Women in Chains: A Study of Mahasweta Devi’s *Mother of 1084*

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**Abstract**

The Bengali writer and activist, Mahasweta Devi focuses on different phases of suffering the women undergo in the society. She does not write as feminist, but as a human being who opens up the realities of human trauma. Her major work *Mother of 1084* reflects such affliction under patriarchy.

Women are born free, but everywhere they are found in chains in our society. They are considered as inferior human beings and are always looked down upon. Since ages, they have been crushed in the whirlpool of male dominated society. Woman is not free and secure as man. She has been a victim to both physical and psychological affliction. She is considered frail and fragile. Since ancient times, man has acquired and occupied a superior status to a woman in the society. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* has highlighted the victimized position of a woman in the society and she opines, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (*The Second Sex*, 87). It means that the identity of the woman is socially constructed by the patriarchal system. Woman is not born fully formed; she is gradually shaped by her upbringing. Biology does not determine what makes a woman a woman—a woman learns her role from man and others in society. Woman is not born passive, secondary, and non-essential, but all the forces in the external world have conspired to make her so. Every individual self, regardless of gender, is entitled to subjectivity; it is only outside forces that have conspired to rob woman of this right.

The Bengali writer and activist, Mahasweta Devi focuses on different phases of suffering the women undergo in the society. She does not write as feminist, but as a human being who opens up the realities of human trauma. In an interview she says:

> I am a woman, and I am writing. But I am not writing of women alone. What I am writing, most of my books, it is about class exploitation, the underclass is exploited, men, women together. Of course, women get worse part of it, but not always. Definitely I am interested in women’s positions, women’s thought. But I am more interested in active work.

(*The Book Review*, 33)
Mahasweta Devi explicates the problems of women and the misery; they undergo in a male-dominated society and present them in her works. In her works she has dealt with the plight of women and their subordination. Her works exemplify the marginalization of women in the face of patriarchal dominance. Her major work *Mother of 1084* reflects such affliction under patriarchy. Commenting on the patriarchal system, Catherine Thankamma opines:

Patriarchy is the system that traces family descent and economic inheritance down the male line. In a joint family the senior most male is the head, the patriarchy, while in the nuclear families of today it is the father. *(Theatre India, 42)*

Women absorb what society imposes on them and try live accordingly. The myth of the “angel in the house” idealised woman and her innocence in ways that made central her confinement to a separate domestic sphere. These qualities restricted woman inside the home and converted them to speechless creatures who willingly carried on the burden of patriarchy. Patriarchy diminishes a woman’s belief in self-worth and makes her believe that her inferiority is pre-destined.

In *Mother of 1084*, we find various instances of women suppression under patriarchal system and male-dominated society. We find that patriarchy is founded on the prejudice and male superiority, which guarantees superior status to males and inferior status to females, its values for males are aggression, force and efficacy while in females it is passivity and docility. Women in Indian literature, through centuries, have been based on the mythic models from the Ramayana and the Puranas: Sita the silent sufferer – the archetype of Indian womanhood: the earth mother, forbearance personified: the playmate and beloved Radha: the devoted Meera. Patterned on these models, woman is often passive, accepting the dynamic role of the man in her life. In *Theorising Patriarchy*, Sylvia Walby calls patriarchy “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominates and exploit women (20). Subordination of women is prevalent in most parts of the world till today, even when there has been a number of ‘waves of feminism’, to free them from the clutches of male domination.

Mahasweta Devi’s *Mother of 1084* depicts the suffering of Sujatha, an embodiment of love, the mother of Brati Chatterjee. Dibyanath, Sujatha’s husband, is a dominant character. He is a complacent and insensitive man. He never cares for the feelings of his wife. He feels superior and likes always his wishes and wants to be implemented in his house. He is self-loving and self-caring and does not give importance to other’s emotions. His superiority and efficacy has a lot of impact on his children. They are influenced and nurtured by their father’s qualities. They also grow obstinate in their self-love. They lose morality on way. All this, brings mental agony to Sujatha. As she is a sensitive wife and mother, she develops an aversion to her husband and children’s attitude. Sujatha cannot influence her children and cannot change their way of living and thinking. Dibyanath’s superiority in the house dominates her. Besides this, Dibyanath’s mother who is alive, suppresses Sujatha and her individuality and always likes her son to dominate her. She feels that everything must be done by his approval and consent and nothing should go without his notice.

