

## DEPICTING PERPLEXED PSYCHO-SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES IN THE SELECT PLAY OF MAHASWETHA DEVI'S MOTHER OF 1084

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### **Abstract**

Mahaswetha Devi's award-winning play *Mother of 1084* is not merely a psychological journey of a bereaved mother (Sujata)-pondering over the memories of her dead son (Brati), rather it is a mirror of the moral degeneration and spiritual demise of the societal elites of the 1970s West Bengal. Mahaswetha Devi, in this play, blatantly depicts the psycho-social consequences of death on the one hand and the death of conscience on the other. Considering death as the driving force of *Mother of 1084*, it is an attempt to reread the play from the dichotomy between corporal and spiritual death and quest for the answer who is dead.

**Keywords:** - Psycho-Social consequences, Death, Quest.

Mahaswetha Devi novels are structured wholly on the distinctive binary oppositions-the opposition between the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed, simple innocence and cultural opportunism. Here she raises her voice against the corruption and the cruel system that has the capacity to contaminate even the child in the womb.

**Focalized around Sujata, a middle-aged woman belonging to a bhadralok, bourgeoisie Calcutta family, narrative of *Mother of 1084* is strikingly rich in its layered intensity and complexity. Born into a conservative, affluent family, Sujata is allowed to do her B.A. so that it helps her marriage prospects, but is ultimately married off to Dibyanath Chatterjee, a Chartered Accountant, even though his financial situation is far from encouraging. In thirty-four years of their married life, Sujata gives birth to four children, two sons (Jyoti and Brati) and two daughters (Neepta and Tuli). When the play opens, two of her children are already married, Jyoti to Bina and Neepta to Amrit. In the eyes of the world, all of them are leading perfectly happy and settled lives, but as Sujata goes on to discover later, this happiness is only skin-deep. Significantly, Sujata makes this and several other such discoveries only after the sudden and mysterious death of Brati, her younger son, with whom she had always shared a very special relationship.**

*Mother of 1084* is a story of Sujata's multiple oppressions within a stifling, familial, patriarchal and feudal order. However, it could also be read as a story of how Sujata moves out of her cocoon of social respectability and civilized façade, only to discover the little known, primitive, underground world of the Naxalites or that of her son, about whom she knew very little while he was alive.

The play begins on the ‘dawn’ of January 17, the day Sujata’s youngest daughter Tuli is to be engaged to Toni Kapadia, a Sweden based exporter. As her son Brati was born on the same day and died barely two years ago on the night of January 16, Sujata cannot help but walk down the memory lane. As a new beginning threatens to collapse into the memory of a tragic end, Sujata’s mind races back to the day Brati had come into her world. She remembers how she had packed up her bag, hired a taxi and rushed to the hospital on her own, with no assistance from her mother-in-law or husband. Indifference of her husband, hostility of her mother-in-law and her own isolation in the Chatterjee household hit her in a single momentary flash. With epiphanic clarity, it dawns on her that her husband only lusted after her, never loved her. He was willing to impregnate her with child after child, but was never around to own up responsibility for her. Soon after marriage, he had begun to run a secret liaison with a typist in his office, for whom he had later rented out an apartment, too. As a result, all her children were born out of a combination of lust, hatred and self-recrimination.

A woman passes through several phases in her life. She is a daughter, sister, wife, and mother. Motherhood is a blessing, a way of life. It permits a woman to express her total self with tender feelings. But life is not fair arithmetic, and motherhood is not a blessing for some women in a patriarchal society. They are under the myth that motherhood is the sphere essentially fated for women.

The play opens with a phone call from the government morgue asking Sujata to identify a corpse of Number 1084- that of her own favourite son, Brati. Sujata’s family belongs to ‘bhadralok’, a bourgeois family of Calcutta. In this society the standards of shame and reputation are different. So as soon as Dibyanath and his elder son listen to the news of Brati’s death, they try to hush the whole matter rather than rushing to the morgue. Dibyanath was more concerned for his reputation rather than his son’s death. If Brati had been ill-tempered, a drunkard or a characterless person then these people would not have been ashamed of him. But he was different from them. That’s why they are trying to hush up the whole matter. Sujata is astonished to see the apathetic behavior of her husband.

As Sujit Mukherjee rightly states, 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 fervour’ 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” (Bandyopadhyay and Chakravorty vii). The play records the happenings of the principal character. She is a sensitive wife and a loving mother. She is almost like a home bird. She is strictly confined to household activities. She feels at home in the company of younger son, Brati Chatterjee.

Sujata investigates the reasons for the death of her younger son Brati. In this journey she meets the mother of one of Brati’s comrades, Somu, who looks tired and broken and as Sujata repeatedly visits her house, Sujata comes to know that she can console her only through her position as a mother. Nandini is a middle class educated woman and girl friend of Brati who has become part of Sujata’s mourning. Nandini doesn’t want to make it public therefore she refuses to take part in Sujata’s grief.

Sujata is caught in the vortex of conflict within herself between a sympathetic mother and a silent protester against the immoral life which her household stands for. This conflict takes on another dimension when her motherly love is contrasted with the indifference of the members of her family towards the news of Brati's death with which the play begins. While Sujata is all concern and helplessness, Dibyanath searches for ways to hush up the incident. The following opening dialogue illustrates this: The impersonal voice of an officer (off).

VOICE (off). 460001?

SUJATA. Yes (VOICE). Dibyanath Chatterjee's house? ...

SUJATA. Yes. Who are you? ...

VOICE. What's Brati's Chatterjee's relationship with you?

SUJATA. Son.

VOICE. Son? Come to Kantapukur. ...

DIBYANATH. What's the matter? Who was it? ...

SUJATA. He said, Come to Kantapukur .. to identify? Brati?

