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Art and Activism: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*

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In this research paper an attempt has been made to highlight the relation between Art and Activism, with special focus on Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*. The paper aims to show how Mahasweta, while attempting to probe into the urban phase of Naxalite movement of late 1960's and early 1970's, exposes the illegitimacy and hypocrisy that was spread throughout that society—both at individual and collective level. Besides, Mahasweta's belief in rewriting history, taking stand in defence of the exploited, and legitimising their violent resistance has been delineated.

If literature ought to prepare man constantly to resist what is wrong, then no good literature is non-activist. Writers through the ages have engaged themselves in various social and political causes. From the Middle Ages to the 21st century, writers have been employing their pen as a *pistol* (isn't the word "sword" outdated and hence inappropriate), highlighting the conflicts and controversies of their time with the aim of either mobilizing public opinion towards a particular point of view or to bring-about any other desirable change. Assessed in its historical perspective, Plato, the premier social scientist, was the first person who wanted art to remain in the service of collective welfare. Plato's concern extended to an advisory note to the philosopher statesman advising that only the poets/writers espousing moralistic concerns, which are closely interlinked with socio-political issues, may be allowed to stay in the state. And down the ages the concern of art and literary activity serving the society stayed. Whether it is Voltaire, Rousseau who provided intellectual sustenance to French Revolution, or the "Voice of the East" Sir Mohammad Iqbal who wished to put 'Himalayan Streams' on boil, all vehemently used their pen for the welfare of society at large and with the aim of bringing-about the desired change. Similarly, the writers like the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the American activist-writer James Baldwin, the Nigerian activist-writer Ken Saro-Wiwa among others are prominent in the world of English literature for producing socially and politically active creative literature. And when it comes to Indian literature in English and English translation, this tradition of socio-politically active creative literature has been forwarded by writers like the acclaimed and incredible social-activist of West Bengal Mahasweta Devi and the 1997 Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy. The present paper aims to analyse Mahasweta Devi's watershed novella *Mother of 1084* to highlight her activist aim behind it.

Mother of 1084 is an English translation of Mahasweta Devi's Bengali novella *Hazaar Chaurashir Maa*, inspired by Maxim Gorky's famous novel *Mother* (1907). It was written by Mahasweta Devi in 1973-74 and translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay in English language in 1997. It is a very sensitive and thought-provoking novel which attempts to probe into the urban phase of the Naxalite movement—the first major event that Mahasweta felt an urge and an obligation to document—of the late 1960's and early 1970's from a feminist, humanist, and activist point of view. It is a momentous landmark in her literary career, a watershed novel in terms of its approach, content, language, and style. It deals with the psychological and emotional trauma of an upper middle-class "apolitical" mother Sujata Chatterjee who awakens one

morning to the earth-shattering news that her favourite son Brati Chatterjee is lying dead in the police morgue at Kantapukur, reduced to a mere numerical: corpse no. 1084. This awakening propels her on a journey of discovery, in the course of which, struggling to understand her Naxalite son's revolutionary commitment, "a morale rationale for her son's rebellion", she, besides finding "the entire social system cadaverous" and "no legitimacy for his death", begins to recognize her own alienation as a woman and wife from the complacent, hypocritical, and immoral bourgeois society her son had rebelled against.

Recording contemporary history has been Mahasweta's self-imposed mandate. For her authentic documentation is the "best medium for protest against injustices and exploitation" (Devi 1997: xii). Read against the backdrop of this assertion of our activist-writer, the novel *Mother of 1084* touches on almost all the features of the urban phase of the 1971-74 Naxalite movement: "the politics that lay behind the brutal massacre of Brati and his comrades: the lumpen proletariat killers who constitute a local mafia and standing threat to survivors" like Partha's brother, or the "traitors like Anindya, who 'had come with definite instructions' from the parent party to penetrate the ranks of the dissidents 'as part of a political manoeuvre' to betray them to the police" (Devi 2008: xiii); the tortures inflicted by police on the Naxalites, the ideological deviations of the movement, the beauty and honesty of the dreams of the Naxal youth like Brati and his comrade Nandini, the brutality and ugliness of their cold-blooded genocide by the state, the weaknesses of the movement at that time and its capacity to learn from mistakes etc. Moreover, it was a rare request from the urban youth who had suffered tremendously during that bloody period of West Bengal and found no one writing about them and their cause that compelled our activist author to write this very insightful and stimulating novel:

Mother of 1084 was written in the background of 70's Calcutta. That time at Calcutta so many Naxalites were killed all over Calcutta. I remember I was going to villages all the time. So one day I still remember the young boys came, they didn't enter my house; they stood outside the veranda and told me "You are writing about the villages in the rural context . . . Who will write about us? We are being killed on the streets all the time". (Agarwal 2010: N. pag.)