Dibyanath and his mother constituted the centre of attraction in the home. Sujatha had a shadowy existence. She was subservient, silent, faithful and without an existence of her own.

*(Mother of 1084, 9)*

Sujatha has had mere existence in the family, as ruled by the two autocratic people, Dibyanath and his mother. Sujatha does not even say a word in protest to all this oppression. Even, the job she takes up in a bank is not due to the generosity and freedom given to her by her husband. The family has supported and encouraged her...
because, Dibyanath, at that time has been facing some problems at his office and family had some financial problems. For this, Sujatha’s mother-in-law says:

You should have begun earlier. It was Dibu’s generosity that he did not send you to work earlier (5).

Though, Sujatha comes from an affluent and aristocratic family, is a graduate from Loreto College and gets a job in a bank on her own, she undergoes suppression and searches for freedom and identity. Because of the Indian institute of family and its ideology, she is bound to be submissive. Helene Cixous in The Laugh of the Medusa (1975) has exposed the patriarchal culture which subordinates women and denies them to access human rights. Cixous’s vehement declaration in this regard aptly highlights reasons for subordination of women:

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. (163)

In Mother of 1084, Dibyanath is a womanizer. He has an extra-marital relationship with a typist in his office. Sujatha, a victim of the male-dominated society and patriarchal system, has never questioned and never spoken ill of her husband because she is in a society which has suppressed woman and her feelings for ages. Along with this, she is also frustrated with her own kith and kin. Tuli, her youngest daughter who is much influenced by her father, always supports him in all his deeds. She does not mind his extra-marital relationship. Instead, she feels proud of him. Dipankar, her elder son, follows his father’s order and never has any individuality or ideas of his own. Neepa, her elder daughter carries a relationship with her husband’s cousin. Sujatha always finds herself at odds with her household. She is frustrated by all this and suffers mental torture. “That’s why she tries to escape all the constraints by taking up a job in the bank rather than protesting” (Satyanarayana, 35). Her job itself is a form of protest and self-assertion against the authority of her husband. Though she resents the immoral acts of her husband and children, she, being a sensitive and responsible wife and caring mother, does not ignore her familial responsibilities. She is trapped in the conflict within herself between a sympathetic mother and a silent protester against the immoral life which her household stands for. She suffers within herself, the torture her husband and family gives her. Thus, she bears everything in pain and sorrow with all patience.

The play brings to light the longing of Sujatha for self-determination as she struggles for freedom, justice and their identity as an individual in male dominated society. In Mother of 1084, Sujatha, after two years of Brati’s death, tries to find moral grounds for her son’s revolt through bits and pieces; and she comes to know a part of her son’s life she had never known. She tells Nandini, Brati’s lover: “Brati was the soul of my life, yet I know him so little” (Bandyapadhyay, 1999:21). Nandini, an activist and a lover of Brati in the Mother of 1084, is tormented in the jail and she describes it thus: “A long spell in the solitary cell in prison made one perhaps oversensitive. For a solitary cell is too lonely, too desolate”(72). She could not erase away the memories of the tortures she faced during imprisonment. She reminisces:

A thousand-watt lamp glared at the naked eyes of the person being held in that room. The person in charge sat in the dark. Smoker or not, a cigarette glowed between his fingers. From time to time, the interrogator educated and sophisticated, could ask a civil and harmless question like ‘oh, so you’re Chatterjee’s friend?’ and clamp the burning cigarette to the skin of the face naked under the thousand watt lamp (73).
The wound inflicted on her in the prison cured, but the tortures suffered, have a permanent itching in the mind. Nandini lost eye sight, due to the physical torture and harassment by a male police officer in the jail. Nandini reveals to Sujatha “My optical nerves were damaged from the exposure to the glare of the lamp for forty-eight, seventy-two hours at a stretch. My right eye is totally blind”(86).

In a nut shell, Mahasweta Devi proclaims that women, in one or the other way, suppress their voice and adjust to the dominance of men. This play depicts the agony of mother who is marginalised by the society. Sujatha is a traditional Indian woman who does not question the authority of men in the society but Dibyanath dominace and bestiality are unquestioned. In the fictional world of Mahasweta Devi women are stripped, harassed and molested for a long time. She reveals the sufferings of women treated as objects, who are essential to men for pleasure and for the welfare of the family.

Works Cited