Mahasweta’s Portrayal of the World of Doomed Mothers in Mother of 1084

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi’s Mother of 1084 was written specifically in the socio-political context of 1970-71. Although the Naxalite movements originated in the North Bengal belt, its fire gradually devoured most of the parts in West Bengal. A considerable number of urban students also joined such movement. Such movements were mercilessly repressed by the establishments. Sujata, Brati’s mother, and Somu’s mother were brought on the same plane for the time being owing to the death of their children though they belonged to two widely different social classes. The central theme was developed around the mother-son relationship - Sujata and Brati, and through this relationship Mahasweta exposes to the readers how a financially sound family remained indifferent to the death of Brati and how engagement function of his sister was arranged on the day of the second death anniversary which was Brati’s birthday also. What was more ironical was that the police officer who acted as the mastermind behind Brati’s elimination was invited as a special guest to attend the engagement party. In this paper attempts will be made to study how Sujata was compartmentalized in the family, when Somu’s mother was compartmentalized by social system.

Key Words: Naxalite, student, mastermind, elimination, world

Mahasweta Devi’s well-known novel, Mother of 1084 (1974) is written in the background of the Naxalite Movement in West Bengal between 1967 and 1977. Although it was mainly the unorganized movement by the poor people living in the margin, the ideals of such movement also highly influenced the educated youth in the city. During the Naxalite Movement many scholarly students got actively involved in it and turned to be sworn enemies to the establishments. The Naxalite Movement had its uprisings in Naxalbari Block of Darjeeling District in 1967. It was an armed peasant revolt mainly led by the tribals and radical communists. In May 1967, a policeman was killed by the revolutionaries while the
police were searching for one of the underground leaders. In reaction, nine villagers were brutally killed in confrontation with the police force. Gradually the movement gathered momentum drawing a considerable number of brilliant students in the cities. In 1971 the clash between CPI (M-L) and CPI(M) cadres intensified to such an extreme degree that even Calcutta was divided between these two enemy parties and anyone who belonged to the opposition violating the boundary of the locality would lose his life. It was so antagonistic that people could not move freely in a city like Calcutta which once was the capital of the country. The Barasat killing of 1970 when eleven young men were murdered on the road, and the Baranagar killing of 1971 when more than hundred Naxalites were beheaded in broad daylight, justified the death of Brati, Somu and others in Mother of 1084. We can quote some lines from the Introduction to this novel:

‘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, Kakdwip and Telengana uprisings’ (xi).

During that time some novels were written reflecting the spirit of the movement and the subsequent consequences, but Mahasweta’s depiction was factual and realistic. In the Preface to Operation? Bashai Tudu, Mahasweta writes, ‘For a long time now, Bengali literature has indulged in a denial of the reality and has been plagued by an atrophy of conscience. The writers refuse to see the writing on the wall. The conscientious reader is turning away from them in revulsion’ (xxii). In the same Preface she also writes:

‘Are even our cities immune? Unemployment grows apace, prices soar to the skies, there is anarchy in education, the middle classes are squeezed and are merging into the Proletariat. The area of class struggle is expanding fast. At a critical historical point like this, a conscientious writer has to take a firm stand in defence of the exploited. Otherwise there is no way that history would absolve him or her’ (xxii-xxiii).

Sujata Chatterjee, wife of Dibyanath Chatterjee and mother of four children- Jyoti, Neepa, Tuli and Brati, is the central character of the novel, Mother of 1084. Among her family members she was emotionally most attached with the youngest son- Brati. Her strongest sense of possession over Brati was not an outcome of his untimely death in confrontation with the establishment, she nourished it secretly in her since his childhood days. But what she failed to understand was Brati’s involvement in the movement for the liberation of the people in a world where there would be no oppression, exploitation, injustice and inequality. After Brati’s death when the police had been searching Brati’s room, Sujata saw some slogans written in Brati’s handwriting:
'The Prison’s our university.
'From the Barrel of the Gun…
'This Decade will be the Decade of Liberation.
‘Hate the moderate, mark him, destroy him.
…is turning into Yenan today’ (18).

Sujata was denied dignity by her dominating and lustful husband, Dibyanath, who was only interested in her for having sex. Even her mother-in-law would not let her enjoy the liberty in the household. During her matured stage of pregnancy she used to be not only deserted by her mother-in-law, but also by her husband who unhesitatingly ignored his duty towards his wife in crisis. Sujata lived in a house where her position was probably equal with Hem, the maid servant. Dibyanath was purely a characterless man who used to spend time privately with his employee- a typist. Her mother-in-law considered it as his son’s masculinity. She was proud that her son was not a henpecked husband.