Thus in writing this novel Mahasweta has fulfilled her self-declared activist aim of recording history and giving voice to the voiceless.

In the novel, Mahasweta, while evoking and re-creating the killings of the Naxalites, "concentrates on the later reactions—and lack of reactions—of a cross section of the survivors, both those who bear the scars and wounds—both literally and figuratively—of those horrible days and those who lived through the days of violence in simulated insularity" (Devi 2008: xiv). And in its backdrop raises certain fundamental, humanitarian, feministic, and activist queries and questions, which, besides stirring and awakening our dead and numb conscience, serve Mahasweta's activist purposes as well.

One of the major questions raised by our activist-writer is regarding Brati's faith in the cult of faithlessness: "Why Brati (and for that matter all like him) had come to place such absolute faith in the cult of faithlessness?" (Devi 2008: 20). Why he secretly chose the path of terrorism; what is the morale rationale of his rebellion? It is through the socio-political awakening of Brati's mother Sujata that Mahasweta gives us the reasons for Brati's rebellion. In her day-long quest, Sujata, besides realizing that Brati's rebellion may have been caused in part by the disenchantment with the hypocrisy, immorality, repression, and narrow-mindedness detectable in the domestic and social worlds to which his family belonged, recognises her own failure as a mother as one of the causes. She discovers that for "Brati and those like him disgust begins at home" (Devi 2008: 82). As a child Brati was deprived of the parental care and love: his mother took a government job (notwithstanding the family compulsions) when he was only three

and was directed to sleep alone at the age of eight. It was actually their family cook Hem who took care of him as a mother and was closer to him. Naturally he grew stranger and alien to his family day-by-day. As he grew up, he found his family (which is the representative of the society against which Brati and his comrades rebelled) the hub of immorality and hypocrisy where his mother is reduced to a mere puppet and a sex object, and accorded a marginalised status. His father Dibyanath Chatterjee was a great womanizer, an avid promiscuous, who never showed any respect and regard for his wife and never tried to make secret of his affairs outside wedlock. Indeed “he felt it was within his rights” (Devi 2008: 45). For him “a wife had to love, respect and obey her husband. A husband was not required to do anything to win his wife’s respect, love and loyalty” (Devi 2008: 45). Even his children “considered all his actions part of his virility” (Devi 2008: 46). In fact, Dibyanath’s ‘favourite’ daughter Tuli used to help her father in his extra marital affairs. This shows the extent to which Dibyanath had imposed his immoral social codes on his children who grew up to accept an artificial atmosphere, “a shiftless, rootless, lifeless society where naked body caused no embarrassment, but natural emotions did” (Devi 2008: 68). In the world of corporate business, he had placed success above scruples and had built connections with the wealthy and the politically powerful. Hypocrisy dominated his behaviour in both spheres: his family was expected to turn blind eye to his marital infidelity, and his commercial success was based on systematic corruption. This we realize when Nandini tells Sujata of Brati’s allegation that “his father bribed clients away from other firms” (Devi 2008: 81). All this was literally nauseating for Brati who used to say that they are “not human”. For him his elder sister Neepa was a nympho, the other sister Tuli a bundle of complexes, and his brother Jyoti a pimp (Devi 2008: 81). Gradually differences started brimming up between him and his family who began to treat him as belonging to the “other camp” because he never followed their so-called modern life-style and never agreed to their point of view. As the authorial third person narrator tells us:

If Brati drank like Jyoti, if he could go about drunk like Neepa’s husband, if he could flirt with the slip of a typist the way Brati’s father did, if he could be a master swindler like Tony Kapadia, if he could be as loose as his sister Neepa, who lived with a cousin of her husband’s, then they could have accepted Brati as one of them. (Devi 2008: 31)

