

The World of 'Marginalised' in Mahasweta Devi's Play *Mother of 1084*

G. Gulam Tariq

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English
Yogi Vemana University, Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh

ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi, the recipient of Padma Vibhushan, Magsaysay, Padmasree, covetous Gnanpith award (1996), and Yashwant Rao Chavan National Award for 2010 is a modern playwright and social activist. In this paper, a modest attempt has been made to explore the concerns of the marginalized section of the society as depicted by Mahasweta Devi in the play *Mother of 1084*. The play also focuses on the exploitation of the tribal folk, the landless workers by the landlords and money lenders of West Bengal.

KEYWORDS

Mahasweta Devi; Tribal Folk; Marginalised.

Mahasweta Devi was born in the year 1926 and belongs to Bengal. She began to show a keen interest in literature from a young age itself. This can be witnessed in her contribution of several stories to the various literary magazines. Her first novel *Nati* was published in 1957. Gradually she raised herself to the level of a writer-activist as she spent many crusades for the rights of the tribals. From 1980 onwards, Mahasweta Devi has been actively associated with many kinds of grass root level social movements around the plight of bonded labour, persisting feudalism in the rural polity, and state negligence, especially to the marginalized section of the society which includes communities like untouchables and tribals.

In recognition of her social activism through the medium of literature, she has been honoured with Padma Vibhushan, Magsaysay, and Padmasree awards for her activist work amongst dispossessed tribal communities. Besides this, she is the recipient of India's highest literary award the covetous, Gnanpith Award (1996), and

the Yashwant Rao Chavan National Award for 2010 for her contribution to national integration, democratic values, and the socio-economic development of India.

Recognizing the work of the writer and social activist, the Human Resource Development Ministry has appointed her as National Research Professor for a second term of five years from February 2011. This honour fetches her Rs. 75,000.00 a month. This has added another feather to the crown of her glory as a dynamic writer. Being a social activist, this octogenarian recently took an active part in issues like Sigur- the Nandigram political controversy, the undocumented plight of the tribals in Gujarat. Her plays, "represent a profound concern for human predicament and sincere hope for the better future of mankind." (Sharma).

Before acquainting ourselves with the plight of the marginalized, knowing the exact meaning of the term 'marginal' or 'marginalized' is of vital importance. According to the Oxford Dictionary the concept 'marginalize' means 'to make

somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence decisions or events, or to put somebody in a powerless position'. So, the word 'Marginalized' refers to the group of people who are deprived of their minimum rights and are exploited.

In Post-colonial dialects, the term, 'marginalized' occupies a prominent place. The term 'subaltern' or 'marginalized' incorporates the entire people who are subordinates in terms of class, caste, gender, and office. It is the subject position that defines marginality. The lack and deprivation, loneliness and alienation, subjugation and subordination, the resignation and silence, the resilience and neglect, mark the lives of the 'marginalized', even when they resist and rise. They feel bounded and defeated by their subject positions. They have no representatives or spokespersons in the society they live in and so helplessly suffer and get a marginal place or no place at all in the history and culture of which they are the essential parts of human beings.

The Naxalite movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was also an important influence on her work. Devi, in a 1983 interview, points to this movement as the first major event that she felt, "an urge and an obligation to document" (Bandyopadhyay).

This leftist militant movement, which started in the Naxalbari region of West Bengal, began as a rural revolt of landless workers and tribal people against landlords and moneylenders. In urban centers, this movement attracted participation from student groups. Devi's *Hajar Churashir Ma* (Mother of 1084) is the story of an upper-middle-class woman whose life is shattered when her son is killed for his nexus with Naxalites.

The play *Mother of 1084* (1997) is the original translation of Mahasweta Devi's Bengali play *Hajar Churashir Ma* that has the best illustrations for the marginalized category. The neglected and suppressed plight of the woman is

represented by Sujata Chatterjee, mother of the protagonist of the play Brati Chatterjee whose ideology i.e., commitment to the revolutionary and Communist Naxalite movement has labeled him as a rebel, and led to his ruthless killing by the police in an 'encounter'.

In the play *Mother of 1084* Sujata Chatterjee, a traditional apolitical upper middle-class lady, is an employee who awakens one early morning to the shattering news that her youngest and favourite son, Brati, is lying dead in the police morgue bearing the corpse no.1084. Her efforts to understand her son's revolutionary activism lead her to reflect on her alienation from the complacent, hypocritical, bourgeois society against which he had rebelled.