Sujata maintained an unbridgeable distance from all the characters in the novel except Brati, her last child and Hem, the servant who was paid by Sujata. In spite of knowing her husband’s weakness for women, Sujata could not say anything to Dibyanath. He used to sleep in a separate room lest children hampered his peaceful sleep at night. He was such a cruel father that he would not bother about the children’s health when they fell sick. But unmistakably he used to care for Sujata’s health after each delivery and ask her whether she was taking health tonic regularly.

The day Brati’s parents were called by police officer to go to Kantapukur to identify Brati’s dead body among others, Brati’s father and elder brother, Jyoti, were more concerned to conceal Brati’s death for his involvement in the Naxalite movement for liberation, to keep up the family prestige. Even Dibyanath refused Sujata use his car to go to Kantapukur in order to distance himself safely from such a revolutionary like Brati. What they could do easily, Sujata could not. She went to Kantapukur with her youngest daughter, Tuli, and experienced the brutality of the administration to subdue such revolt against establishments. The brutality of Brati’s death- body having several holes of bullets and face slashed beyond recognition- made her completely shattered. After Brati’s death everyone in the family except Sujata and her domestic help, Hem, was busy to forget fast Brati’s memory. They refused to consider him as a member of the family. They were concerned with the living, not with the dead. As a result, Tuli’s engagement function was finalized on a day that was Brati’s birthday. Sujata was compartmentalized in her family. Similarly, Brati was also compartmentalized in his lifetime as he did not support his father, brother and sisters. Even, from the early phase of his life when everybody was controlled by his grandmother, Brati would go according to his will. Sujata felt that if Brati would drink wine like Jyoti, if he could go drunk like Neepa’s husband, Amit, if he could make love with a typist like his father, if he could be a master swindler like Tony Kapadia, if he could be a person as morally loose as his sister Neepa who happily lived with her husband’s cousin, then they could...
consider him as a devoted member of the group. But it did not happen. So, like Sujata, Brati was an enemy and belonged to the group of opposition.

Therefore, no one felt the urge to consult Sujata to fix her daughter’s engagement date. It was fixed by Swamiji, Mrs Kapadia’s guru, living in the United States. The day coincided with Brati’s birthday when Brati was not in the world around. When Mrs Kapadia told about this date, no one disagreed and consulted Sujata. Except Sujata, all other members in the family forgot the birthday of the youngest member who was not among them in mundane world.

On the day of Tuli’s engagement Mr. Saroj Pal whom Sujata hated intensely was invited keeping her in ignorance. ‘It was left to Saroj Pal to organize the army against liberation’ (28). From Saroj Pal Sujata came to know that Brati lied to her. He did not go to Digha. Regarding Brati he remarked, ‘Misguided youth! Yes, a cancerous growth on the body of democracy’ (29). Sujata could not accept that kind of treachery from the family members. Tuli told her mother, ‘Enough is enough, Ma. You’ve turned this house into a tomb, Ma. Father does not dare say a word when you’re about. Brother has a guilty look all the time… Every body tries to hush up an incident like the one we had. That’s natural. Brati is dead. You must think of the living’ (29). Sujata silently made a revolt and leaving the alive parted with the dead, Brati. He remaining absent in the known world highly guided his mother’s course of life. Sujata always felt his unseen presence in her life. Sujata was trying to find solace in Brati’s memories and her clash with other members continued.

Sujata used to go to visit Somu’s house once a year on that particular day, 17 January, to share her sufferings with Somu’s mother. Somu’s family status was quite below compared with Brati’s, but this was the place where she found some peace for herself. The description of Somu’s house was really pathetic, ‘It was a ramshackle house, with moss on the roof, cracked walls patched up with cardboard. Still, this was the only place where Sujata found some peace for herself. She felt as if she had come home’ (35).

