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## **Self-contradictory Image of the (M)Other Resulting Out of Social and Familial Denial: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084***

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### **Abstract:**

The concept of 'Other' is an essential part of Postcolonial theory and literature. In Postcolonial studies, 'Other' always comes in contradiction with 'Self'. The struggle between the 'Other' and the 'Self' is an ongoing process between the influential and the influenced and it hardly seems to be off and out of existence from our society. This continual and endless process of struggle has been going on since the very origin of our civilization. Lack and deprivation, subjugation and subordination, loneliness and alienation, resilience and neglect, resignation and silence are the very signs of the 'Otherness' against which many sensible writers and theorists have come to challenge with a voice of protest. However the way the concept 'Other' has been treated by Mahasweta Devi in "*Mother of 1084*" is an achievement in itself. Based on the Translated version of Samik Bandyopadhyay "*Mother of 1084*" from its original Bengali version entitled as "*Hajar Chaurasir Ma*", this present paper tries to present the struggle between the 'Self' and the 'Other' on the dramatic surface against the backdrop of Naxalite Movement of 1970s.

**Keywords: Other, Otherness, Self, Mother, Feminine, Family, Society**

The term 'Other' refers to the state of being alien or foreign. According to Oxford dictionary, the term 'Other' is "*used to refer to a person or thing that is different or distinct from one already mentioned or known about.*" The concept of 'Other' is an essential part of Postcolonial theory and literature. In Postcolonial studies, 'Other' always comes in contradiction with 'Self'. The struggle between the 'Other' and the 'Self' is an ongoing process between the influential and the influenced and it hardly seems to be off and out of existence from our society. This continual and endless process of struggle has been going on since the very origin of our civilization. One section of our society is always made victim by another oppressive section of people and this sub-ordination of one to another turns one to the status of 'Otherness' losing one's self and identity. Ironically majority of people are victims of handful minorities who regulate the lot of majorities imposing their will upon them. This majority class of people generally coming from the grassroots of our society comprising peasants and labourers are forced to live on the traces of minorities and they are looked upon as the "Other" in the eye of society. The injustice and

domination of 'Self' over 'Other' is well-illustrated in Bernard Shaw's most celebrated essay "Freedom":

*"If you like honey you can let the bees produce it by their labor, and then steal it from them. If you are too lazy to get about from place to place on your own legs you can make a slave of a horse. And what you do to a horse or a bee, you can also do to a man or woman or a child, if you can get the upper hand of them by force or fraud or trickery of any sort, or even by teaching them that it is their religious duty to sacrifice their freedom to yours."* (Freedom)

The studies of 'Other' in Postcolonial theory and literature has a broad area of studies as it covers almost all who are subject to loneliness and deprivation in terms of caste, class or gender. Today women are the most pathetic figure of castigation as a social and familial being in our society. They are made victim of ill-treatment by the forces of patriarchy. Their participation as a social and familial being is depreciated and derogated. They are ignored in every decision. This status of 'Otherness' curses the life of women as long as they exist. Simone de Beauvoir draws our attention towards the position of a woman as an entity of the 'Otherness' in our present society: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (*The Second Sex*, 87), meaning that a woman suffers from identity crisis and her identity as a woman is defined by the society in which she lives and is guided by the norms and system completely regulated by the forces of patriarchy.

Lack and deprivation, subjugation and subordination, loneliness and alienation, resilience and neglect, resignation and silence are the very signs of the 'Otherness' against which many sensible writers and theorists have come to challenge with a voice of protest. However the way the concept 'Other' has been treated by Mahasweta Devi in "*Mother of 1084*" is an achievement in itself. Translated into English by Samik Bandyopadhyay from its original Bengali version entitled as "*Hajar Chaurasir Ma*", the play "*Mother of 1084*" tries to present the struggle between the 'Self' and the 'Other' on the dramatic surface against the backdrop of Naxalite Movement of 1970s.

