UGC Approved Journal

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed,Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065

Impact Factor : 5.27

Editor-in-Chief

Volume V, Issue VIII August 2017

www.ijellh.com

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MAHASWETA DEVI'S *MOTHER OF 1084*: AN EXPLORATION

Abstract

'Dramatic Realism' means 'objective experience' and 'social truth' and in that drama becomes a powerful weapon for exposing and demolishing social evils and injustices. As an anti-establishment artist Mahasweta Devi always committed herself socially and ethically in order to give voice to the marginalized and the downtrodden. Like Shaw she employed drama not merely for faithful documentation of contemporary social evils, but as active medium for revolting against authority and other social constraints. The play *Mother of 1084* (1997), actually a translation of her early Bengali novel, titled *Hajar Churasir Ma*, conscious of the political happenings of Naxalite Bengal, focuses on the exploitation and deprivation of the tribal and the marginalized people, the landless and the curse of landlordism and feudalism, and aboveall the neglected and subjugated fate of women. The plot, a diatribe against decadent social institutions articulates 'the awakening of an apolitical mother', which has an urban middle class setting. Through Brati's (the protagonist) whose commitment to the revolutionary Communist ideology led to his killing in an 'encounter', self-sacrifice the dramatist debunked the 'spent-up intellectuals', 'cocktail parties', the meaningless 'God-men' and the so called radicals. Somehow the play mirrors the whole gamut of a hypocritical culture with its brooding over the Bangladesh war, amorous scandals, a world of 'affluence', of 'pseudo-religion', selfishness, of drinking, whoring and abnormal relationships. Yet in Sujata, the deprived mother, 'a new woman is born'. Sujata's past life, her isolation, her philandering husband, her unwanted motherhood all ultimately ends up in her self-realization which itself becomes a convenient and powerful protest against the rotten societal value system.

Key Words **Social reality, problem play, anti-establishment, political, subaltern, Naxalite, anguish, revolution, power struggle, socialism.**

Once the great French writer Verlaine exclaimed that "I wish art to be irresponsible in order that I may indulge without reproach my sadism, masochism and my anti-parental neurosis" (qtd. in Goodman 43). The statement was at the background of the *Art for Art's sake* Movement which asserted that art should be useless: that the end of art is 'not utility but pleasure' or the intoxication of aesthetic sensibility. To the theorists it has no bearings on life, hence no social or moral purposes (thus, it can be 'moral', 'immoral', 'amoral', 'asocial' and even 'anti-social'): its purpose is to achieve perfection in the formal expression of life and nature. However, the Decadent Movement was fiercely countered and made extinct by the new age playwrights like Galsworthy, Shaw, Ibsen, and others who gave birth to the 'Problem Play' or the 'Drama of Ideas' which advocated the principles of equality, freedom and justice as against the wrongs and injustices inflicted by social norms and authoritative machinery of law. The playwrights employed drama as a powerful and effective medium for social criticism; a vehicle for protesting against conventions and frustrations and class prejudices; as new experimentations in form and technique, of the devices and expedients of the theatre. This also includes the dramatization of the conflicts of ideas and social attitudes. Naturally the Problem Plays were embedded in the social and economic milieu which bred them and their aim was to introduce drastic changes in the prevailing laws and conventions and in the intellectual makeover of contemporary people. The questioning spirit and the unbridled freedom for thought (no sacrosanct ideas, political principles, dogmas or sentiments) had produced many iconoclasts and social heretics. Their single-minded pursuit of demolishing and repudiating the symptoms and settled orders unite them under the anti-establishment school. The rise of the Problem Plays which opposed romanticism, idealism and escapism also mark a journey from the world of imagination to the world of objective reality. However, many considered problem plays as mere propaganda in the name of social healing and betterment.[1]

Before explaining Mahasweta Devi's social commitment her statement to the "Preface" to *Sreshtha Galpa* is worth quoting:

> I have never had the capacity nor the urge to create *art for art's sake*. Since I haven't ever learnt to do anything useful, I have gone on writing. I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation . . . . (qtd. in Chakraborty 250)

Her gradually evolving writings had become political parables and socialistic ethics and of contemporary relevance. Samik Banerjee observes –

