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THE DILEMMA OF THE (M)OTHER IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S "MOTHER OF 1084"

JITENDER SINGH
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Hindu College, Sonepat, Haryana, India

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the "other" has been given significant consideration under the banner of Post-colonial studies. This branch of study concentrates on how one position, person or ideology is held in privilege by creating 'other'. In this category of 'other' come all those ideas or identities which have been given a subordinate position in the wake of maintaining a prime position for something ideologically supported. In Post-colonial dialects the term, 'other' occupies a prominent place. It incorporates the chunk of people who are subordinates in terms of class, caste or gender. 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 'marginalized', even when they resist and rise up. 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 marginal place or no place at all in the history and culture of which they are the essential parts as human beings.

The objective of this paper is to scrutinize Mahasweta Devi's novel *Mother of 1084* as a saga of the mothers who are treated as 'others' not only by the society but their families as well. The second stride that the paper takes is to analyse the different paradigms of identity crisis: how politically motivated people view the martyrs as 'others' and eulogize those who actually act as 'others'.

Key Words: Otherness, Post-colonial Studies, Mother, Identity, Marginality.

The concept of the "other" has been given significant consideration under the banner of Post-colonial studies. This branch of study concentrates on how one position, person or ideology is held in privilege by creating 'other'. "Thus, the postcolonial discourse is intimately linked with a broad range of dialogues within the colonizing powers, challenging various forms of what is called 'internal colonization'" (Dahiya 48). In this area of research, post-colonial theory uses a concept called 'otherness' – a somewhat flexible concept, deriving from Freudian psychiatry, which argues that human beings inevitably define themselves against what they are not: 'the other'. In this category of 'other' come all those ideas or identities which have been given a subordinate position in the wake of maintaining a prime position for something ideologically supported. In Post-colonial dialects the term, 'other' occupies a prominent place. It incorporates the chunk of people who are subordinates in terms of class, caste or gender. 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 'marginalized', even when they resist and rise up. 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 marginal place or no place at all in the history and culture of which they are the essential parts as human beings.

This concept of 'otherness' has been thought upon by various writers but the way it has been treated in *Mother of 1084* by Mahasweta Devi is an achievement in itself. Translated into English by Samik Bandyopadhyay from its original Bengali version called *Hajar Chaurashir Ma,* it basically deals with the Nexalite movement of 1970s. It has also been interpreted as a story of generation gap as Sharmila Lahiri Maitra opines:

> The first draft of the novel was published in the Sharodia *Prasad.* Initially it was a story on generation gap. Mahasweta instituted many changes at a later stage. The story was eventually developed as a manifesto regarding the life and death of some individuals during a politically virulent time. (2)

Another important stride which it takes on the social and political front is how youngsters like Brati Chatterjee who were passionate about to overthrow injustice, corruption and exploitation inherent in the political climate of Bengal, were ruthlessly murdered by the authorities. However, the novel is concerned not with the dying of the younger people, but with the dying ideals of freedom and justice. "The question that followed his death was whether by killing him the authorities had been able to destroy the burning faith in faithlessness that Brati and his compatriots had stood for. Brati was dead. His friends were dead. But did that mean the end of the cause?" (20)

In the midst of such socio-political commotion, *Mother of 1084* launches a plea through Sujata for the way mothers of the mutilated youngsters were cast aside and degraded to the status of 'other'. In fact, during the course of the novel, the sensitive reader is left baffled for being unable to distinguish between the 'other' and 'mother'. It seems as if this fractured identity of 'otherness' is exclusively the lot of the mothers of the dead sons. The society maintained an attitude of normalcy which was really disturbing for these poor creatures. The novelist states:

> What terrified Sujata was that nobody found it abnormal that everyone in the state should deny them and join in a conspiracy of pretence, the pretence of normalcy. Sujata had felt in the marrow of her bones how terrifying, brutal and violent this normalcy was. While the Bratis were being killed in the prisons and on the streets, chased relentlessly by the black vans, and being torn to pieces by frenzied mobs, the conscience-keepers of society had not a word to say about them. They all maintained their silence on this one issue. (60)

In order to sensitize the readers, the narration is presented through the voice of Sujata – a failed wife, daughter-in-law and at the verge of considering herself a failed mother – who remained an 'other' even for the son she was closely attached to. The novelist states, "There must be thousands of mothers like her who fondled their sons' clothes in secret and touched their sons' portraits lovingly" (21). She represents the lot of all mothers like her who could never understand their sons. Sujata was never accepted in the family as an important family member, rather she was opposed by almost everyone except Brati. She was made to feel like an outcaste, someone who did not abide by the standards of the family. The novelist informs:

> Sujata belonged to the other camp, the camp of the enemy. For Sujata was the only one in the family who had never blamed Brati for messing up her neatly organized life. she had never blamed Brati. She had not beat her breast in wild wailing. She had never put her head on the chest of anyone of them and sought consolation. She had made up her mind quite early that she would never seek consolation from those who thought first of themselves while Brati lay dead in the morgue. (30)

But interestingly, the novelist has a dig at those people who are actually 'other' to the mainstream humans and display inhuman traits: they drink and roam around, flirt with typist like swindlers and having loose character. Sujata realized this element of 'otherness' imposed upon her by those who were 'others' in actuality. "With her pride and strong

sense of dignity, Sujata had realized soon after her marriage, that the more she kept herself aloof from the household, the more satisfied the others were. Dibyanath and her mother-in-law were the 'others'" (45).

The novel deliberates upon the theme of 'otherness' and the dilemma of those termed as 'other' on a larger scale by incorporating the distresses of women like Somu's mother whose sons died as 'others'. They could never get a chance to know what their sons actually were. And their broken hearts melted down with the prospect that they were not important enough for the society they died for. "The deadly risk 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?" (50) But this heinous act could not yield the spirit of the movement; no matter they were mutilated and murdered mercilessly. Like Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev, these young burning hearts established the faith in the faithlessness of the system and authority. And surprisingly, they died yet created vibrations in the hearts left behind. The pain was not of having lost them, but they went unnoticed for society and unknown to their own mothers. The novelist tells:

> But Brati had built another Brati with his belief, his ideals and idealogy. 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. That was how they could be inseparable in both life and death. (57)

The society offered nothing to these miserable creatures except negligence. A feeling of unwantedness gripped the conscience of the mothers like Sujata who had nothing to call their own. The roots of Relationships were too weak to hold the tree of life from falling down to the false standards. In a conversation with Somu's mother, Sujata was caught into a dilemma on which the novelist deliberates upon:

> If Sujata had told her that she lived in a shiftless, rootless, lifeless society where the naked body caused no embarrassment, but natural emotions did; if she had told her that mothers and sons, fathers and sons, husbands and wives never hit one another even when relationships stood irremediably poisoned, never wept aloud, showed their best manners to everyone, Somu's mother would not been able to make any sense of it at all. (68)

These mothers had nothing else but memories of their dead sons either to feel proud of or to cry their hearts out. Their sole possession was deep pain and a sense of loss. The otherness they were doomed to suffer had taken away from them the feeling of knowing their sons. It is because of the unknown objectives their sons were committed to that had rendered them weak and lost. Many mothers like Sujata just wish if they could undo what they did. Mahasweta relates:

> If Sujata got that moment back again she would rush down the stairs, and hug him hard, body of her body. She would tell him, Brati, I have to know everything, I'll begin to know everything. Just don't go out, Brati, please don't. in Calcutta a young man of twenty cannot go from one part of the city to another safely. Don't go, please. (76)

And this is not the end of the matter. Mothers like Sujata also suffered of guilt-consciousness considering themselves responsible for the terrible demise of their offspring. They thought that their irrevocable love for their sons rendered them weak and emotional. The novelist raises questions, "Was Sujata's hungry, clinging love then indirectly responsible for Brati's dearth? Brati had stayed on in Calcutts on that fateful day only to avoid hurting her" (83). And thus they died for the society that even did not wish to acknowledge their existence: "Deny the existence of a few thousands of the country's youth. Deny them altogether, and that would be enough to wipe them out of existence" (61).

Moreover, people like Nandini were badly struck by the inhuman treatment they received at the hands of the authorities. It caused them both emotional and psychological trauma. They lost their power of discretion and left bewildered. After being harassed in the prison-cell, Nandini did not know

what to do and whom to look for. The novelist captures her dilemma in the following words:

> I've told you I don't know. I still feel disturbed and confused about so many things. Everything seems so strange, so unreal. I can't identify with anything. My experience over the last few years have made me unfit for this so-called normalcy. All that you people find normal, I find abnormal. Can you tell me what I should do? (87)

Thus, they were forced to live a crippled existence. The 1970s in Bengal was a time of struggle against the colonial forces working within the socio-political scenario. "The Movement created a gap in society. One 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" (Maitra 6). The process of decolonization began but ruthlessly curbed by the new colonizers by killing the youth and making the elders destitute. The novel is a cry of all those mothers who beat their breast to mourn the death of their sons whose martyrdom was not acknowledged just because they were 'others'.

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