The struggle between the 'Self' and the 'Other' is prominent in Mahasweta Devi's "*Mother of 1084*" from beginning to end. The characters come under two categories – the haves and the have-nots. People like Dibyanath and Saroj Pal come under the category of those powerful people who are representative of 'Self', whereas people like Brati, Sujata, Somu's mother and Nandini are the personified figures of 'Otherness'. Along with presenting the image of motherhood through the characters of Sujata and Somu's mother torn between 'Mother' and the 'Other', the play also presents those youngsters like Brati, Somu and Nandini who sacrifice their life becoming 'Otherness' on their noble mission. The play shows how the people like Dibyanath representing bourgeois class materialize their self-interest regulating law and state. He is an embodiment of 'Self' who can go to any extreme, be it fair or foul, to attain his goal. Such kind of people dominates over all and even her wife Sujata is not free from his domination. The play

presents superbly how the 'Other' is forced to sacrifice his or her self-interest on the altar of powerful 'Self'.

We feel the very air of 'Otherness' when the play commences. We come to know from stage direction that it was seventeen January nineteen seventeen and then the play holds its informal commencement with the sound of a telephonic call. The telephonic call told Sujata, a middle class woman that her son Brati was lying dead in the police morgue. The death news of her favourite son was so shocking that it proved too bearable for her. Next Sujata was called to identify the body. This abrupt beginning of the play left Sujata in dilemma of mind and she asked for Dibyanath's car to reach Kantapukur to identify the body but she was denied and when she insisted on, she was unheard:

*"DIBYANATH. My car, at Kantapukur? No. Listen, Jyoti  
JYOTI. Yes?"*

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

*DIBYANATH. I need the car. I'm going to Chaudhuri. You ring up Dutta. Tell him... Why don't you go over straightaway?"*

*SUJATA. You talk of going to people? Why? Brati..."*

*DIBYANATH. (oblivious of Sujata's presence). Jyoti, there may still be time. Isn't there a relation of your mother-in-law's in the police?"*

*JYOTI. A maternal cousin."*

*DIBYANATH. Ring him up. Chaudhuri must help hush it up. He had warned us."*

*SUJATA (uncomprehending, in panic). What will you hush up? What are you talking about?"*

*DIBYANATH. Jyoti, there's no time to waste."*

*He goes out."(Mother of 1084, 4)*

Readers and audience are left in an intermingling effect of shock and surprise when Dibyanath turned down Sujata's proposal and preferred to go to Chaudhuri instead of Kantapukur to identify his son's body and the effect reached at the height when he was seen trying to suppress the news of his son's death from becoming public in order to save the family from stigma instead of having a look on the body. It was unexpected turn of event from the part of an individual who fathered a son. When Sujata's voice was unheard, she rather appeared before us as a helpless creature reflecting the image of the 'Otherness' in the family. This sense of 'Otherness' later goes deeper through Sujata's revelatory speech:

*“SUJATA. Jyoti and Jyoti's father...(Pause) are rushing about the place to hush up the news...(pause)...and so I'm alone...”* (Ibid, 5)

The more the drama develops, the more the sense of ‘Otherness’ becomes stronger. In Dibyanath’s household, Sujata and Brati were of no importance as they had their own ideals contrasted to the rest of the family. Sujata was more nearer to Brati than any other in the family. This is evident in Sujata’s Speech to Tuli:

*“TULI. Are we not worthy enough to pronounce his name?”*

*SUJATA. The way you pronounce it! To hurt me!*

*TULI. Hurt?*

*SUJATA. To Tony and his crowd, to the others, you, your father, Jyoti, Neepa, the way you all speak his name, as if, as if Brati was a criminal.”* (Ibid, 8)

That Brati’s existence in the family was no more than the ‘Other’ is clearly expressed by Brati himself when the drama develops a bit further:

*“BRATI (lower his eyes). Mother, you have to bear with a lot for me, don't you?”*

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

*Brati. Don't they bully you a lot over me?*

*SUJATA. Let them”* (Ibid, 13)