> . . . her plays and stories are often located among or refer to the communities in the fringe of society; this may be deliberate strategy to undercut the social and cultural hegemony of the upper-class people. The doms, the bayens and all categories of 'harijans' . . . she wants to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak so well. (Sengupta 250-1)

Her castigation of Government and authority and bureaucracy is the chief concern to 'her questioning of what the nation in the post-independence era has done to its people' (Sen & Yadav 15). And the possibility of a revolt and revolution on the part of the exploited had been the theme of most of her works. Infact, in the first world she is considered as the iconic voice for the Third World literature. Her main focus has been the themes like the struggles and hardships of the life of the marginal and tribal, the exploitation of the lower class in the hand of the rich and the landlords, the hypocrisy of the administration in complying with the upper class, bonded labour and forced prostitution, the misery and destitution in the lives of the city dwellers and aboveall, the sad fate of women under patriarchy (widows, ill-treated wives, unwanted daughters). Yet her radical political engagement gave her the opportunity to "demonstrate the kind of theoretical engagement of the postcolonial historian with 'nationhood' censuring the make-believe of a benign solidarity built around divergent people" (Sen & Yadav 16). In *Douloti* the myth of national independence and liberty has been ironically shown to be insufficient (and even failed) in changing the material reality of common man's life. *Bashai Tudu* mourns the exclusion of the tribals from the greater body of the nation and tries to reinscribe the *dalits* and *adivasis* into mainstream discourse. *Bedanabala* reexamines the marginality of women (through marrying off a prostitute with a *bhadralok*) within the framework of a post-independent Indian nationalist ideology. *Rudali* assesses the socio-economic condition of women in which the growing bond and affinity between two women and their domestic and economic bearings challenge the traditional value system. *Stanadayani* going beyond the narrow field of Western feminism reexamines the issues like surrogate motherhood, starvation, alternate means of livelihood and the strategy for survival. In *Draupadi*, allegorically built upon the 'vastraharan' episode of the *Mahabharata* the male construction of feminine virtues and womanly modesties has been problematized after the protagonist, being gang-raped in police custody refuses to clothe her

body. *Hajar Churasir Ma*, however, picturizes a bereaved mother whose sense of maternal loss traps her into a life-in-death existence; it also categorically offers observations on the institutionalization of power, undercurrent of active political awakening, the police torture and the ruthless killing of young men and most importantly on inhuman apathy towards human misery and suffering. In my present attempt, I would explore Mahasweta Devi's debunking of the repressive apparatuses of state politics, her diatribes against hypocritical upper class life, her castigation of the meaningless and aimless intellectualism and a overall nausea she expressed against social, political and authoritative constraints.[2]

Mother of 1084, a dramatized and translated version of the Bengali novel *Hajar Churasir Ma* is a potent protest against the ill operated political mandate to suppress Naxalite uprising in West Bengal. The writer is politically committed and the novel has its roots in history – she herself confesses:

> . . . I felt increasingly that writer should document his own time and history . . . . The Naxalite movement between the late 1960s and early 1970s, with its urban phase climaxing in 1970-71, was the first major event after I had become a writer that I felt an urge and an obligation to document. (qtd. in Sengupta 251)

Clearly, the drama has concrete political background. The setting is an urban, educated, affluent middle-class family. Brati Chatterjee, a sensitive but somewhat poor representative of that family engages himself with the cause of the peasants and the tribals who congregated for the Naxalite movement. And as an outcome of it, he falls a victim to a planned 'encounter'. This predominantly political injustice has been given a personal edge which the author herself defines as 'the awakening of an apolitical mother'. Sujata, the victim's mother confronts the passive apathy and cold indifference with a kind of calm resistance. Through the speculations into her family life the author deftly points out the sham and hypocrisy of the patriarchal society in which women have to bear with innumerable tortures – both mental and physical. Somu's mother stands with her on equal footing with their mutual bereavement. It is, however, Nandini, though faced barbaric police torture with her unyielding faith in human dignity and social change, helps Sujata in her self-realization and in that process the experience of Sujata (and also her identification with her dehumanized son, a mere number) becomes the 'collective experience' of women under male conditions and socio-political bias.