The play moves around Sujata, a middle-aged woman belonging to a 'bhadralok', bourgeoisie Calcutta family. Born into a conservative, affluent family, Sujata is advised to pursue her B.A. so that it helps her marriage prospects but is ultimately married off to Dibyanath Chatterjee, a chartered accountant, despite his unsound financial situation. In thirty-four years of their married life, Sujata gives birth to four children, two sons (Jyoti and Brati) and two daughters (Nipa and Tuli). When the novel opens, two of her children are already married, Jyoti to Bina and Nipa 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 superficial.

Significantly, Sujata makes several other discoveries, only after the sudden and mysterious death of Brati, her younger son, with whom she had always shared a very special relationship. For instance, she discovers that all her thirty-four years of her married life, she has been living a lie, as her husband, being an incorrigible philanderer, always cheated on her with his mother's and children's tacit approval.

He fixed up a petty bank job for her, when Brati was barely three years old, not out of any consideration for her economic independence, but essentially to help the family tide over a temporary financial crisis. And, as soon as the tide is over, he wants her to give up the job, which Sujata simply refuses.

Later, she also discovers that her children, too, are leading lives very similar to her own. If there is someone who has dared to be different, it's Brati. Sullenly rebellious, right from his childhood, Brati has made no secret of his disregard, even contempt, for his familial code and value system. Turning his back upon this decadent and defunct code, Brati decides to join the Naxalite movement sweeping through the State of West Bengal in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Unaware of his secret mission, Sujata is not able to dissuade her son from joining this movement. During his period of struggle, he comes into contact with a young girl, Nandini, who is also a member of the underground movement and with whom he shares his vision of new world order. On being betrayed by one of his comrades, Brati and three of his close associates, Somu, Parth, and Laltu, are brutally murdered by the assassin of the police.

Later, the police call up his father, asking him to come and identify the dead body of his son, who, has in the meantime been divested of his identity as a person, and given another 'dehumanized identity' as corpse number 1084. Not only does the father refuse to go, but he also forbids other family members from doing so. Outraged at how his associates, his immediate family, and the state have abandoned the dead Brati, his mother, Sujata decides to go, throwing all pretensions to false social respectability and the fear of public censure, to the winds.

Dibyanath Chatterjee, father of Brati Chatterjee is represented, as an honest representative of the male-

dominated society. As soon as he comes to know about the news of his son, instead of rushing to the police station, he tries to hush up the matter.

Sujata is aghast to see the indifferent behaviour of her husband. He was least bothered to talk about this matter to his wife Sujata. The following sentences reveal very clearly how much she was neglected by him:

Sujata: (uncomprehending, in a panic). What will you hush up? What are you talking about?

Dibyanath: Jyoti, there is no time to waste. He goes out.

Sujata: Jyoti! (Jyoti is busy dialing a number. He does not reply) Jyoti! (Reproving). Jyoti! What's Happened? (04)

From the above lines, one can easily conclude that Sujata was neglected though she was the second important member of the family. Dibyanath Chatterjee bothered to consult his son Jyoti rather than his wife, Sujata. Sujata felt shocked when Dibyanath Chatterjee refuses to go to the police station with the fear of stigma in the society for his son's involvement in anti-government affairs. In the words of Sujata:

But that soon? Even before the body's been identified? A father gets the news on the telephone and does not even think of rushing to have a look? All he can think of is that he'd be comprised if his car went to Kantakapur? (09)

The four chapters in the play mark a new stage in the evolution of Sujata's consciousness, as it enables her to re-order her fragmented and chaotic life in search of a cohesive identity. Every time she visits her past or that of Brati, Somu's mother, or Nandini, her long-suppressed personal loss is slowly released into the ever-widening, spirals of betrayal, guilt, and suffering. From a weak-willed, hopelessly dependent, and a non-assertive moral coward, Sujata is transformed into a

morally assertive, politically enlightened, and socially defiant individual.

In the first chapter, significantly titled 'Dawn', Sujata primarily returns to her interior, private world of personal suffering, torture, betrayal, and loneliness. Negotiating the inner time concerning her immediate familial situation, she becomes aware of how she and Brati were not just fellow sufferers but also soul mates.

In the second chapter, 'Afternoon', Sujata's visit to the bank to get jewellery from the locker is only a pretext for her to visit the house of Somu's mother. A close associate of Brati, Somu had been killed in the same encounter. More significantly, Brati had spent his night in Somu's house before his mysterious disappearance and death.

