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Feminist Social Concerns in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*

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Abstract

Feminist writers use fiction to expose their inner struggle for self-identity, self-assertion, individuality and freedom. Sociological and cultural backgrounds and feminist ideology have been a strong bearing on these writers. Among the women novelists, Mahasweta Devi occupies a great place and has been an eminent writer in Indian English Literature. Her works are concerned with human values and complex human relationships. In her novels, Devi has utilised female characters as her device in exposing the society that discriminates and victimises women. Also, she gets political support in parallel to females, as both are essential for the life of people. The cultural, legal, political and social restrictions are highlighted in her novels. She does not want women to be man's appendage or his shadow. Her heroines are courageous intellectuals. They rebel against the existing codes of conduct that victimise women-folk.

Keywords: Feminist, Women-Folk, Ideology.

1. Introduction

Indian society is full of conflicts and contradictions where a female is considered a peripheral member of the family both in her parent's house and in the husband's house. She cannot decide her roots, and her position is unstable. This leads her to feel unsecured. Being a woman, Devi has delved into every woman's problem in this hypocritical society where she is forced to hold a second-grade position but is expected to be the lynchpin of the family. This double-edginess plays havoc on her psyche. In *Mother of 1084*, she portrays the inner turmoil of a woman, fighting within herself, between her knowledge and the one thrust on her by the surrounding.

In *Mother of 1084*, Sujatha, a grieving mother, realises why her murdered son Brati has had joined a violent uprising. The scenes cleverly fuse indigenous oral histories with contemporary events to explore the bitter and often bloody relationship between tribal communities and India's domineering classes and systems, along with a mother's delicate and sensitive feelings.

The drama is rooted in history, folk myth, and contemporary reality. Devi deals with an immediate past event to comment on the present as a cautionary fiction universalising human experience, an experience that drives many a son to martyrdom. Though the play, at one level, reads like a mere account

of the brutal suppression of an apolitical woman in the role of the mother who awakens one day to a greater truth of martyr.

The drama revolves around a single day in the life of the principle character, Sujata, the mother of corpse number 1084, hailed from a relatively affluent middle-class family. Though she is a sensitive wife and loving mother, she is a stranger to her husband in her household, who is reduced to a mere cog in the wheel. Nevertheless, she feels at home in the company of her younger son, Brati Chatterjee. Brati, unlike her other children, is a man of ideals, and it is his life and activities that Sujata fails to understand. Not understanding him or the absence of understanding in her, the events' voice adds to the play's tragic interest. She can find a moral rationale for the son's revolt only when she can piece it together. Only on the second death anniversary of her son did Sujata come to know of his activities. The learning process continues till the end of the play.

Sujata, a traditional subjugated woman, recalls her situation two years back when she prepared to bring Brati into this world. She went to the hospital alone without anyone's help and Brati, the fourth child of Sujata, was born only at the dawn of January 17, 1948. Her life became miserable in the company of her lustful husband and along with her mother-in-law. As a traditional wife, Sujata continues to live with her husband; he is the family's breadwinner and looks after her children. Men's hegemony does not allow women's liberation from the labyrinthine of family ties. Dibyanath treats Sujata as a childbearing machine. Her mother-in-law also shows the same attitude toward her as Dibyanath. She does not even allow Sujata to take care of her children, Jyothi, Neepa and Tuli. They also grow up with the same character as their grandmother. They do not come anywhere near Sujata. Therefore, her marital life has not been happy, and Sujata fails to find the fulfilment that a woman craves. The result is frustration and disillusionment, and she forgets her value as a woman.

Unlike other children, Brati is fond of his mother. He is the only son who misses and cries for his mother when she works in a bank. He is the only child who enjoys her nearness. There, she recalls the dreadful night when she received a phone call while she was sleeping about the death of her loving son. She was asked to come immediately to Kantapukur to identify a dead body in the mortuary. She is shattered not only by the news but also by her husband's activities. He does not even allow Sujata to use his car on the day of Brati's death. He does not want his social status to be spoiled. He tries his best not to publish Brati's name in News Papers. Dibyanath tries to wipe away the existence of Brati from home. He removes Brati's picture, old shoes and raincoat from the hall to the room on the second floor.

The death of Brati creates a vacuum in the life of Sujata. Even two years after her son's death, his memories haunt her mind. She tries to learn the facts behind the sacrifice of her son. Even though Sujata and Brati value each other feelings, the former does not know about the ideology of her Brati and his activities. As she says: "Brati was soul of my soul of life yet I know him so little" (Devi 8).

The learning process involves her in a series of encounters with the people whose cause Brati championed. It continues till she finds herself drifting towards a kinship with her son's ideology. Her confrontation with Somu's mother and Nandhini makes her aware of the following side of life to which she has been a stranger. Now, she identifies herself with the cause of the suffering humanity. So far, she has been put in dark confines. The death of her son stirs her, and she brings herself to the outer world and becomes socially conscious from her earlier position as an apolitical mother.

Nandhini, an activist and faithful follower of Brati, provides Sujata with an insight into a part of her son's life and makes Sujata realise the pathetic social position, which is painful and heart-rending. Sujata's confrontation with Somu's mother, who lost her son to the outrage of the mob, moves Sujata to pathos. It is highly pathetic to see people who are pledged the responsibility of saving or protecting human values act callously to the sufferings of innocent. A contrasting feature between Brati's father and Somu's father is noticed here. This is revealed when Somu's father runs to the police station with the hope of getting help and returns with shattered hopes. Somu's mother speaks of the inhuman attitude towards the innocent. When she identifies her son Somu in the police morgue, she cries like anything. Her lamentation does not fail to shock even the so-called stone-hearted.

Most of Devi's novels focus on female protagonists. She exposes the ills in the society which discriminates and victimises women. She receives political support from all corners. According to her, women and society are parallel as both are essential for the life of people. The cultural, legal, political and social restrictions are highlighted in her novels. She wants women not to be man's appendage or his shadow. Her protagonists are courageous intellectuals. They rebel against the existing codes of conduct that victimise women.

In her writings, Mahesweta Devi depicts the life of ordinary women, particularly of the tribal women, the simple joys and sorrows of life, their exploitation and sufferings and conditions of abject poverty they live their lives. Her treatment of woman is gifted with sympathy, and her profound humanism is instilled with a deep-rooted love for humanity's suffering. Most of her short stories and novels portray the life of the oppressed (indianetzone.com) and the neglected tribal women oppressed by the society and destroyed by man's greed, narrowness and selfishness. Devi acquires prominence in the present scenario as she continues to disclose the oppressed communities have started emerging out, breaking the shackles of subjugation, slavery and oppression.

2. Conclusion

The history of the whole world is a history of the conflict between two communities, i.e. the community of the oppressor and the oppressed, the subalterns. When two communities of opposing value systems coexist, the politically, economically, and technologically dominant one subsumes the other. Mahasweta Devi takes unusual themes from contemporary life and transforms them into creative works of artistic excellence. Survival through struggle is the central message of her fictional creation. Thus, her writing presents the authentic details of absolute poverty through the real subaltern characters with real-life histories. The social concern in her propels her to write about the poor.

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