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CORPSE NO. 1084 IN MAHASWETA'S "MOTHER OF 1084"

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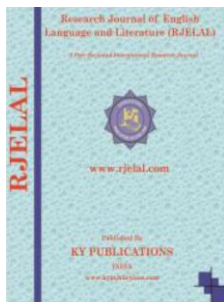
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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* is a poignant tale of mother-son relationship. This novel is written specifically at the background of the Naxalite movement in West Bengal in 1970-1971. In this novel Mahasweta shows how the Naxalite movement touched the educated youth of the city and how they fought in their own way. Brati who was reduced to Corpse No. 1084 came from a well established family, turned a Naxalite, and considered those as enemies who believed in the ideals his father did. Brati was humiliated as mother's child by his father who had extramarital sex in spite of having a beautiful, dignified and educated wife. He used to hate everyone in the family except his mother. He felt emotionally more attached with Somu and his family who represented the deprived lot of the society. He was also sympathetic to Hem who had nursed him since his childhood. In this paper attempts will be made to study how Sujata came to know Brati from his different relationships with Somu's mother and his girlfriend, Nandini. Attempts will also be made to show how dead Brati's values stood glaringly in stark contrast with the values of his father, brother and sisters.

Key Words :Naxalite, 1084, deprived, sympathetic, values

Naxalite movement was first trying to gain its ground in the North Bengal belt in the state of West Bengal. Its presence was strongly realized by the administration after finding a police man murdered by the revolutionaries in 1967 when the police were searching for one of its underground leaders. Although it started as a long deprived peasants' revolt for claiming government approved minimum wage from the jotedars and moneylenders, it was gradually gaining support from the intellectuals in the city. In **Operation? BashaiTudu**, Bashai was tagged as Naxalite by the party leader of the Front, Samanta, but the leaders never went into the deep to analyse why people

were supporting such kind of extreme revolutionary path. Bashai told Kali Santra, 'But why don't you try to understand objectively why the Santals, the Oraons, the Mundas, the Bauris, the Tiors, and the Keots have become Naxalites in so many places. You'll understand if you go about it honestly. But the Front refuses to understand, Kali-babu. They would only sit on judgment and then order death by hanging'(56). A considerable number of bright students like Brati, Somu and others got involved in the movement to revolt against bourgeois values. In his Introduction to **Mother of1084**SamikBandyopadhyay writes : 'At one level at least, urban gurrillas were reacting against the

immorality of this life style that celebrated and cultivated survival at any cost, and rejecting the social familial system that had nurtured them'(xiv). The Barasat killing in November, 1970 when eleven young men with their hands tied behind were mercilessly killed, and the Baranagar killing of August, 1971 when more than hundred naxalites were killed in broad daylight, justified the brutality of torture that Brati and his friends received. In the Introduction to **Five Plays**, SamikBandyopadhyay writes, 'Mahasweta Devi sets her novel against the backdrop of that climactic phase of the annihilation of the urban Naxalites, and its aftermath'(xiii). Unlike some writers about such armed uprisings, Mahasweta was performing her social, political and cultural obligation as a writer. She says, 'In the 70s, 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. As a writer, I feel a commitment to my times, to mankind and to myself. I did not consider the Naxalite movement Playsan isolated happening...In the Naxalite movement I saw only a further extension of the movements of the past, especially the Tebhaga, Kakdwip and Telenganauprisings'(xi).

The opening of the novel, *Mother of 1084*, is very captivating. Sujata at the age of fifty-three was back on a morning of twenty-two years ago in dream remembering packing her bag with towel, blouse, sari, toothbrush, and other necessary things to go to be admitted to nursing home because she had been experiencing waves of labour pain before the birth of the youngest member in the family- Brati. Mahaswetawrites : 'The first pain came in the bathroom, and trembled all over. The sight of blood frightened her. She packed up all her things, herself, and asked the cook to call a taxi'(2).

When Sujata was admitted to Nursing home before Brati's birth, Jyoti was ten, Neepa eight and Tuli six. But what was pathetic was that during the delivery Sujata not only used to be deserted by her mother-in-law, but also by her husband, Dibyanath – a womanizer. Dibyanath was only interested in Sujata's recovery of health after each delivery : 'Are you taking your tonic regularly ?

Dibyanath's voice sounded deep and phlegmy. When a restless lust stirred him, Dibyanath's throat seemed to secrete phlegm till his voice laboured under a viscous load'(3).

On 17 January, 1948, Brati was born. Sujata was thinking of a morning of 17 January, 1968 when she was fifty-one and her husband Dibyanath fifty-six. Telephone was ringing on that morning of 1968 and Sujata in a drowsy state received the phone. She heard an officer's voice asking her: 'Are you related to Brati Chatterjee?

