

The Silhoutted Self in Mahashweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*

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“In the seventies, in the Naxalite Movement, I saw exemplary integrity, selflessness and the guts to die for a cause. I thought I saw history in the making, and decided that as a writer it would be my mission to document it”, Mahasweta Devi says in the Introduction to *Mother of 1084*. It depicts not only the times, but also the power of the self over society. *Mother of 1084* is set against the backdrop of the climactic phase of the Naxalite Movement in Bengal. In the midst of the political disturbance in the seventies, the polyphonic female voices reinforce the sense of anxiety and remorse that raged in contemporary society. On the one hand is the organised killing of the Naxalites, perpetrated by the police, the party in power, hired assassins, and even some political parties of the Left Establishment acting in an unholy nexus. On the other hand is that part of society that looked on in simulated insularity, with a sense of casual, cold detachment. The indices of the matrix include the ones who suffer directly : the young men fired by the splints of idealism and the womenfolk who keen for the loss of their loved ones.

The predominant voice is that of Sujata, the mother of Brati who is killed in action, and is referred to as the mother of corpse number 1084. Sujata is caught in a strange predicament; it involves a process of learning and slowly edging towards a decision. Her behaviour begins to change in an alarming manner. The cocoon is shed off and the self stands exposed in its raw intensity. At the beginning, she is presented as a part of a patriarchal family, with distinct patriarchal gender

roles that prohibit a female voice to express itself independently. In the structured society, she is a petty pawn who is busy with her day to day , routine existence. An incident changes the pattern of her life altogether. On the seventeenth of January, Nineteen Seventy, her placid serenity is suddenly countered by a phone call that beckons her to Kantapukur, to ' identify' her son, Brati Chatterjee. Dibyanath, the materialistic husband of Sujata, and her elder son , Jyoti, overhear her . Filled with a clear apprehension, they exchange knowing glances. Then they rush out to seek help from a distant relative. Their motive is to hush up the incident. They have neither the time nor the inclination to reach out to the uncomprehending mother, who is left to deal with the crisis all by herself. The silhouetted self of Sujata , at this juncture, appears helpless.

The visit to the police station proves to be a nightmare. A very taut Sujata stands in front of the five dead bodies, with her hands tightly pressed to her mouth, a look of disbelief in her eyes. She is an image of the suffering self. As the officer in charge directs her to a body, her distraught orientation takes in the fact that her dear son lies on the ground as a hapless body. Yet she is unable to confront reality. "I'll take him home", she whispers incoherently. The officer, however, denies to hand over the deadbod. Sujata is too shattered to retaliate.

After the son's death, Sujata feels that she has failed as a mother. She has not been able to understand her dear son and the ideals, and vision for which he had languished for long. To find peace of mind, she embarks on a mission to try and understand the lost son. In the process she learns that the Naxalites had initially raised their voice against the established order in order to bring about a change in society. They fought for the poor who were being exploited by the upper classes. Their creed was to herald in a new era, freed from the shackles of inequality. Inorder to fulfil their dreams, they did not hesitate to take up arms against the ills rampant in society. Vexed at their revolutionary zeal, the Governmant attempted to pull the reins at any cost. Indiscriminate police force was used to curb any form of violence. This, in its turn, gave rise to fresh turbulence. The rough and disorderly condition of society is clearly delineated.

Somu's mother represents the social other, an uncontrolled, almost hysterical voice. In the police morgue, undulated keening of the aggrieved mother greets Sujata. The scene is reminiscent of Cathleen's unabated tears in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. There is a change in inflection thereafter. Able to come to terms with