While Sujata goes to Somu's mother with the specific aim of retrieving the memories of Brati's last few hours, it turns out to be her entry and initiation into another world altogether. It is the world of primitive squalor, filth, poverty, degradation, and subhuman existence that only hovers tentatively on the margins of 'bhadralks' consciousness. She enters into the little-known world of slum dwellers. The sight of Somu's ageing mother, her disgruntled daughter, and that of their ramshackle tenement with a straw roof is enough to complete the rituals of initiation.

In the third chapter, titled 'Evening', she visits Nandini, who apart from being Brati's comrade-in-arms was also his beloved. It is Nandini who reconstructs for Sujata all the events leading up to Brati's betrayal and murder. In the process, she also initiates Sujata into the little-known world of the underground movement, explaining to her the logic for an organized rebellion, giving her a first-hand account of state repression and its multiple failures. It's through Nandini that Sujata is finally able to understand the reasons for Brati's political convictions and his rejection of the bourgeoisie code. All this leaves her so completely bewildered that she openly

admits to Nandini, "I didn't really know Brati." (87).

In the last chapter of the novel titled 'Night', we meet a transformed Sujata, one who is more self-assured, morally confident, and politically sensitive. She decides to leave the house in which Brati never felt at home, where he wasn't valued while he was alive, nor his memory respected after his death. Having found a soul mate in Brati, she turns her back on Dibyanath and his decadent value system.

Bound by a sense of moral responsibility, she does go through all the rituals and ceremonies connected with Tuli's engagement, but during the party, she maintains stiff, studied silence. Her insistence on wearing a plain, white sari for the party is also a significant gesture. The feelings of Sujata were not respected but misinterpreted by the members of the family. The given conversation between Sujata (Tuli, the second daughter of Sujata) and Tuli represents this thought:

Tuli: Didn't Brati laugh at other people's beliefs?

Sujata: Brati's belief was so different from your belief in the Swami, or Bina's in her prayer room, that it sounds utterly absurd when you drag his name into the same context.

Tuli: The same thing again! You will react every time we mention Brati.

Sujata: Yes.

Tuli: Are we not worthy enough to pronounce his name?

Sujata: The way you pronounce it! To hurt me! (08)

On one occasion, Dibyanath Chatterjee accused Sujata of misleading their son which has led him to become a rebel. The egoistic nature of the father is understood in his words, "Bad company, bad friends, the mother's influence" (29).

It is a well-known fact in the society that father and mother play an important role in bringing up children. But it is

ridiculous to notice that when the children get spoiled, complete blame is thrown on the mother. Being physically fragile, (for a few years, she had been living with a rotten appendix inside her system), and traumatized by her younger son's death and subsequent repression of grief, she simply gives up on life. When she screams and collapses into a heap, her husband is quick to react that her "appendix" has burst. Whatever the symbolic overtones of his statement, she certainly succumbs to the slow process of inner-outer rot and decay. Finally, as she says, "Now that Brati is dead, I, too, wouldn't like to go on living." She discovers her inner self but, on the whole, loses her will to live and survive.

Time constantly swings back and forth, and so does the pendulum of two interconnected, intertwined lives, that of Sujata and her son, Brati. Interestingly, it is death that unites them both, irrevocably asserting the authenticity of their lives, too.

Mahasweta Devi's predominant concerns are the tribal backwaters, the

"exploitations of the Adivasis by the landed rich or the urban-administrative machinery callously perpetuating a legacy of complicity with the colonizers, bonded labour and prostitution, the destitution and misery of city dwellers who are condemned to live at the fringes and eke-out a meager livelihood, the plight of a woman who is breadwinners and victims of male sexual violence, dependent widows, ill-treated wives, and unwanted daughters whose bodies can fetch a price – are adequately represented". (Sen).

From the above situations, one can infer the insignificant role of Sujata in the play *Mother of 1084*, as a woman who has been relegated to the position of a neglected, suppressed, ill-treated, mechanical and marginalized in all forms in the male-dominated society who consider woman as an object of sex, only to reproduce, bring money when needed and does not possess even a voice to express her concerns.

WORKS CITED

- Bandyopadhyay, Samik. *Five Plays*. Calcutta: Seagull Books Pvt Ltd, 1986.
- Devi, Mahasweta. "*Mother of 1084*" *Anthology of Five Plays*. Calcutta: Seagull Books Pvt Ltd, 1997.
- Sen, Nivedita and Nikhil Yadav. *Mahasweta An Anthology of Recent Criticism Devi*. New Delhi: Pencraft International Publishers, 2008.
- Sharma, Dr. Ram. *A History of Indian English Drama*. Baraut, Baghpet, U.P.