But Brati never did that. Instead he resented and revolted against their immoral life-style. He revolted against the values and customs they stood for and desired to fight the social malaise that permeates his private and public domains. This led him to join the Naxalite movement. Thus, for Mahasweta the youth that joined urban guerrillas were reacting in part against the immoral and hypocritical life-style of the society of which their families were a part. This may not be acceptable to the objective analysts of Naxalite movement, but, as for Mahasweta, that is the one reason that could rationalize the movement to a fairly affluent, sensitive, enlightened, and an apolitical mother. Besides rationalizing Brati’s rebellion, Mahasweta here tries to make us realise that any act on the part of a child is the responsibility of the family s/he belongs to. In fact, family is the first school of a child. Its influence can either make or mar the future of their wards. And this is what Mahasweta tries to highlight throughout this novel. Even for Samiran (full name of Somu), a Naxalite from a poor family, disgust with the social system begins at home. Although he had a fairly good relationship with his father, he would say that “he would kill his father first for taking everything lying down” (Devi 2008: 82). His father, it is pertinent to mention, was “bullied by everyone from the fishseller to the local tough” (Devi 2008: 82). Mahasweta however does not generalise it. She is quick to add that “one can’t explain” why those who had a very good relationship with their respective families take such undesirable steps.

Another Naxalism related question raised by Mahasweta is, “was there anything in the way she (Sujata) had brought up Brati that had made him into no. 1084 in the decade that headed towards liberation? Or was there anything that she could have done, or not done, to make him no. 1084? Where did she fail?” (Devi 2008: 14-15). In the course of her encounters with Somu’s mother and Nandini—Brati’s comrade and beloved, Sujata realises that motherhood demands not only love and care but also understanding and the possibility of communication between mother and child. As she deliberates over her rhetorical question: “Why did it never strike her that when a son became a stranger to his mother, and they lost touch with each other even while they lived under the same roof, there could be a threat growing from it?” (Devi 2008: 16). She aptly realises that filial love must be earned and not expected as the child’s automatic duty. Nandini also tries to make her understand the essence of relationships by asking a very stimulating rhetorical question: “Does one have to love and trust others only because they happen to be one’s father or sister or brother, even if there is no gesture of love from them?” (Devi 2008: 80). She confronts Sujata: “You ask for everything—love, loyalty, obedience. But why do you demand it? How can you? . . . You shouldn’t. Many of you have forfeited the right to expect it!” (Devi 2008: 80). These deliberations make Sujata realise that Brati’s transformation into a Naxalite may have been caused in part by her own failure as a mother.

Thus, for Mahasweta a mother has a socio-political duty of moulding future citizens capable of creating a better world. She wants that only those women with a moral and social conscience ought to enjoy the right to bear off-springs. This belief of Mahasweta becomes more apparent at Tuli’s engagement party, where, watching the socialites who bring up their children without any social responsibility, Sujata mourns for Nandini whose exposure to physical torture has destroyed her chances of motherhood, although she would have been far more worthy of maternal responsibility. This ideal construction of maternal ideal by our activist-writer has been beautifully summed-up by Radha Chakravarty in these words:

This is a visionary dimension to Mahasweta Devi’s construction of this maternal ideal. Unlike mythical archetypes, this ideal is rooted in particularities: instead of unthinkingly valorising motherhood *per se*, it demands that the women prove themselves worthy of the role. The proof resides as much in the lifestyle and values of the women themselves as in the way they bring up their children. (Chakravarty 2008: 113)

Regarding the other root causes of the Naxalite movement, Mahasweta believes, as is evident from her various writings like *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* as well, that when the very basic needs and demands of the general masses are denied, they are left with no option except to take recourse to the violent resistance. This “violent resistance” according to Mahasweta is not only justified but necessary also. In the novel we observe that many people like Laltu and Somu who joined the Naxals were denied their basic everyday needs and requirements. In case of Laltu, despite being a brilliant student, he “went around desperately looking for a job. He didn’t get one. That’s what hit him. And a rage swelled within him” (Devi 2008: 58). And in case of Somu, his family’s plight and financial crisis would often swell him into rage, and he would often retort: “Are we beggars? Why must we beg for things that should be ours by right, and get kicked in return?” (Devi 2008: 68-69). Though one may not agree with Mahasweta’s compassionate attitude towards the people who take recourse to violent resistance to get their day-to-day needs, one cannot ignore the need to tackle the deep rooted problems of the poor if we want to prevent the Naxal like uprisings.

