nation state. (23-24)

The Post-Independent Indian Government only managed to provide geographical freedom to the people of all sections. They were unable to give all sections of people economic, social and political freedom alike. Therefore discontent, disillusionment and decadent in the society were rampant after Indian independence. Like post-war Europe where unemployment, economic crises, political unrest gave rise to angry-young-man generations, absurdity and disillusionment in the society, in post-colonial India, the marginalized class, caste and gender being oppressed and ‘history-less’ tried to search their own identity through finding their respective articulation. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her prolific essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), says that subaltern cannot speak. By subaltern Spivak means those people who have not voice those marginalized people whose utterances have not been taken into account by the hegemonic institutions. They are also ‘history-less’ and identity-less as they are easily erased from the history which is written by the dominant class. Therefore, the necessity of creating new history of the oppressive or the subaltern is obvious. Now the question is who will come forward with this issue? Many writers in post-colonial India come forward with an aim to represent the oppressed in their writings. Arundhati Roy, Shobha Dey, Amitava Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee and many others tried their hands in different way to uplift the marginalized people. But it is only Mahasweta Devi who becomes successfully able to write the subaltern history from below by enabling them to articulate strong voice proper to an alternative history where the true documents of their suffering, deprivation and humiliation are inscribed with a hint to fight back. Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* (1974) was one of such rare documents which would not only retrieve political history of the period but also reconstruct the true identity of a mother, a wife, Sujata in contemporary patriarchal society. This article will intend to unveil the iron curtain of disguised history written by the institutionalized Organization along with construction of self-identity of a bereaved mother, Sujata through her traumatic journey from ignorance to experience of reality.

Keywords: Angry-young-man, Subaltern, hegemony, self-identity, “history-less”.

Introduction:

Mahasweta Devi is the foremost woman writer of modern Indian writings. She was born in 1926 in the city of Dhaka in East Bengal (at present in Bangladesh) with prominent literary background. She did B. A. (Hons) English in Vishva Bharati University in Shantiniketan and M. A in English at Calcutta University. Devi's singularity from other literary writers lies in the fact that she not only writes for the cause of oppressed but takes part in their enlightening process. Ram Ahuja in his widely read book *Social Problems in India* (1992) highlights enormous social problems like poverty, unemployment, population growth, communalism, class and caste discrimination, youth unrest and agitations, child abuse and child labor, violence against women, illiteracy and many other that run unnoticed by the Government before and after the Independence. Mahasweta Devi being an active writer and social activist tries to bring all these issues into light with an aim of reconstruction. Devi works for the improvement of downtrodden (i.e., Santhals, Lodhas, Shabars and Mundas). She dealt with the topics related to the lives of such exploited class of society. She chose the path of an activist and dedicated many years in fighting for the rights of the tribals. In the time span of nearly last forty years she contributed twenty collections of short stories and several novels and dramas. *Her Mother of 1084* (1973), *Rudali* (1993), *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), *The Queen of Jhansi* (2000), *Titu Mir* (2000), *Old Woman* (1999), *Breast Stories* (collected and translated by Gayatri Spivak in 1997) and other works very realistically draw the contemporary problems that remained uncultivated by the 'grand narrative'. She subsequently won many awards for her contribution. She was very much aware of the topical historical events. The big Red Movement of Naxalbari of late 60s and early 70s. mostly known as Naxalbari Movement strongly influenced her. *Her Mother of 1084* (1974) realistically captures this event and artistically gives it an apolitical zeal by affording Sujata, a bereaved mother and the central character of the novel, the status of a universal mother. The political becomes personal through the depiction of agony of a mother in her traumatic journey to explore the ideal of her dead son Brati who has been brutally killed by the institutionalized Government and her self-identity in patriarchal society.

The novel *Mother of 1084* (1974) is set in late 1960s and early 1970 s Calcutta and covers the daylong journey of a mother, Sujata whose younger son Brati has been brutally Killed by the established Government agency. Sujata's journey in search of self-identity is accompanied with several questions to be answered. What is her own position in the family, what is Brati stood for, what necessitates Brati to join the Naxalite movement, what is her own role in preventing Brati from this dangerous path, why Brati had to sacrifice his life, who killed him, what the society and the rest of the family members stand for and many others. All these questions drive Sujata to undergo a daylong journey to find out the true self of Brati and also explore her own self-identity in such a society where a woman's impulse is very schematically destroyed in the name of discharging duty and responsibility.