During the first visit to Somu’s house she received warm welcome from Somu’s sister, but in the second visit she disapproved Sujata’s arrival. After her father’s death who died wailing for Somu, she bore the responsibility of maintaining this family by giving tuitions to students. She had also two more sisters. She gave an angry look to Sujata and then went out. It was clear to Sujata that she was unwanted there even once a year. Somu’s mother was weeping continuously. She told Sujata that Partha’s mother was going through heartbreaking pains as her other son could not return home after Partha’s death. She said, ‘Those who died are lost anyway. But those who remain alive won’t ever be able to come back home again’ (36). When Sujata first came at Somu’s home she felt hesitations considering the financial position of the family. ‘Somu’s mother kept staring, baffled, at Sujata’s expensive white sari, aristocratic appearance and sophisticated ageing face encircled with greying hair’ (37).

This made Sujata feel awkward. But the sense of attachment deepened when she learnt that Brati used to come to that house very frequently and spend hours with Somu and
other friends. Without any hesitation he used to ask for water and tea. On that night of mass killing Brati fell a victim to fate. He came to warn Somu and others who returned the locality. Somu’s mother told Sujata that Brati wanted to leave immediately but she stopped him because there could be dangers awaiting him outside in the darkness of night. Before getting shot dead from a very short distance, Somu, Partha and Brati, slept close to each other on torn mattress in that dilapidated house. This revelation made her wonder-struck. As the room was too small, and as there was practically no other room, her daughters slept on the ledge outside which was fenced. Somu’s mother sat on guard at the window to keep a watch, and Somu’s father remained awake to wake boys up early in the morning. ‘Sujata looked at Somu’s mother, their room, the picture on the wall torn from a calendar, the cup with its handle broken, with new eyes.

‘Brati, blood of her blood, the child whose birth had endangered her life, young man who had become so strange and impregnable to her, was coming back to Sujata again’(38).

Brati came alive in Sujata’s memory. She could still see him putting on a blue shirt and combing his hair. Brati while descending the stairs stood at the bottom and looked up into mother’s face. Brati did not speak and his lips did not smile. But at Somu’s house Brati felt at ease. He would speak, laugh and ask for tea and water. Sujata got hurt as she felt Brati’s memories were hers only. She could not believe it easily that Brati had also left some memories to Somu’s mother.

Sujata recollected what Brati had done before leaving house for Somu. He stayed at house the whole day which was quite unnatural, he also looked serious. It was noticed that there was some restlessness in him. But he did disclose nothing to his mother. She also remembered that Brati who left home to go to Digha did not go to Digha but he did not tell it to his mother. When asked he told Sujata that he went to Digha but did not stay there because it was a dirty place and no good hotel for meal. Sujata felt that Brati was slowly maintaining distance from the family. One day she asked him, ‘Do you need your mother at all? Do you ever try to know what your mother feels and thinks? You’re always running away, always slipping away. You have assignments all the time, you say’ (42). Sujata also knew that Brati would not like his father. He understood what he used to do with the typist-lady after his office hours. He realized that his mother had no say in the family matters. He would refer to his father as ‘Boss’.

Sujata, with her strong sense of pride, dignity and self-respect realized soon that she was practically of no importance to her husband, mother-in-law, Jyoti, Neepa, and Tuli. They reserved for her some subordinate role in the family. Gradually, in Sujata’s mind they also occupied the ranks of the others. She remembered, ‘Dibyanath had never understood Sujata. She was not one of those radicals, the independent woman conscious of her rights. She was not one of those fashionable ladies with fashionable jobs driving their own cars through Calcutta’(46). Sujata was asked by her husband to resign from her job in the bank. But she declined his proposal. After this refusal, her husband’s sex life outside the house became more active.
During the first visit to Somu’s house everything seemed normal and the way her mother was expressing her sorrow was also quite natural. ‘Sujata realized that Somu’s mother with her little learning, her limited intelligence and her inability to put her ideas into words, thought the same thoughts as she with all her learning, clarity of vision and competence in articulating ideas’(53). She was crying aloud unlike Sujata at her home. Sujata could not cry over Brati’s death because it was unwanted. She told her that she was such an unfortunate lady that even the foxes and dogs wept at her poverty. Somu’s father had to work round the clock to maintain the family. For Somu’s education he did not have to worry at all because Somu was exceptionally bright and had his scholarship. Somu’s sister had given up her college after Somu’s death because she had to carry on with the responsibility of the household. She was also having humiliation in social circle for being Somu’s sister.

From Somu’s mother Sujata came to know that Bijit’s elder brother had taken his mother away to Kanpur. Partha’s mother had broken down totally. She collapsed under the pressure of shock. She had lost one son to the ‘God of Death’ and the other remained in exile. If he returned, he would be sliced. Somu’s mother made this remark that ‘A woman’s life is like a tortoise.’ She’ll find peace only if she dies’(56). Laltu had not his mother alive to feel anguish. She died before he was killed. When his father married again, he left home and went to live with his sister.