Though the Naxalite movement of 1971-74 was curbed by the government, the novelist raises certain pertinent questions in this regard which entertain none other than the answer in negative. Referring to Brati's death Mahasweta asks a very thought-provoking question: "Whether by killing him the authorities had been able to destroy the burning faith in faithlessness that Brati and his compatriots had stood for . . . ? Was Brati's death futile? Did his death stand for a massive NO?" (Devi 2008: 20). For Mahasweta, and for that matter for any conscious holding individual, it cannot be so. Nandini—Brati's comrade and love, asks some relevant rhetorical questions in this regard: "What has changed? Are men now all happy? Have the political games ended? Is it a better world?" (Devi 2008: 86). Rejecting Sujata's complacent attitude that "everything has quietened down" she retorts: "Nothing has quietened down, it can't! It wasn't quiet then, it isn't now Thousands of young men still languish in the prisons without trial. And you can say it's quiet now?" (Devi 2008: 85-86). So Mahasweta is categorically rejecting any complacency on the society's part that post-Naxalite Bengal was normal and happy. Instead she believes that unless and until we take a personal loyalty pledge "to everything of everyday life", to raise voice against the oppressions and the suppressions of the marginalized in the society, things cannot change for better. That is why she questions the indifference of the conscience keepers of the society over the killing of the youth during the 1960-70's Naxalite movement. She wants them to answer why they maintained the criminal silence over the brutal killings of the thousands of the youth. Why they never tried to delve deep into this sensitive issue? "Why their benevolence extended to the rest of the world, while nearer home their outlook became opaque, hazy, unclear?" (Devi 2008: 60).

Invoking the deadly period of West Bengal Mahasweta in a highly satiric and ironic tone writes: "The deadly risks that the youth of West Bengal faced cannot have been important enough. If they had been important, wouldn't the artists, writers and intellectuals of this legendary city of processions have picked up their pens?" (Devi 2008: 50). Since they found nothing unnatural in the spectacle they kept mum. To make their silence more brutal and more loathsome, the same writers, artists and intellectuals "of Calcutta turned West Bengal upside down out of sympathy with and support for the cause of Bangladesh" (Devi 2008: 50). This shows their double standards and their hypocritical nature that amounts to betrayal to those who had the desire to fight a social malaise that permeates both their private and public domains. Otherwise, how could one rationalize the fact that not a single person raised his voice when thousands of young men were rotting in the prisons? So to Mahasweta it was not only the betrayal of the persons like Anindya but also the betrayal of whole social setup that spelled doom to those who wanted to change the society for better: "The nation, the state, refused to acknowledge their existence, their passion, their indomitable faith in the teeth of death, all that they stood for" (Devi 2008: 60). Mahasweta here while exposing the so-called conscience keepers of society, at the same time makes her activist message clear: "A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history has to take a stand in defence of the exploited. Otherwise history will never forgive him" (Devi 1997: viii).

Mahasweta also raises her finger at the inhuman government policy to liquidate the youth that joined the Naxalite movement, and the unwritten ruthless policy for their families. According to her there are more dangerous anti-social elements in our society like food and drug adulterators than the Naxalites, but the administration has never cared to take any decisive action against them. Directing her ironic and satiric barrage at the society which offers them a safe haven she writes:

It is a social system which has the capacity to contaminate even the child in the womb, and where the killers in society, those who adulterated food, drugs and baby food, had every right to live. The leaders, who led the people to face the guns of the police and found for themselves the safest shelters under police protection, had every right to live. But Brati was a worse criminal than them. Because he had lost faith in this society ruled by profit-mad businessmen and leaders blinded by self-interest. He had rejected a society of spineless, opportunist time servers masquerading as artists, writers and intellectuals. (Devi 2008: 19)

Mahasweta expects, rather, demands a little more humanity and leniency against such so-called anti-social elements. The way Mahasweta projects their plight, one is forced to accept her contention and feel that they certainly deserve a more humane treatment: a healing touch and a chance to change.

