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Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*: A Naxalite shot and upshot

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Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* probes into the Naxalite Movement of the early 1970s from a feminist and a humanist point of view. Being a postcolonial writer, she stands at the intersection of vital contemporary issues of politics, gender and class. Recording history was her self-imposed mandate permeating her depiction with trenchant satire against government and soul stirring poignancy for subaltern, peasants, outcastes, untouchable, tribal and young idealists. In her introduction to *Agnigarbha (Womb of Fire, 1978)*, Mahasweta Devi admits, "Rural India has the appearance of an enormous grave yard...This Movement has been the most significant and inspiring event for a number of decades in this country." (2008, ix) It is only in the course of voicing one's moral, social and ideological place that a person could probably hope to reconcile some wounds of tyranny and subjugation and rise to protest the system of oppression personally or collectively. Attempting self-liberation, Sujata, the mother of 1084, has learnt to make a way out on the long road to hegemony.

The economic and social exploitation has forced the dispossessed to the Naxalite Movement. As Sumanta Banerjee puts:

It was senseless orgy of murders, misplaced fury, and sadistic tortures, acted out with the vicious norms of the underworld, and dedicated by the decadent and cunning values of the petty bourgeois leaders. (1983, 17 7)

Mahasweta Devi continues this process of documenting the exploitation in her other works such as *Agnigarbha (Womb of Fire)*, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* and *The Glory of Sree Sree Ganesh*. Here she focuses on the responses of a cross-section of the fighters and their survivors. They are both, those who endure the mutilations and injuries of the holocaust, and those who have survived through the days of horrible violence in sham insularity. Samik Bandyopadhyay writes:

The adoration of god men, the euphoria over the Bangladesh war, the pretenses of radicalism and scandals commercial and amorous constituted for the latter a lifestyle that guaranteed their security. At one level at least the urban guerrillas were reacting against the immorality of this lifestyle and rejecting the social-familial system that had nurtured them. The rebellion against the middle class mores need not be an explanation even of the urban Naxalite rebellion, but that would be the one aspect that could rationalize the Movement in retrospect to a fairly affluent, sensitive and enlightened mother, who had not known till the shock of an early morning phone call from the police morgue that her favorite son had become part of the movement. (2008, xiv)

The play is a yawning psychological sketch of a mourning apolitical mother, who instead of drowning her son's memory in tears, keeps the ardent ideal alive during the traumatic time. Her personal anguish turns into political awareness and metaphysical understanding only after the unexpected and mysterious death of her younger son Brati, with whom she has always shared a very keen relationship, unlike her other children. It is his life and activities that Sujata fails to understand which enhance her soul thrilling quandary.

Sujata comes to know of the facts behind Brati's sacrifice exactly two years after his death. The learning process continues till the end of the play involving her in a series of meetings and encounters with the people whose cause Brati campaigned. She is one of those victims whose dear ones have been killed in a skirmish with the people in power. Brati, like other youth, was disillusioned with the existing social and power systems. They harbor many evils which boom on the credulity of the innocent people. Consequently Brati rebels through the people's movement. Later on, the movement spread to the metropolis, when the urban highbrows, out of a sense of guilt, resolve to take part in it. Jai Sen puts, "for their guilt in acquiescing in the perpetuation of a system of exploitation from which they had reaped benefits for generations."(*The Unintended City*, 1976, 33-40)

Brati protests against the 'internal colonization' and irrational ethics of all those establishments that add to the woes of the underprivileged. The play begins with a morning phone call that Sujata receives from the police to identify corpse number 1084 which is, in fact, Brati's. The play like Asif Currimbhoy's *Inquilab* is a commentary on the historical

movement. Being a tricontinent writer, Mahasweta Devi purposefully writes historic and domestic literature to portray the actual situations of the contemporary society. As Sujit Mukherjee observes:

Mahasweta Devi turns, with *Mother of 1084*, to recording the present instead of reconstructing the past. It is a typical play of documentation in which she seeks the roots of the revolutionary fervor of the urban rebels in their discontent with a system that upheld a corrupt and insensitive establishment both in the family and in the State. (*Book Riview*, 1991, vii)