Sujata remembered that she had seen many corpses in the morgue and their relatives lamenting over the dead. ‘At that time she had not understood how those corpses, those grief-stricken men and women, were connected, were one with her. Now she realized that Brati had belonged with them not only in death, but also in life’ (57). Brati belonged more and more to these dispossessed people than he did to his own family. These people knew the other Brati whom Sujata never knew. ‘That was how they could be inseparable in both life and death. Just as Sujata found herself bound inseparably to all those who carried in their hearts the burden of their loss’ (57).

In the second visit, Somu’s house looked strewn with poverty. Somu’s mother wore a sari that was old and torn. Sujata also noticed that the thatched roof bent on one side which was supported by a stick. The low bedstead was no longer there. Bricks on the floor supported a flat wooden plank instead. Cooking was probably no longer possible in the verandah. In a corner of the room one could see the small clay oven, a pan and a few utensils. Somu’s mother looked more distressed and more crushed. Sujata felt, ‘Her appearance carried the look of death that one saw occasionally in an abandoned child on a city pavement, a kitten in the gutter, or a scrawny little crow’ (58).

As conversation went on, Somu’s mother expressed her apprehension that her elder sister would not get any job because of her link with Somu. In reply, Sujata sounded optimistic saying that she was working still without any hazards. Then the blow came from Somu’s mother, ‘Don’t compare yourself and my daughter, Didi. With all the contacts you have! Didn’t you notice how all their names appeared in the papers, but Brati’s name never appeared? Didi, I have no contacts, I don’t have the money to hush things up or get things done’ (61). Sujata was aware that one day, when the grief which brought them close, would
subside, Somu’s mother would feel the difference between the positions of the two mothers. The following passage would be illuminating to know actually who was better positioned:

‘Somu’s mother did not know that she had scored over Sujata; she had known what Somu was up to. Sujata may have had an aristocratic bearing, a stiff upper lip, a watch on her wrist and an expensive handloom sari. But Somu’s mother did not know that Sujata as a mother had lost out to several thousands of mothers, for she had never known what Brati was up to’ (69).

Sujata met Nandini, Brati’s girlfriend, in the late afternoon. But what she experienced there was also intensely shocking for a mother. She came to learn that Brati and his group were betrayed by Anindya who was sent by Nitu, Brati’s friend. Nandini told Sujata that among the family members Brati loved his mother most while he hated the rest. His anger was mainly directed at his father who used his mother as a doormat. Sujata was also told by Nandini what Brati told her, ‘…his father bribed clients away from other firms. He was one CA whose death would not be mourned by anyone. With a wife like you and four grown up children, he was a great womanizer’ (81). Brati would say that his brother and sisters were not human beings. His eldest sister was a nympho. The other sister was a bundle of complexities. The eldest brother was a pimp. Sujata envisioned a solitary cell in her life. She knew that she had to live with Dibyanath, Jyoti, Neepa, Tuli, Bini and the colleagues in the Bank. She felt completely alone. Brati’s death left her alone. She would not meet Somu’s mother again. Nandini would not meet Sujata again. She felt a deep pain and a sense of loss within. She was terribly shattered.

On coming back home Sujata found the house marvellously decorated for the engagement party. When she was asked by Dibyanath why she was late in the evening, she for the first time in her life raised her voice, ‘If…you…don’t leave…this room….at once, I’ll…leave…this house…and never come back again’ (94). It was a slap on Dibyanath’s face and he left quietly wiping the nape of his neck. Sujata decided not to stay there after that night. Again and again she was remembering Brati in the deepest level of her mind. She remembered that Brati would hate Tuli as she supported her father’s adultery with so many women. When Jyoti came to know about his father’s infidelity there was a tumult at home. Tuli opined, ‘…Dada, it’s easy to condemn Baba. But people who seek such escape have some unhappiness in their lives. Like Baba does’ (98). Sujata thought, ‘She would often project her father as the model of the virile man, and proclaim that if one married, one should marry only a man like him’ (98). Brati did not say anything. He hated to share the same table with Tuli. He would say nothing when Tuli was around. As a mother Sujata could only reminisce the intensity of labour pain when Brati was born. Regarding the birth of other children she had also felt the labour pain, but she did not bear that in mind. Sujata did not at all want Tuli’s engagement on Brati’s birthday which ironically became also his death day, but she was of no importance in that family. Dibyanath was pleased with Tuli and considered Tony Kapadia as a perfect match for her. Like Dibyanath, Tony was a worshipper of mother. Tuli did not only support her father’s extramarital sex, she also helped him in passing the messages to her father’s girl friends. To celebrate the engagement function on Brati’s second death anniversary expensive sweets and food packets were brought from outside. No one
except Sujata felt the need to commemorate Brati on that particular day. When Tuli asked her mother why she was away the whole day when she attached deep sentiments to that day, Sujata used the opportunity to hit back, ‘You didn’t heed my sentiments when you fixed the day. You chose the day because Tony’s mother wished it. That I’m back home at all should be enough for you’ (102). She also humiliated Neepa for not coming to visit Jyoti when he was suffering from typhoid, and Suman on his birthday.