Your son, you say? Come to Kantapur. Yes the faceless, disembodied voice had repeated, Come to Kantapur. The receiver had crashed to the floor, Sujata had fainted'(5).

The news came on the day that was his birthday- 17 January. After getting the news of Brati's death Dibyanath and Jyoti, in stead of going to see him for the last time, were busy to use their high connections to hide this news that Brati, the member of an affluent family turned a Naxalite. Dibyanath refused to allow Sujata take his car to Kantapur morgue because that could reveal Brati's link with his father. With Brati's death, Dibyanath also died to Sujata. 'Dibyanath never knew that his behaviour on that day had taken him far away from Sujata, that he was dead for Sujata, from that day onwards'(7-8).

Sujata joined her service in the bank when Brati was only three. In the dream Sujata saw Brati sobbing and nagging, 'Ma, don't go to office today, just this one day, why can't you stay with me(9)?'

Sujata went to Kantapur morgue with Tuli and saw Brati with other corpses. Brati's dead body was tagged with the number 1084. Sujata identified Brati's blue shirt, fingers, hair but she was not shown the face because Brati's face was smashed beyond recognition. She had strong memories of what she had seen in the morgue : 'There were three bullet holes on his body, one on the chest, one on the stomach, one on the throat. Blue holes. The bullets had been aimed from close range. The skin around the holes was blue. The cordite had left its burns. Chocolate-coloured blood. The cordite had

left scalded the skin around the hole to leave it parched and cracked into hollow rings.

Three bullet holes : on the neck, on the abdomen, on the chest (10-11).'

Sujata knew well that Brati had no love for his father. He tried to maintain a safe distance from him. Once Brati told her mother that his father was not his enemy. The class that believed in the values his father did was their enemy. Sujata could not make out what he said. When Sujata told him that he was changing a lot, he kept quiet and smiled. Sujata would consider herself as Brati's daughter. Sujata felt the widening distance between them.

When police was searching his room, Sujata noticed some slogans written in Brati's handwriting :

'The Prison's our university.

'From the Barrel to the Gun...

This decade will be the Decade of Liberation.

Hate the Moderate, mark him, destroy him.

.....is turning into Yenantoday'(18).

They used to write slogans on the walls in the darkness of the night. Sometimes, being desperate, they would write slogans in the day light and were shot dead by police. Death was the only sentence for such revolutionaries. Anyone could kill them – hired goons, opposition, police, army and such like. Killing them was a democratic right. The killers did not need the permission to kill them and killing was not a crime to be judged in the court of law. Dibyanath and Jyoti tried their best to make Sujata understand that the lawbreakers like Brati could be eliminated with any weapons and that was the right action on the part of the administration. Sujata could not think on the same line. 'The question that preceded Brati's death was why Brati had come to place such absolute faith in the cult of faithlessness'(20).

Sujata thought that Brati might have been dead to his father long ago and so Dibyanath did not feel the urge to go to Kantapukur morgue to see Brati. Sujata would feel that she and Brati were

compartmentalized in the family. If Brati would drink wine like Jyoti, if he would go drunk like Amit, if he would flirt with ladies like his father, if he would be a swindler like Tony Kapadia, if he would be characterless like Neepa, then he would be a gentleman. But Brati did not proceed to that direction in his life. In Sujata's eyes, 'Brati was a different. Even as a child he would not be scared by false bogeys. He would listen to reason. He would never be intimidated by threats. As he grew up, Sujata could see a mind of a different cast opening up, a mind different from all those she had known, those she had identified with her husband and her other children'(31).

Sujata started to know Brati's other self from Somu's mother. She told Sujata that Brati came that night to warn Somu and others against traitors and wanted to leave immediately. But she did not let him go in the darkness fearing dangers outside. She had told him to spend the night there and go home early in the morning. She continued, 'That night, Didi, in this little room of ours, Somu and Partha and Brati slept close to one another'(37). Throughout the night they were talking and laughing. 'Didi, Brati's laughing face floats before my eyes. Your son had a complexion of gold (37)!' Sujata was wonder-struck knowing that Brati used to come to that dilapidated house very frequently. Brati would ask for water and tea in a very polite way. Sujata felt that Brati who used to stay in his private cell at home had behaved freely with the people living in this ramshackle house. Somu's mother went on uninterrupted, 'I used to tell him, why do you waste your life like this, my child? You have everything. A well-known father, a mother so learned. He would not say a word. He would only smile. His smile floats before my eyes, Didi'(38). Sujata was quite hurt. She believed that Brati's sweet smile was only reserved for his mother. She could not believe that Somu's mother also shared Brati's wonderful smile.