reality at a faster pace than her counterpart, Somu's mother symbolizes calm stamina and endurance thereafter. Neither spirited nor ebullient, she is a strong contrast to both Sujata and Nandini. Unlike Sujata, she has known about her son's whereabouts from the very beginning. It is through the confrontation between the two mothers that many details about the movement fall in place. Sujata learns how Brati had plunged into the agitation. Later, one of the leaders gathered a group of young colony boys. Laltu, Somu, Bijit, and Partha were all Brati's friends. When Brati came to know that a mole had leaked some information about their whereabouts, he went to warn them. Despite all the endeavours of the kind and sensitive Brati, he could not save the boys from the police encounter. In the process, he was hunted down too. Somu's mother praises the boy who had sacrificed his life for his fellow fighters. Considered a miscreant in his own hierarchy, Brati is lauded as a hero in the colony. Such appreciation comforts Sujata and provides some solace to her agonised heart. It is as a loving and caring son that she remembers him. Her maternal instinct wants to shelter the image of Brati from any ills that torment society. Living in a make-believe world, she had once failed to realise that her son had grown up, had become mature enough to understand and treat the affliction that haunts society at large. The process of cognition, the transition from ignorance to knowledge, signifies the transition from one state of 'atman' to another state, from the waking state through the dreaming and the deep dreamless sleep to 'Turia'. According to the Mandukya Upanishad, a Turia remains unaware of the external, intermediate and internal worlds. He/she lies beyond both consciousness and unconsciousness. Sujata's journey is almost to this stage, where the atman has no experiences at all, being completely unaware of the material world, merging with the universal and being identical with it. The material, physical world moves in the background: Sujata stands in the foreground.

As Sujata tries to take a grip on her life after Brati's death, it is the strong voice of Nandini that brings her face to face with reality. They come to share a sense of oneness. Nandini, Brati's fellow fighter and beloved, was initiated into the cause. In the course of time, she was caught and put behind bars. As a Naxalite guerrilla, she was exposed to various forms of torture that drained her physically and mentally. Severe physical torture affected her eyesight. Moreover, she had not been allowed to lodge any complaint against the sexual abuse meted out to her in prison. But all these factors have failed to erase her gritty determination to pursue the cause even after the death of Brati, an emblem of the golden ideals of the

movement. She had informed Brati about Anindya's betrayal over the telephone. She had expected him to convey the message to his friends. The conscientious Brati would take no chances. He went personally to caution his allies. Thereafter, as they were moving out of the area, they suddenly found themselves cordoned off, and eventually they were hunted down like animals. Nandini holds herself responsible for Brati's death, and lives a kind of death-in-life.

Nandini has a catalytic effect upon Sujata. It is Nandini's perspective that helps to rebuild Sujata's into a different coherence. She learns how a group of zealous revolutionaries had set out to attain the unattainable, very much like the aspiration of the moth for the star. Money, power, promises of secure jobs did not have any relevance to these young aspirants. But these were the very temptations that were used to tempt some others to join the same cause. They joined with different motives. Theirs was the "programme of betrayal". They pretended to be friends, only to betray in serious moments. Anindya had been introduced to the others as an ally of Nitu, one of the activists higher up in the order. In fact, Anindya was an informer who betrayed Brati and his friends. A trusted compatriot had hit beneath the belt. The movement could not succeed because of these men who corroded the movement from within. It was easier to fight against enemies. Here one had to be wary of friends, who turned foes at the slightest provocation, and even without provocation. Such thoughts haunt Nandini. She allows Sujata to have a peep into this world.

Unable to tolerate the psychological torment of the young girl, the middle aged lady tries to reassure her that the movement and its associations are things of the past. The distressed girl is not comforted. "Nothing's changed", she asserts. Men still rot in prison, without trial. Denied the state of political prisoners, they are treated like ordinary convicts. A different type of torture thus continues. Perhaps it is less blatant, more secret, subtle and sophisticated. Their miseries are kept a tightly guarded secret. Nandini wonders at the smug and complacent attitude of the common people. She poses a simple question to Sujata: "With so many young men killed, so many imprisoned, how can you wallow in your complacency?... How can you carry on with your pujas, concerts, cultural festivals, film festivals, poem fests?" (Bandopadhyaya.706). She wonders if all the death and bloodshed were useless, "all for nothing". The stark honesty of her questions reverberate through the psyche of Sujata and awakens her from her state of stupor. They almost appear as a jolt, a whiplash to make her confront reality. Like Johnny of *Urvashi O Johnny*, Nandini

aims at enlightening the “ smug” of the nauseating conditions they are unmindful of.