From the evening Sujata was experiencing terrible pain of appendix. Her stomach was tightening. She herself had planned an operation of it after Tuli’s marriage, but the pain warned her to undergo operation immediately. She needed to maintain her duties in the evening to attend the guests. After all it was her moral obligation. In the house she sentenced herself to a self-imposed imprisonment. She took a bath in the shower in winter evening but did not feel cold because of the potency of pain. After having bath she prepared herself and went to attend the party. ‘Her nerves, veins, heart, blood, screamed, No-no-no! She dried her body, her hair. Threw down the towel. Powdered her body. Put on her clothes. And tied her wet hair into a bun’ (103). After entering the room she found that everyone was in a merry-making mood. Mrs Kapadia was speaking of her guru in America. Neepa was being chased by Balai Dutt, her husband’s cousin, with a piece of meat on a fork. Tony’s sister Nargis who was also a devotee of the guru wore skintight top and trousers of saffron-coloured nylon wool. Tony was kissing Tuli in everyone’s presence. Mrs Kapadia told Sujata about their Swamiji that, ‘He is God himself. He is the Almighty. He wants India to have this poverty, so that it knows suffering. When he wills, everyone will be rich’ (111). Molly Mitter, mother of Ronu, deliberately raised Brati-episode to hurt Sujata. Sujata instantly left the place. She went on telling that Brati was a very bad boy- a liar. She told her how they came to offer their condolences after hearing Brati’s death. She continued, ‘Chatterjee had a bad time. How hard he worked to hush things up! We felt for him. As you know, Sujata is a thoroughly unfeeling wife. She spoilt her son. Otherwise how could someone from a family like this…’(113). The tempo of the engagement party was on the rise. All were drunk. Neepa left with Balai and Amit told Dhiman Roy that Balai did not leave any young woman in the family untouched. Balai started with his own aunt. DCDD Saroj Pal came to wish the would be couple- Tony and Tuli. Sujata had to go to attend him, but he did not get down from the car because he was in a hurry. He was given a packet of sweets by Bini. He left. Sujata had been feeling waves of pain in stomach since the evening and after Saroj Pal’s departure she collapsed on the ground. ‘Dibyanath screamed, The appendix has burst’ (128).

Mahasweta depicts the different worlds of two mothers in detail- Brati’s mother and Somu’s mother. But in Somu’s mother world people were poor but not morally hollow. In Sujata’s world people were rich, but morally bankrupt. When Somu’s father tried desperately to save Somu and others from being killed, Dibyanath, Brati’s father, tried to use his high connections to hide Brati’s involvement with the Naxalites. He tried to separate Brati from the family. Arrangement of engagement function on Brati’s second death anniversary and the glamour of the party made us see inside the emptiness of the characters. Somu’s mother in an accusing tone expressed her wretchedness before Sujata, but she did not know the world Sujata lived in. In the Introduction to Five Plays Samik Bandopadhyay writes:
‘In Mother of 1084, Sujata, mother of corpse number 1084, can find a moral rationale for her son’s revolt only when she can piece together exactly two years after the killing (and coincidentally, on Brati’s birthday) a part of her son’s life she had never known. Unaware in her situation of life of the politics of economic deprivation and exploitation, the more she can see in Brati’s revolt an articulation of the silent resentment she has carried within herself against her corrupt-respectable husband and her other children and their spouses and friends the closer she feels to her dead son, and the more poignantly she feels the loss’(xiv).

In the ultimate analysis Somu’s mother seemed to be in a better position, though she was drowned in acute poverty.
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