At root *Mother of 1084* is a historical document of a period of Bengal when Naxalite uprising has been branded as 'extremist' and 'terrorizing'. The Naxalite Movement was

predominantly an economic and agrarian cause in which the tribals and peasants clash with the landlords. In 1967 at Naxalbari, a small village in West Bengal tribal peasants being barred from ploughing their own land violently retaliated against the feudal authority (with them the police consorted) and ends up in killing a policeman. As a result government, unleashed torture and firing on innocent tribal people killing innumerable. On ideological and sympathetic grounds the urban intellectual (only a portion of it) supported the marginal against their oppression in which the landowners, the state officials and the police collaborated. The repressive structure of authority 'criminalized' their intent and sought recourse to force and violence thereby endorsing political hegemony. Brati Chatterjee's is a case of sensitive, intellectual young man devoted to social cause during 'the state of emergency' and falling victim to police encounter: the authority charged them for 'treason'; but actually, they were propelled by the strategy for survival. The tale of time is mired in torture and blood: organized government authority carried on mass arrest, 'fake encounter'; resisted mass gathering; put on strict surveillance on young people's movements; dubbed certain places as politically 'sensitive'. In Act V Sujata apprehends 'danger' for Brati: "Young men from one locality aren't allowed these days to visit a different locality. They get killed if they do" (MID 694). Common people grieves and lamentations were dealt with extreme apathy and sometimes with harshness – 'No. You won't get the body' (686). The upper class remained strangely indifferent and considered the mass uprising as 'a cancerous growth on the body of democracy' (688). The government's bureaucratic and domineering role 'hushed' up 'the splints of idealism' with rampant police force: capitalist tendency shamelessly resurfaces above socialism when Saroj Pal is given 'quick promotion' 'in recognition of his heroic role in the suppression of the Naxalite revolt' (ibid.). The power politics that include caste tensions, discriminations and contradictions made the scenario claustrophobic. The influx of Bangladeshi refugees further worsened the situation. However, Brati's fate is not 'out of the ordinary' or exclusive but 'That's only natural' (689) in the nightmarish phase of turbulence and unrest.

Gayatri Devi studies the drama as a form of subaltern resistance against the visibly oppressive ideology of governmental propaganda. She begins by citing 'Rajan's case' (an engineering student, faced custodial killing in Kerala) and on the broader perspective of 'civil liberties' she treats the issue of Naxalite rebellion and its ruthless suppression in West Bengal in the 1970s as evidence of totalitarian attempt of diluting subaltern voices. She also takes into account the fact of Naxal party's organizational weaknesses, the betrayal from within

(that of Anindya's) and aboveall their failure to get connected to the common mass and even with the marginal: the result was an unsuccessful insurgency which claimed many a valuable lives like that of Somu, Brati, Nitu and others. Spivak's essay *Can Subaltern Speak?* clarifies 'subaltern' as specific 'demographic' 'position'; and the 'organic intellectual' whose function is to develop a discourse for the subaltern and thereby ethically connecting the indigenous people with crises and dilemmas surrounding the subaltern identity formation. Here in the play the young activists like Brati, Somu and Nandini took up the cudgels for decolonizing the subalterns. Even Sujata shares a closer identification with the downtrodden for in the patriarchal system motherhood and womanhood are rigorously subordinated. Class warfare and its consequences physically and emotionally affected both family (it is evident in the dual reactions that come out of the Chatterjee household) and the state. And the meaning and the sense of loss it generates within Sujata is spatio-temporally nationalized by unveiling the history behind thousands of missing sons and daughters in the structured subjectivity of the country. Brati's inclination to the Naxalite cause technically puts him in alliance with the subordinate people and therefore against the dominant national culture. On the other hand, Jyoti and his father's callous response to Brati's framed death foregrounds their allegiance to the corridors of power; for they too are insecure in front of the subaltern rise and the possibility of a reversal in the socio-cultural paradigm. The operation of power and its shifting nature in the ongoing class war forces our 'subjective consciousness' to meditate upon whether Brati's death can be justified as simply the destruction of malicious threatening for national interest, or the actual development announcing subaltern insurgency demanding a change in the history of representation.[3]