Sujata imagined the day of 16 January, 1968. Brati spent the whole day at home. On coming back from office when she saw him at home she was quite surprised. Later she knew that Brati was waiting for a phone call throughout the day, and when he received no call from the messenger, he straight went to Somu's house to warn them against

dangers. What he did not know till his death was that he was betrayed by Anindya, a member in his group. In stead of carrying Brati's message to Somu, he carried it to those who desperately wanted to kill them. The young men out of their commitment believed that all of them were devoted to the ideals of their movement and so no one could betray. They had not realized that the establishments had the potency to destroy loyalty of the children even in the womb. Sujata and Brati had tea together in that winter evening. Brati went to Digha a few days ago with his friends. So, Sujata wanted to know how they had enjoyed at Digha. Brati replied that it was a dirty place and there was no good hotel for meal. Sujata could not believe and informed him that her cousin went there but she did not make such complaints. Brati wittily told her that she did not complain because she was her mother's cousin. What he meant was that Sujata had also made no complaints of Dibyanath's ill behaviour with his mother. After Brati's death she came to know from police officer that Brati did not go to Digha, he lied to his mother. He was on some other mission. Sujata out of affection told Brati that he did not need his mother any longer. The following conversation could be illuminating :

'Do you ever try to know what your mother feels and thinks? You're always running away. You have assignments all the time, you say.

I do have assignments !

Baba re baba ! So many ?Already ? How will you manage when you have a serious job like your brother ?

Brati had retorted, Why do you think my job is not serious?

Is gossiping a serious job?

Isn't gossiping serious business ?

Yes, Sir, Yes. And I know something else.

What do you know ?

I know it's absolutely serious when you gossip with Nandini'(42).

Brati loved Nandini. But he himself disclosed nothing to his mother.

'Sujata had asked him, Brati, who is Nandini?

A young woman.

Won't you let me see her?

If you want to.

I want to see her.

You won't like her.

Why?

She's no beauty.

So what ?

Boss won't like her'(43).

In Dibyanath's absence Brati would call him Boss. Brati asked his mother if she knew where his father used to go after office hours.Sujata realized that Brati also had known about his father's extramarital sex. Brati asked his mother whether he made sufferings for her. 'Every now and then I get the feeling you suffer because of me. You don't suffer over Dada or my sisters(44).' After Brati's death Sujata realized that Brati knew everything about his mother's imprisonment in her family. So, he loved her mother most and tried to give her some comforts in his own way. Sujata went back on the wings of memory : 'When he was only ten, he would rush back home from his games, whenever Sujata was sick. He would offer, Shall I sit here and fan you (47)?'

On that evening of 16 january, 1968, Sujata asked him what he wanted to have for next day's dinner. Bratiquestioned :

'Why suddenly?

Isn't it your birthday tomorrow ?

Really ! How do you remember birthdays?

How can I help it?

I never remember.

But I never make a mistake.

So you'll make special payesh for me?

That's all I do these days for birthdays, anyway.

Wait. Let's think. What can you make for me?

Don't ask for meat.

Why? Is Boss dining at home ?

Yes.

Make whatever you like'(48).

Phone was ringing when Sujata went downstairs and she saw that Brati received the call when she was leaving the room. Coming back to room she saw Brati wore a blue shirt and trousers, and was combing his hair. He asked for money and told his mother that he would be back in a minute. But he never returned.

While talking to Somu's mother Sujata realized that Brati was closest to those revolutionary boys –Somu, Partha, Bijit, Laltu-in the part of life he built for himself. In that life he was most himself. He did not let the family enter that part of life. 'My son, my brother- these were just a set of dead definitions that Brati had carried with him through his life'(57). Sujata felt that ' This other Brati loved his mother, his mother loved him, but never really knew him. These boys knew the other Brati, the Brati that Sujata did not know'(57).

Surprise did not end here for Sujata. When she met Nandini, Brati's girlfriend, she came to know a Brati whom she was not again familiar with. From Nandini she learnt that Brati and his friends were betrayed by Anindya. She told Sujata that : 'Anindya betrayed us. Brati, like a fool, had trusted Anindya. For Anindya was Nitu's recruit, and Nitu was Brati's friend'(72). Nandini told Sujata how she and Brati were emotionally attached. Nandini and Brati used to walk the way from Shyambazar to Bhowanipur. Whatever they saw on the way – the people, the houses, the neon signs, red roses, festoons, newspapers, smiling faces, political rally at Maidan – everything appeared full of joy. But Nandini's world changed after Brati's death and a slow death that she had to die remaining confined to a solitary cell. When Nandini came to know that

Brati told his mother about his love, Nandini remarked :

'I knew that if he told anyone, Brati would tell you. For he did not have faith in any one else in that house.