Peripheral voices form an unorganised mass. The younger daughter, Tuli is given no distinct identity. She has no say in her engagement, fixed on the death anniversary of her younger brother. In fact, she hardly seems to be bothered. Somu’s sister is not a contrast to Tuli. They are both voiceless in the patriarchal framework. Somu’s sister does not allow Sujata to visit their house for she is afraid of the powers-that-be. Independent thinking is forbidden. Their voice is no voice; they represent a voiceless void.

Sujata’s discovery of her son and his cause helps her to re-discover her own self. She comes to terms with herself not only as a mother, but as a woman and a human being. She had been culturally conditioned to accept an artificially constructed inferiority. The meek and silent Sujata now resolves not to tolerate injustice in private life. She accosts her husband directly and reminds him that he has forfeited his “right” to question her. Moreover, she castigates her children in public for the first time ever. The moment she decides to compromise no more, her transformation is completed. It is almost as though she shakes off the yoke or the burden of societal norms that have always restricted her life and living, pressurising her to act in certain ways, conforming to the set standard. Once the harness is thrown away, there is a noticeable change in her. She realizes, as Thomas Mann says in *The Magic Mountain*, “silence isolates”. The culture of male supremacy had become so deeprooted that Sujata’s confidence in her own capabilities was reduced to the bare minimum. When she is able to put her finger on what Betty Freidman calls “the problem with no name”, her frustrations and psychological distress find adequate voice. She is able to discard the female’s passive maternal role, so deeply entrenched in culture and society that it is presumed to be a woman’s “natural destiny”. A sense of emancipation is hinted at. As a conscious human being she enters into a struggle for recognition with every other conscious being. Then she concludes, as in Hegel, that she is the essential subject or “the self” while all the others are the inessential object or “the other” This is how she achieves an identity for herself.

On the day of her daughter’s engagement, Sujata faces the unfeeling social hypocrits once again, continuing with their unruffled, mechanised existences. Looking at the drunken lot, engrossed in the party, she wonders if Brati’s death “will

go in vain". "Did Brati die to let you carry on in your cadaverous existence....Do the living die, only to leave the world to the dead to enjoy?", she asks. She exhorts the assembled guests to shake off their sense of apathy and complacency, and look at the universal ills that confront them in their naked starkness. When she sees Saroj Pal, the inhuman police officer responsible for Brati's death, something snaps inside her. The diseased appendix, like the cancerous breast of Jashoda in *The Breast Giver*, becomes a powerful symbol of the cancer that corrodes society. As the futility of all takes a toll on her nerves, she collapses on the floor, but before she falls, the plight of mankind has been successfully communicated. The shackles of bondage are torn vehemently. Everything seems to freeze for a moment as realization seeps in. Then, the assembled group rush forward to her, suggesting that there is an attempt at communication. Sujata breaks free from the power structure that has been the controlling factor of her life to project a strong and affirmative voice that is able to rise above circumstances. The docile, middle-aged Sujata is finally able to shed off her cloak of diffidence and assert her own self. She becomes the symbol of the universal bereaved mother, very much like Katrin in Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children* and Mrs. Boyle in Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Peacock*. The power of the self is able to vanquish the power of patriarchy. The transformation of Sujata is not less revolutionary than that of Brati. It is thus that she is able to violate the codes of conduct of a typically structured patriarchal set-up. The journey from the voiceless pawn to the strong-voiced trooper is at the core of *Mother of 1084*. The volte-face of the silhouetted Sujata stands out as vehement comment on society at large.

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