Now, on a larger perspective we may view the drama as encapsulating the anxiety and anguish of a post-independent generation. Osbourne's *Look Back in Anger* almost made Jimmy Porter a working class Hamlet, yet his immaculate vitality, volcanically articulate nature failed to revolutionize because of a lack of a noble cause. But here Brati's uncompromising devotion to bring about any amount of realistic change to a politically stifled society shakes the urban middle class 'bhadralok' and places them in front of moving and disturbing queries. The complacency and apparent security had left the industrialists and artificial intellectuals to overlook the hardships and crises that the established order introduced into the lives of the poor and the exploited (Jyoti and his father may deal with adulterated food, drugs and baby foods; and yet maintain the façade of aristocracy). Yet the new generations of people like Brati and others heralded a new manifesto of drastic social

change: Nandini clarifies against 'a programme of betrayal' – "Money, jobs and power didn't mean a thing to us" (MID 699). Yet a sense of 'betrayal' and 'disloyalty' runs through the violence, lawlessness and upheaval in the society. Her anguish is perhaps more poignantly expressed after she meditates over her brief romantic experiences of the past which in turn becomes a caustic social satire:

> Betrayal . . . so many young men still in the prisons, and yet a political party will not take a stand until it has been able to determine how it'll serve its own interest and affect its standing with the centre. Betrayal. The worst reactionaries make avowals of their sympathy for us, and in the process they spoil our image in the public eye. Betrayal. We are not allowed the use of the press, paper, type-lead to explain our views. Even when we ('adventurist-romantics') were being killed, all the writers and all the periodicals were crying over Bangladesh, they had nothing to say about West Bengal. (700)

The process that wiped out 'a generation between sixteen and forty' provides no solace or consolation for Nandini except frustrations: "No. No. No. No. It was never quiet, nothing's quiet. Nothing's changed" (705).

The politics of annihilation piles on wounds and miseries upon the natives; law and police rampancy mutually make the plight more horrible, cruder and scarce. From the very first scene brutality and torturous presence of police operation are apparent in the play. Initially the Kantapukur police station indifferently intimates Brati's death to his family, deducing and dehumanizing him to a mere number – '1084'. Then there is the reference of a distant relative in the police contingency who would surgically 'hush' up the event keeping intact all reputations and facades. After that for political reasons it guards off Brati's dead body declining all heart-rending motherly pleas; naturally Saroj Pal becomes 'bloody cur of the police'. They do not even honestly suppress the revolution instead applies tramps cards of betrayal. Somu's mother reiterates about Somu's father who hoped 'They'll . . . still be alive if the ploice comes' (696): "He had such faith in the police, but they wouldn't even take down his complaint. They didn't do a thing. They only sent their vans when it was all over to collect the dead bodies" (ibid.). However, the inhuman cruelty reaches its climax in Nandini's experiences: 'The prison. The solitary cell. The worst torture.' (702); as a result she has become mentally ill and partially blind. Sujata, however, carrying on the legacy of the author

puts question on the authenticity of the whole administration system: "Still in uniform? Still on duty? Mass action in Baranagar?" (710).

Under the shadow of revolution the women question is artistically considered: the presentation of the 'existential crisis' of women and their gendered resistance to the dominating discourse intuits us about the different threads of contemporary society, aristocratic life, isolation on personal level, hollowness of the artificial culture, hypocrisy and showiness of regarding religion, drinking, whoring, illegitimate amoral affairs; in sort it debunks a shallow world of petty self interests where filial bonding comes secondary to sham reputation. A cacophonous world which is overcrowded with aimless surfacial intellectuals, who utters 'sob stuff' in the face of political crisis and earns titles of 'rebel poet' by 'whining over Bangladesh'. Regarding women we can observe that their personal lives has been exposed to political power struggle: and they are used, abused and deprived (of normal life) whether as a mother or a beloved or simply as a woman. Jaydip Sarkar comments appropriately:

> Through the character of Sujata, Mahasweta seeks to bring to light the darker areas of life where persecution of the innocent continues unabated. She is one of those victims whose kith and kin had been done away with as a result of confronation with the people in power. She finds herself caught in a conflict between a sympathetic mother and a silent protester against the immoral tendencies of the members of her family . . . she feels suffocated under the weight of the stifling values enjoined on her by the patriarchal society. (Chakraborty 256-7)