Discussion:

Mother of 1084 (1974) is story of a mother (Sujata) whose son (Brati), corpse number 1084 in the morgue was brutally killed by the State because of his ideology of advocating the brutal killing of class enemies, collaborators with the State and counter-revolutionaries within the party. Though Mahasweta Devi tries to present Sujata as an apolitical mother as far as possible in the process of her identity formation, she cannot avoid the historical context of the time. In her narrative, Mahasweta does not give any historical account of Naxalite movement in West Bengal, that broke out in the tribal region of Naxalbari in northern West Bengal, in May 1967, when a policeman, Sonam Wangdi, was killed by armed tribals resisting police

combing of the village for one of their underground leaders, and the police forces in retaliation, fired upon the villagers, killing nine, including six woman and two children. The regional movement grew and spread fast, drawing in a wide assortment of elements, including a considerable section of urban students', but with inadequate organizational control and sharp differences in the leadership over both ideological and strategic issues, mounting persecution, above all else, the left establishment's use of state machinery both to disinform the people and the ranks alike and to drive power to the extreme of brutality, the movement collapsed in 1971. However, she does not avoid the responsibility to give an artistic representation of the contemporary reality as the history is in making. Anyway, she has a more limited objective in *Mother of 1084* as is reflected in her acknowledgment in the 'Introduction' to the novel by Samik Bandyopadhyay: In the 70s, in the Naxalite movement. I saw exemplary integrity, selflessness, and the guts to die for a cause. I thought I saw history in the making, and decided that as a writer it would be my mission to document it. As a writer, I feel a commitment to my times, to mankind, and to myself. I did not consider the Naxalite movement an isolated happening... In the Naxalite movement I saw only a further extension of the movements of the past, especially the Tebhaga, Kakdwipand and Telengana upspring. In my work *Agnigarbha* (The Fire within, 1978), located in the rural experience, I produced a work for more important than my *Hazar Churashir Ma*. In the latter I portrayed the Naxalite...movement in it's 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 close to her through her quest. (xi-xii)

So, Sujata's journey comes to a final destination through searching out all these questions with or without clear and satisfactory answers.

In the narrative course, the novel begins in the morning when Sujata, the mother of corpse number 1084, goes back to two years ago, the day in which her dearest child Brati had been brutally killed and turned into a mere number 1084. She does it in her dream, as she is so vulnerable that either she has no courage to do so in reality or her position in patriarchal society does not allow her to do so. Dibyanath Chatterjee a CA is Sujata's husband and all in all of the family. He and Sujata had four children including Brati. Now Brati is no more. In his patriarchal enterprise Dibyanath was assisted by his mother. Even in his licentious activities with a typist girl Dibynath's mother saw no illegitimacy rather an expression of her son's virility. Sujata's other son and daughters like Jyoti, Neepa and Tuli are also without moral principle. Therefore, in Chatterjee family, Sujata is a lonely individual whose only companion in the family was her younger son, Brati and he is now no more. The dichotomy of this pathetic condition of a woman lies in the irony that her mother-in-law and even her own daughters (here Neepa and Tuli) become instrumental in imposing infliction and suffering through their respective enterprise. Now the question is how a feminist writer and a liberal humanist will resolve this kind of complexity spread all over the society. I think it will not be possible all of a sudden. If one wants to come out of it, it is needed for him/her to break the system and it is a gradual process. Brati being liberal humanist and enlightened by the self and the other, tried hastily to break this system. But the diplomacy, perseverance, endurance and schematic discipline, needed to execute a mission, had been lacked by Brati and his comrades. Now as a woman Sujata feels an impulsive necessity to find out her own identity in a society where adversity always prevents a woman from achieving this. Yet Sujata being an educated, self-employed and a determined woman comes out of her confinement to discover her dead son, Brati, his ideal and the cause behind his premature death and above all her self-identity.