DIBYANATH. Kantapukur?

SUJATA. Haven't I told you? Jyoti, get me the car out. ...

DIBYANATH. My car, at Kantapukur? No. Listen Jyoti ...

SUJATA. But why? Why can't the car be there?

DIBYANATH. I need the car. I'm going to Chaudhari. You ring up Dutta. Tell him ... why don't you go over straight away? ... Jyoti, there may be time still. Isn't there a relation of your mothers-in-law in the police? ... Ring him up. Chaudhari must help hush it up" (3-4).

Sujata is traumatized when she finds her husband (Dibyanath) searching out the ways to hush up the incident with the fear of stigma in the society for his son's involvement in anti-government affairs. Sujata says to Tuli:

SUJATA. But that soon? Even before the body's been identified? A father gets the news on telephone and doesn't even think of rushing to have a look? All he can think of is that he'd be compromised if his car went to Kantapukur?"

TULI. That's only natural.

SUJATA. Brati was dead to all of you long before, isn't that so?

TULI. You have always been too possessive about Brati ...

SUJATA (off). With Brati, they've cast me too in the opposite camp. If Brati had been like Jyoti, or a drunkard like Neepa's husband, Amit, or a hardened fraud like Tony, or had run after the typists like his father, he'd have belonged to their camp" (9).

Sujata feels oppressed under the dead weight of the suffocating values enjoined on her by the patriarchal institution. Yet she never attempts to disengage herself from them. Though aware of her husband's lecherous and corrupt practices she does not protest. Rather, she starts working in a bank in order to escape all the restrictions. Her work is a form of protest and self assertion against the domineering authority of her husband. Many a time she resents the immoral acts of her children, but continues to discharge her familial duties, stoically going through all kinds of humiliations. She is very fond of her younger son, Brati, who unlike her other children is a man of character. She seems to find in his company what she misses in her household. The natural relationship between a mother

and her son is exceptionally evoked when the playwright attempts to create a sentimental situation in scene V.

BRATI. (pulls his eyes down) Mother, you have to bear with a lot for me, eh?

SUJATA. No, Brati, Bear with a lot for you? Oh, no.

BRATI. Don't they bully you a lot for me?

SUJATA. Let them.

BRATI. (with tenderness and concern) Why do you bear, mother?

SUJATA. It hurt once, doesn't hurt any longer. It doesn't hurt from the time you came, because you're there.

BRATI. Because I'm there!

SUJATA. Oh, let it go. You tell me now what you'll have for dinner tomorrow.

BRATI. Why? What's special about tomorrow?

SUJATA. Don't you remember, it's your birthday. ...

BRATI. How can you remember birthdays?

SUJATA. How can I help remembering? I was almost dying when you were born.

BRATI. Lucky you didn't? (13).

It is ironical that even though they value each other's feelings, Sujata does not know enough about Brati's deeds. It is only with the help of others that she learns about the true nature of Brati; what really his mission was. As a matter of fact, her first meeting with Nandini, an activist and a faithful follower of Brati provides Sujata with an insight into a part of her son's life that she had never known and she realizes how Brati had endangered his life by staying back on his birthday to honour the feelings of his mother. As Nandini tells her:

NANDINI. Of course. He stayed back home till the sixteenth of January only to honour your sentiments. Otherwise, he should have left for the base on the fifteenth.

SUJATA. Was it ... because ... he stayed back home ... that day?

NANDINI. He stayed back home for your sake, and he left home after I had rung him up(21-22).

Nandini, who is out on parole, reveals the horrors of the tortures in the prison to Sujata. Her revelation shows how brutal and senseless the killings and the torture of the innocent bring catastrophe not only to a family or a group or a society but also to an individual. Nandini, who is nearly blinded by the police tells Sujata:

NANDINI. Me? I'm out on parole. For medical treatment. They wouldn't have let me out otherwise.

SUJATA. Treatment?

NANDINI (takes off her glasses, puckers her eyes, puts her glasses on again). My right eye's blind from gleam of the thousand-watt lamps. There's a little sight left in the left eye. ...

SUJATA. After the treatment ...?

NANDINI. I don't know. (Smiles benignly). But I'll never come back to the so-called tidy life. Some day you'll learn I've been arrested again.

Thus, Sujata goes through a painful process of discovering Brati and her own being while others in the family including Dibyanath, the father, enjoy socializing with those persons who have been overtly a part of the Establishment that caused Brati's death. She is now

fully aware of the situation in which she lives. The more she learns about Brati, the closer she feels to him. She can find him among the people who he strove for and died for. Though initially, grief had brought them and Sujata together, she finds herself always on the receiving end. Somu's mother tells Sujata:

SOMU'S MOTHER. Your son, sister, gifted his life away. He had come to warn Somu and his group. They had got wind that the four of them were there in the colony, there was the fear that they wouldn't survive the night. ...

SUJATA. I hadn't ever seen them. (Pause) Brati had never brought them home. (Pause) I wasn't home all the time.

SOMU'S MOTHER (draws a breath). You're a working woman, you've a rich home, I wonder why Brati chose such a course! Didn't you ever realize what your son was up to? Somu's mother asks Sujata not to come again to her house for "They tell her, why she comes to your house? Forbid her. It'll be dangerous otherwise" (17). The revelations made by Nandini and Somu's mother are a severe indictment of the Establishment's inhuman attitude towards its rebels.

Sujata feels satisfied when she finds in his revolt a parallel to her suppressed protest the decaying middle class mores. In fact, Sujata's discovery of Brati and his cause helps her to rediscover her "self" and her cause as a mother, a woman, and a human being. And she does not regret being classed with Brati. Mahasweta Devi has depicted the horrifying tales of women forcibly strait jacketed into the mythical assumptions of 'womanhood' disturbed through patriarchal ideology.

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