Indeed, her grim past, her isolated present, her husband's affair with the typist girl, her unwanted motherhood, her anticipation of a hopeless future all point to the experience of a traditional Indian woman. She is almost forced to go to Kantapukur to identify his son's corpse, for her husband with duality and materialistic nature would like to 'hush' it up. Her entrapment within a hellish situation and her mute lamentations reminds us that of Maurya inSynge's *Riders to the Sea*.[4] Her internal sufferings and pangs and the battle within is beyond restrictions when Nandini disillusioned her saying: "Everyone remains a stranger these days to everyone. It's an obligation these days to know one's son (MID 701); and a little latter "He stayed back home . . . only to honour your sentiments" (ibid.) (which caused his death); it makes almost impossible for her to grapple with the reality. The make-believe world cannot feel her sentiments and the maternal longings that existed between her and

Brati; the organization of a booze party on Brati's death and birth anniversary brings about her frantic collapse in 'your (her) solitary cell' (706). Somu's mother's 'tortoise's life' is even more painful: she pines –

> You have yet another son. You can still hold him to your breast and forget your grief . . . I lost my son, my son's father, and I, with this tortoise's life of mine, shall live on forever, and two funeral pyres burning within. (697)

Her repressed emotion, shackles over socialization are in conflict with her urge to live. But no one else's is a more pathetic condition than that of Nandini's. Her involvement in the raging Naxal movement which leads to her arrest gives her life irrevocable, torturous turn: her enthusiasm and earnestness is enforcedly castrated in 'the interrogation in a dark room' and by calling her up in a 'different room' (which connotes her custodial rape). Sujata realizes that it has been more poignantly tragic 'for a living Nandini than for a dead Brati'; Nandini's hapless fate, her denied status of political prisoner, her subjugation to sexual assault, her shock and suffering find outlet in the series of rhetorical and truncated questions, expressing her angst towards bourgeois democracy:

> How can you be so smug and complacent? With so many young men killed, so many imprisoned, how can you wallow in your complacency? . . . How can you carry on with your pujas, concerts, cultural festivals, poetry fests?[5] (705)

Mother of 1084 against the background of the bleakness of death and morbid condition of an unfeeling society exhorts socialism. We are all familiar with Mahasweta Devi's Marxist orientions so the proliferation of idealistic sensibility through the story of an 'apolitical mother' and her martyred Naxalite son is on the whole an attempt of making 'world a better place' and thus embody the war cry of a whole generation who are meditating about 'a regeneration of a perfect state of being' (Lahiri Maitra web.). Brati's self-sacrifice is assertive protest against economic deprivation, exploitation and corruption; in Gautam Sengupta's words – "(his) death is not a synonym for loss; rather it is a route to fulfillment" (Chakraborty 253). Nandini sounds optimistic: defying mental and physical tortures she still can dream of regarding the ideals of the movement and associated zeal and spirit – "someday there will be people who'll say that behind all our apparent hatred lay a craving to love and to revere" (MID 699). Besides the affectionate mother-son relationship [Brati repents – "you (Sujata) have to bear with a lot for me; Sujata retorts – "It hasn't from the time you came,

because you're there (692)] dispenses and dilutes the political scenario and counters establishment's effort in circumscribing 'private feelings' and 'basic existence'. Finally, we should not overlook the fact of Sujata's realization of her own self; Sengupta again observes – "*The Mother of 1084* is unique as political drama because it actually declassifies a mother; out of a deprived mother a new woman is born" (Chakraborty 253). Thus the pain and suffering cannot actually subdue the beckoning hope for a utopian future; neither do they lead to frustrating limbo. But the resolution, the human dignity, the sense of concern for all mother's son, advocate general welfare, at least promise a better future. It would be proper to conclude with Jaydip Sarkar's comments on the play:

> . . . the play is several kinds of text at once: it is history, social critique, ethnography, literature, political testimony, providing many ways to understand he 'truths' of experience by recounting live of pain and persecution ... It constitutes an articulation of the unvoiced, a recovery of forgotten selves. (Chakraborty 262)

[1] For the definitions and features of the Aesthetic Movement and the Problem Plays I closely followed the edition of W. R. Goodman cited below.
[2] The general introduction about Mahasweta Devi I got from the introduction portion of the volume jointly edited by Sen and Yadav
[3] I am indebted to Gayatri Devi's article for the Subaltern critique of the play. However, I took the concept and made it suitable for my purpose.
[4] However in the current play the elegiac tone is suppressed under angst and protest.
[5] These ornamental performances are actually capitalist superstructures which the rebels wanted to deconstruct.

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