Sujata's impulsive drive to know Brati and herself compels her to come out of her confinement and she at first goes to Somu's house which is located in a colony, congested with desolate small houses where the signs of poverty is conspicuous: — "It was a ramshackle house, with moss on the roof, cracked walls patched up with cardboard." (35)

So, Devi in this novel touched upon the issue of post-independent political and economic scenario where millions of people were forced to migrate from East Bengal to West Bengal and spent their lives in utter poverty and desolation. Somu's mother was silently crying as she also had lost her only son Samiran who was supposed to be the only bread earner in this family. Sujata's overwhelming grief for Brati restores her to Somu's house on this particular day. And it is in this house Sujata comes to know about Brati, that Brati feels relief in this house, that here he laughs and talks with Somu, Bijit, Partha, Laltu and many others, that he has expressed his disgust for his father Dibyanath, his brother and his sisters, even the whole social system against which their revolutionary movement aims at. Sujata gradually starts her journey from innocence to experience, from ignorance to knowledge. For a moment, she can identify her own grief with that of Somu's mother. As Soon as the humanistic realization— "The sharp assault of grief had wiped away the class distinctions that normally separated them", (62) then "time had restored the class distinctions with the passage of time" (62). So, the constant struggle for self-discovery continues till the identity is finally formed. She first learns the lesson from Somu's sister's struggle for survival: Somu's sister had pleaded, Don't cry Ma. He won't come back. He kicked you in the chest Ma, and went off. Ma, look at me and pull yourself together. (54)

Somu's sister teaches her how to face reality to stand on one's own feet. And her ultimate silent repulsion though closes the door of Somu's house behind her for even, yet it has literally pushed Sujata forward in the way to form her own identity. The final empowerment she gained through the knowledge she acquires from Nandini in a gradually decadent house. The house itself symbolizes many things including the decadence of the culture, society and time also. In this house Sujata gets answers of many questions and issues that were raised in her mind at the beginning. She comes to know that it is the corruption and hypocrisy of social system against which Brati and his comrades wage war, it is the betrayal of Aninda that restore them to the mere number in the morgue at Kantapukur, it is the disgust for his father and his luxurious and licentious life and the corruption of the rest of the family and an intense feeling for her mother's silent suffering and alienation that compel Brati to join the Naxalite movement and finally it is Brati's intense love for his mother that coincidentally delays him to leave his own home to the base camp and sentence him to meet death. Brati, Nandini, and all their comrades stand for an ideal of faithlessness in all faith, corrupted social system and a government that nurtures the interests of the capitalistic society of which Dibyanath Chatterjee, Mr. and Mrs. Kapadia, Jishu Mitter and Molli Mitter, Tony, Amit, Bolai, Neepa, Tuli and many others are active members. Now Sujata gathers all the potentials that will render her confident of her own self. It is not that she was totally passive, but passionate affection and a strong sense of duty only bind her in the bondage of subordination. In the course of narrative, we come to be familiar with her protest when at first, she denied to be pregnant for fifth time after Brati's birth and secondly, when she was asked to leave the job then she denied. Now she gets her voice and her self-identity in a society where a woman is always suppressed and subordinated and reduced to the status of a subaltern.

In the process of forming an alternative identity, every individual is to confront a lot of difficulty. Sujata also faces such difficulties in her quest. Dibyanath and Jyoti, representatives of dominant class try to erase the sign of revolutionary identity of Brati by wiping out his name from newspaper. In this way true history

of oppression is manipulated. Mahasweta Devi allows her central character Sujata to discover the manipulated history, though through apolitical and artistic way in the course of her journey in search of self-identity. Like Dalit writer Joseph Macwan, who in his famous novel *Angliyat* (Gujarati : 1987, The Stepchild in English, 2004), makes his characters strong, courageous, heroic and willing to sacrifice their personal impulses and desires to uphold high moral values and thereby script a new image of Dalit identity by countering the stereotypical image of Dalit as being lazy, quarrelsome, drunkards, thieves, etc., usually enforced by upper-caste writers, Devi also makes her character progressive and bold to face the voice of patriarchy and her ultimate attacking voice is a big blow on the face of patriarchy : If... you...don't leave...this room... at once, I'll... leave...this house... and never come back again. (94)

Conclusion:

So, Sujata finally finds her own voice, the voice of a gendered subaltern who has long been silenced by the system. “The narratorial voice in *Mother of 1084* submits to Sujata’s emerging voice which in its turn rises above the voices at the party. At one level, the work is all about a woman finding a voice of her own, distinctive from all the other voices. She has negotiated with, including those of her family, Saroj Pal, Somu’s mother, Nandini, Hem and those at the party” (xviii), However Mahasweta Devi has succeeded in affording a bereaved mother, Sujata her distinctive articulation and thereby exploring her self-identity. But the final point of her eruption is perhaps the culmination of her growing rebellion or may be the authorial strategy to throw enormous questions to the generations of readers and thinkers to be resolved.

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