Similarly, highlighting the predicament of the Naxalites' families, Mahasweta questions the ruthless "unwritten policy" of the government for them as well. In the novel we observe that Somu's sister is unable to get the government job on the pretext of being a Naxalite's sister, and Partha's brother has gone on exile because if he "ever comes back to the locality, he will be cut into pieces . . ." (Devi 2008: 56). Besides criticising this "unwritten policy", Mahasweta warns us against the possibility of violent resistance by the Naxalite families (who represent all the oppressed sections of society) if we don't stop the "unwritten policy" of oppression and suppression against them. This is endorsed by the retort of Somu's sister to her mother (both these women have not been given any specific name; thus projecting them as the representative of the whole class of oppressed mothers and sisters, those who have lost their beloved ones to one or the other conflict), "I won't let my life go waste like this, all for you" (Devi 2008: 62). Similarly, there was no rehabilitation policy by the government for the Naxalites who were released after the bloody period was over. Instead they were ostracized by the society; as a result of which, they were left with no option but to take the old path again. In Nandini's case she was unwelcome and unacceptable in her home and society and was home interned after her release. Such callous attitude from one and all forces her to tell Sujata when the latter asks her about her post-release plans, "You might hear that they have arrested me again. Who knows" (Devi 2008: 87). Thus, while Mahasweta demands rehabilitation policies for such people, she pronounces her verdict also in case the government perpetuates its callous attitude against them. And the verdict is nothing but that the violent resistance remains the only option for the hapless to withstand and overcome the "unwritten laws" and ruthless policies of the government.

At one level, the novel is a story of how an apolitical mother finds a voice of her own. How she is compelled to recognize the basic human need to formulate or re-formulate one's moral/political or ideological position in an insensitive, conceited, and utterly commercial world of *bhadraloks* such as Chatterjees. Read against the backdrop of this, Mahasweta tries to highlight that it's only in the process of formulating or defining one's moral, political, or ideological position that an individual could possibly hope to heal several inflictions of oppression or prepare himself/herself to fight the oppressive forces at the personal or collective level, thus paving the way for self-liberation. The gradual awakening of Sujata's consciousness from the "Morning" to the "Evening" enables her to reorganize her fragmented and chaotic life in search of a cohesive identity. Each time she visits either her own past or that of Brati, Somu's mother, or Nandini, her long-suppressed personal loss/grief is slowly released into the ever-widening, eddying spirals of collective framework of betrayal, guilt and suffering. Now whether it is a question of becoming acutely conscious of other people's suffering or that of her own

situation or simply gaining a more enlightened understanding of the circumstances that compelled Brati to make the kind of choices he did, all of these do facilitate Sujata's transformation from a weak-willed, hopelessly dependent, and a non-assertive moral coward to a morally assertive, politically enlightened, and a socially defiant individual. And this is what our activist author aims at and wishes our fair-sex to be. According to her only the morally assertive, socially defiant and politically conscious women deserve and can prove to be better mothers. That is why Brati's mother Sujata after her daylong quest realizes that "if only she had had the strength to come out with the truth and challenge Dibyanath while Brati had still been alive! Even then she might have been able to affect the course of events" (Devi 2008: 94). So according to Mahasweta the political and moral sense which Sujata gets after the daylong awakening should already be there in a person. For her political naiveté is as much a sin and a social crime as is political indifference or an immoral political choice. That is why Sujata in a rhetorical question asks herself, "Was this why Brati left home that evening in his blue shirt—so that Sujata would recognize the defaults in her nature and in her mind?" (Devi 2008: 76). And that is why Nandini while alluding to Brati's death tells Sujata, "I know you people never know anything . . . but now you know that it's wrong to carry on presuming that one needn't know why and how such things happen" (Devi 2008: 72).

Hence, throughout the novel, it is illegitimacy and hypocrisy that Mahasweta locates spread throughout the society—both at individual and collective level, "in administration, in the cultural-intellectual establishment, in politics, in the existence of a whole antisocial fringe of killers prepared to serve the interests of any organized political force anywhere between the extremes of the Right and those of the Left" (Devi 2008: viii). By highlighting this illegitimacy Mahasweta besides defending the violent resistance of Brati and the like, anticipates possible future resistances and catastrophes of this kind, in case we remain socially, politically or ideologically indifferent to their plight and oppression. For her the Naxalite movement (and for that matter any violent resistance rooted in oppression) is a human catastrophe for which the nation and the civil society is responsible, and must account for. This certainly has a universal significance, and holds true for any part of the world—be it West Bengal, Kashmir or any conflict zone in the world. By accusing the families and the societies for producing the Bratis, she may not qualify as an objective writer and may be accused of emotionality and sentimentality, but she has certainly qualified as a HUMANE and a socially committed and dedicated activist writer.

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