This indifferent and callous attitude of the family was too bearable for both Brati and Sujata to remain longer in the family. After Brati’s death Sujata lost the vigour of life. Her identity was no more than a shadowy existence. Nobody cared for her. The sense of ‘Otherness’ started to haunt her all the time in her loneliness. The things went crueler than earlier when the family paid no heed to Sujata’s consent while fixing the day of Tuli’s engagement on the same day of Brati’s day of birth which was accidentally the day of Brati’s death also. Sujata received a shocking blow on hearing this. In her reply to Tuli whether she would be present in the evening engagement ceremony, we can feel the intensity of Sujata’s grief over the news:

*“TULI. Will you be home in the evening?”*

*SUJATA. Why not? It's Brati's birthday today, if that didn't matter to you when you chose the day, I think I have to be there.”* (Ibid, 8)

Castigation of Sujata from her family circle is clearly revealed through Sujata’s reflection on her position in the family:

*“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 typist like his father, he’d have belonged to their camp.” (Ibid, 9)*

The hypocritical life led by the members of the Dibyanath’s household comes to its clear revelation in Sujata’s speech. Shockingly the persons who represent the ideals like Brati and Sujata are subjected to the status of ‘Otherness’ in the family. Both these characters were unwilling to confine themselves into the walls of this house which come in against of their ideals and where they are living like the ‘Other’ instead of a complete identical being. The unwillingness of Brati to stay at ‘home’ which stands for Bourgeois mentality is clearly expressed in the speech of Nandini while speaking to Sujata:

*“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.” (Ibid, 21-22)*

The absence of Brati, the unfelt presence of her entity and her position as the ‘Other’ rushed to bite Sujata within the four walls of Dibyanath’s household. The course of action dramatized in “Mother of 1084” took place in a certain day and the day proved significant for more than one reason in Sujata’s life as it not only set Sujata free from the confinement of those four walls which were in against of her ideals but presented an opportunity before Sujata to know the ‘Other’ Brati. So when she was denied twice to come at favourite places of Brati –first when she was seeking permission to leave from the house of Somu’s mother and next when she was denied to come Nandini’s house, she could not check her temper before Nandini:

*“SUJATA. I won’t go to Somu’s mother again. I won’t go to the places where Brati exists. May be that’s my punishment for not knowing Brati.” (Ibid, 26-27)*

The shadowy effect arising out of ‘Otherness’ also exerted a deep and permanent influence upon the mind of Somu’s mother, Nandini and in the life of those thousand mothers whose sons sacrificed their life becoming the ‘Other’. The same sense of ‘Otherness’ continued in the words of Somu’s mother to Sujata when the later came to the former:

*“SOMU’S MOTHER. I lost my son, my son’s father, and I, with this tortoise’s life of mine, shall live on forever, the two funeral pyres burning within!” (Ibid, 17)*

She became a universal figure of motherhood when she identified herself with all those thousand mothers who were made innocent victims of ‘Otherness’ due to their sons’ anonymous sacrifice for some noble mission:

*“SOMU’S MOTHER. Even now. There’re thousands of them, young men, all homeless. All those families banished from the colony. It leaves one sick at heart even to think them. I can’t think any more.*

SUJATA. *Aren't things all quiet now?*

SOMU'S MOTHER. *Quiet, sister? How can there be quiet with the mother's hearts burning like bodies on fire?* "(Ibid, 10)

The introduction of Nandini heightens the effect of 'Otherness' in the play. When Sujata paid her visit to Nandini, readers are introduced with her. The depth and intensity with which the authoress has presented Nandini corresponds well to the theme of 'Otherness' in the internal design of the play. Prior to know Nandini more, the initial description of Nandini works enough upon the mind of readers. The initial description echoes a very deep and effective sense of 'Otherness' in Nandini's life than many : "*Everything about her, her form, the way she sits , the way she speaks, gives the impression of a tight secretiveness, a self-imprisonment. When she speaks, she has the manner of a storyteller, as if she is speaking of other people, not herself, not about her own people.*" (Ibid, 18) For her participation in Naxalite Movement Nandini had to bear various physical and mental tortures that even reached to the extent of sexual assault by the state machinery represented by Saroj Pal. We get the clear hint of this sexual assault during the course of conversation going on between Sujata and Nandini:

"NANDINI. *That was the beginning.*

SUJATA. *The beginning!*

NANDINI. *I won't be able to tell you all that happened after. (Pause.) The sores on the skin have healed, but I'll never be normal again.*" (Ibid, 25)

The sense of 'Otherness' in Nandini's life reaches to the height when Sujata did not fail to, "*realize that it's more tragic for a living Nandini than for a dead Brati.*" (Ibid)

The play "*Mother of 1084*", besides showing the sense of 'Otherness' in the lot of majorities, also draws our attention to those people of minority class who apparently seems the representative of 'Self' but in reality the 'Other'. People like Dibyanath and Saroj Pal proved themselves the 'Other' in the eye of society. They wear the mask of the 'Self' but they cannot escape from the status of 'Otherness'. In spite of living in society they are not social beings. They misuse their powers for the benefits of a few instead of a large and they hardly display any quality that befits a human. Saroj Pal, the "*bloody cur of the police*", who got "*Quick promotion*" after "*his heroic role in the suppression of the Naxalite revolt*" (Ibid, 9) was a double faced intriguer- on one hand he tried to soothe Sujata and her husband Dibyanath: "*I know, I too have a mother. No, Mr. Chatterjee, it won't get into the papers,*" (Ibid) and on the other he considered the revolutionists, "*A cancerous growth on the body of democracy!*" (Ibid) and treated them iron-handedly. Dibyanath, the representative of Bourgeois mentality equally lived like a hypocrite. His speech and action never matched. What he said never followed in real life. While charging Brati and Sujata before Mrs. Kapadia, "*Bad company, bad friend, the mother's influence*" (Ibid, 29), he pretended that he was right in every sphere but the reality was different. Dibyanath was a man of loose morale, one who under the mask of appearance duped

everyone and even did not leave her wife without being betrayed by his flirtatious design with the typist. The way Saroj Pal treated Nadini and the way Dibyanath treated his wife Sujata and his son Brati never come in conformity with a gentle and civilized person. Being completely devoid of gentility and civility they are actually the ‘Other’. Ironically the play also indicates to this reversal meaning of ‘Otherness’.

The period of 1970s was a period of socio-political commotion in Bengal. “*An encounter with numerous heart-rending events became unavoidable in this decade. The taut excitement of determination, the helplessness of the shot arrow that has missed the mark, the self-destructive structure of the headless ideal, and above all, the watchful, advantage-seeking silence of the larger intellectual elite, and the clever inhumanity of the state machinery- all these contributed to a cloudy silence that absolutely choked the decade.*” (Parichay, 6) In the midst of such socio-political commotion, the play “*Mother of 1084*” launches a plea through Brati and Sujata for the way the mutilated youngsters and their mothers were cast aside and degraded to the status of the ‘Other’.

Thus, the play deliberates upon the theme of ‘Otherness’ and the plight and suffering of those termed and defined as the ‘Other’ on a larger scale by incorporating many youngsters and their families who were largely impacted during the 1970s. The process of decolonization that was begun by the revolutionists during the 1970s was curbed brutally by the state machinery. “*The Movement created a gap in society. On the one hand, was the men burning with idealistic zeal, talking about a regeneration of a perfect state of being. On the other, was the people wearing masks, pretending that all is well.*”(Galaxy, 1-6) The rage of one section of people ‘burning with idealistic zeal’ against another section of people leading a life of complacency in the midst of such commotion dug a vast rift between them making one section the ‘Self’ identified and another section the ‘Other’ devoid of identity and the play successfully lays bare this rage of the ‘Other’ of being unidentified against the ‘Self’ identified delving into the each character.

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