Brati's mission of life is to liberate human beings from the grabs of the hydra-headed exploitative mechanism which regards the dispossessed sufferers as 'other, disqualified and inadequate'. He is dedicated to create a class-less society where mankind enjoys equal rights, equal access to identity and attempts to voice against the 'epistemic violence'. Ironically the autocrats of the ruling party look at the young rebels as a malignant tumor on the face of power politics, hence a conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed, resulting in brutal muggings and counter muggings and an orgy of vicious killing under an excuse of fake encounters. Brati is slaughtered along with Somu, Partha and Bijit, in one such encounter. The native power in the shape of Saroj Pal, the DCDD- Deputy Commissioner, Detective Department, steps into the shoes of the previous British imperialists. Observing the Indian scene Gayatri Spivak views, "The mindset of the imperialist is displaced and replaced in the comprador capitalist." (*Imagery Maps*, 2006, pp. 351)

Sujata's visit to the persons beyond the course of her experience is a confrontation which uncovers the secret areas of understanding her son. In the introduction of Mahasweta Devi's *Bashai Tudu*, Gayatri Spivak writes, "In fact, these confrontations take place across the cleavages of hierarchies of power, of class and commitment." (1990, viii) These confrontations serve two purposes. Firstly they let Sujata come face to face with the realities of life and secondly of self-realization that the 'other is a self-shadow'. So far she has been forced to adjust herself to the patriarchal social codes and conducts and unconsciously she has accepted them as they have gone into her psyche. As a matter of fact, she is heedless to Brati's revolution against the traditional social ethics and beliefs. Nandini makes her conscious that she is able to achieve a voice, "(smiling) It's for you to take the first step. Isn't

it your obligation to set a model for the younger generation to follow? Why do you demand loyalty by virtue of relationship? Why don't you try to earn it by virtue of your integrity? You won't be honest, won't forge relationships and then you put the whole blame on us.” (2008, 29)

Nandini's tone presents her as an angry young woman livid by the cruelty and torture of police. However her resolute confidence in humanity is inspiring and moving. In fact Sujata's self-realization occurs in her company. Nandini asks her:

How can you be so smug and complacent? With so many young men killed, so many imprisoned, how can you wallow in your complacency? It's your 'all's right with the world, let's go on nicely' that frightens me most. How can you carry on with your pujas, concerts, cultural festivals, film festivals, poetry fests? (2008, 35)

The Naxalite storm has gone but its ruin and wreckage left. The nightmarish reminiscences of the disruption and turmoil still disturb the survivors. They could not come out of themselves and readjust to the mainstream normal life. Somu's father feels cheated being unconscious of the monstrosity of the crime executed by the ruling party with tacit backing from the police. He goes to the police station for support, when the furious crowd slaughtered his son, Somu, Brati and their friends. His optimism was devastated. As Somu's mother says to Sujata, "... he died of the shock. O God! Is there no justice in this country? God! No justice? He went on and on asking till he was dead.” (2008, 22)

In an orgy of violence Somu's mother has lost the last bread-winner for the family. Consequently many mothers and sisters have been given to hopelessness. Their social situation is wretched and aching. Mahasweta Devi reveals the pathetic life that seems to mock at the fate of history reminding that nothing has changed in imperial strategy except the name of the new rulers. Initially Sujata could not mix up with Nandini and Somu's mother. Bit by bit she finds a 'dialogic hybridity' that echoes her inaudible cry of anguish and harassment in their perpetual miseries and woes. However, the oppressors sense a rebel in her and accordingly ban her visit to the houses of the underprivileged. Sujata and Somu's mother, both are victims of the shots and upshots of Naxalite Movement. The bond, established

between them, is natural and it feasibly turns a major threat to the privileged ruling people. They fear that the sufferers may learn to revolt for the common cause against all kinds of persecution. Sumanta Banerjee, throwing light on the upshots of Naxalite Movement writes:

There are thousands of sufferers who are not being allowed to lead a normal life. For years the police have been trained to suspect every young man as a potential rebel, and they find ready preys even among those unfortunate youth who were perhaps once on the fringe of the Naxalite Movement but have no political connections whatsoever now. (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 1983, 176)

Through Nandini, Mahasweta Devi ratifies:

Betrayal. The prison walls rise higher, new watch towers shoot up, there are so many young men still in the prisons, and the 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. (2008, 27)

Saroj Pal, a bloody cur of the police for whom there is no forgiveness, is a typical autocrat tyrant, exceeds all those torturers notorious for persecution. The scene of interrogation, in which he implements terrible procedures and skills to bring out information and evidence from Nandini, is poignant:

SAROJ PAL. (softly) what was your relation with Brati Chatterjee? Was he a friend?

NANDINI. Stop it.

SAROJ PAL (the same voice) what was your relationship with Brati Chatterjee? Was he a friend?... (Bends close to her, lights a cigarette, presses the lighted cigarette to Nandini's cheek. She screams.) . . . He puffs at cigarette and then presses it again to Nandini's cheek. The questions and the pattern continue. (2008, 33)

Subsequently, the survivors of the victims either learn to bend or rebel. The disclosures made by Somu's mother and Nandini are severe impeachment of the authority's merciless insolence towards revolutionaries. As Nandini says:

No. No. No. No! It was never quiet, nothing's quiet. Nothing's changed.

Thousands of young men rot in the prisons without trials, they are denied the status of political... Torture continues with greater sophistication and secrecy.

(2008, 34)

The traitor like Anindya is free and rewarded while the prize for the sensitive mothers like Sujata is only a chic number 1084 to identify the dead body of her dear son among hundreds of other dead bodies at the police morgue, suggesting the immeasurable terrors happened to the people during the ruthless subdual of Naxalite Movement. So much so that she is not allowed even to take the corpse at home. As the stage direction reads, "*The sentence-- 'No. You won't get the body'- reverberates in different voices, in different pitches, each time striking Sujata's face like a whiplash, as Sujata kneels, her face staring upwards, shocked.*"(2008, 7)

Sujata's heart bites when sees Saroj Pal as being a friend of her son-in-law Tony Kapadia, he arrives to wish the newly engaged Tuli and Tony. She experiences edged from all directions by his presence. She remembers his stony and autocratic approach when she was summoned to identify the corpse no. 1084. He is in uniform; hence she fears another ruthless killing in Baranagar and in Kashipur today. She appeals to the spectators for not to be passive but protest, "Why don't you speak? Speak, for heaven's sake, speak, speak, speak! How long will you endure it in silence? Where is the place where there's no killer, no bullets, no prison, no vans? ...Where can you escape it all, Brati, in Calcutta, in west Bengal, from north to south, from east to west?" (2008, 42) Sujata's exhortation is an alarming outburst of counter revolt to the apparently motionless and unfeeling civilization.

Sujata, now onwards, changes into a protesting woman and a mother. She revolts in the face of decadent social standards. She becomes conscious of the grim truth of the ruthless slaying of 1084 revolutionaries and senses an image of her son in every young rebel who dies for the cause of suffering humanity. Mahasweta Devi articulates her agony thus, "(Pointing to the

audience, and the dancers) Corpses, stiffened corpses, all of you! (Pointing to herself) And I myself? Did Brati die to let you carry on in your cadaverous existence, enjoying and indulging in all the image of the world...forever, till infinity? No! Never! ...Let this 'No' of mine pierce the heart of the city...set the past, the present, and the future atremble. Let it tear down the happiness of everyone cooped up in his own happy happiness." (2008, 42) Sujata falls on the stage with this flare-up, however her quest for Brati and the protest are very much alive.

NOTE

- All the textual citations are from Mahasweta Devi's *Five Plays*, translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay: Calcutta, Seagull Books, 2008.

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