Brati ?

Brati was not close to the others. Still...

What is there to be surprised about ? Does one have to love and trust others only because they happen to be one's father or sister or brother, even if there's no gesture of love from them(80)?'

Nandini continued to say that Brati did not have respect for his father. Even, his father also did not try to make a relationship with him. 'Brati used to say that his father used you like a doormat'(81). Hearing this Sujata turned red, but instantly controlled herself. She remembered that When Brati was merely six he saw his mother weeping secretly and consoled her saying ' Ma, I'll buy you a sari printed with tigers and hunters'(81). Brati also told Nandini that his father was such a CA whose death would relieve others. 'With a wife like you and four grown up children, he was a great womanizer...he had set up some typist in a rented flat'(81). She went on saying that Brati could not consider his brother and sisters as human beings. They had planned to leave Calcutta to go to base, but Brati postponed the departure because he wanted to spend the birthday with his mother. 'He said you were a good person. You were thoroughly non-understanding, but he could explain to you. He had no resentment against you. When he won the national scholarship he thought for a time in terms of a good job. He planned to take you away somewhere. Then of course he dropped the idea'(83). Sujata had to reluctantly leave Nandini's room as winter evening was settling down fast.

On coming back home in evening, Sujata found that the house was wonderfully decorated for Tuli's engagement party. But Sujata was drowned in Brati's memories. As the engagement party was arranged on Brati's birthday (which also his death day also) as per the decision of Swamiji who lived in America. Sujata was looking for Brati. She decided

that she would not live in that house after 17 January, 1970. She remembered that one day there was a great disturbance in the family when Jyoti came to know his father's extramarital sex. Tuli guarded her father and put the blame on her mother. Brati heard everything but remained silent. Brati would not say anything when Tuli was around. He would not share the same table with Tuli at home. 'He must have thought that if Sujata, who should be the first to protest, could keep quiet, why should he talk? But something must have shaken his loyalty, for how else would he have decided to leave home (98)?'

Sujata also planned to leave home when Brati was settled. But her plan collapsed after his death. In her utter depression she remembered, 'Even in his childhood Brati had become aware of Sujata's intense loneliness and would console her – Ma, I'm going to put you inside a glass house once I grow up. A house built of magic glass, Ma, where you can see everyone but no one can see you'(99). Sujata passionately recalled that when in class ten students were asked to write essay on 'My Favourite Person', he wrote about his mother. From the evening she had been feeling waves of pain in her stomach. But no one knew that. Her body did not allow her walk any longer. But she performed her duty as hostess ignoring the warning of the body. Once Brati told his mother that visiting doctor for her eye check-up was more important than doing her duty on Neepa's daughter's birthday. 'Brati had told her that it was more important for her to visit the eye doctor.

Neepa will be disappointed.

No, Ma, she won't.

Sujata had kept silent.

Didi's disappointment is merely a matter of convention. But you know quite well, Ma, that her happiness or unhappiness does not depend in the least on what we do'(105-106). Brati had clear idea of everyone in the family and so he had rejected everyone except his mother. Sujata lived in the memory when she came back home from Kantapukur morgue. She found that everyone in the family seemed to be more concerned with how to

explain Brati's death to others than to express grief at his untimely death. Only Hem burst out in tears, 'There's no one any longer who'll care to bring me my gout medicine in the midst of a thousand worries of his own ! Who will stop me in the street, when I'm bringing home the week's ration, and tell me – How can you walk with such a heavy load? Can't you take a rickshaw? He's no longer there to call a rickshaw for me and help me into it'(107)! When everyone in the family was absorbed in enjoying the engagement party with drink, expensive food and sweets, Sujata was in search of Brati and thus Mahasweta by her superb narrative technique had represented two completely different classes of people in the same family- one drowned in material comforts and narrow minded, and the other full of ideals, love and care but remained repressed and compartmentalized. Sujatagot his long cherished death at the end of the novel to separate herself from the living family members and merge with Brati in an another life.

To conclude we can say that Brati, though a strong supporter of an armed revolution against establishments, was a much better character than his father, Dibyanath, brother Jyoti, and sisters Neepa and Tuli. He got a complete shape in his mother's eyes after she came in contact with Somu's mother and Nandini, Brati's girl friend. Mahasweta believed in resistance against oppression and exploitation and therefore made Brati live in so many things that Brati loved :

'...but Brati was still present elsewhere, in the red roses in pavement stalls, in the hanging festoons, the bright streetlights, in the laughter of men, in the face of Somu's mother, in the dark, lasting shadows under Nandini's eyes...'(100)

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