



EXIST OR EXIT: THE AGENCY OF WOMEN IN THE MOTHER OF 1084 BY MAHASWETA DEVI

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The paper explores the representation of female agency in Mahasweta Devi's *The Mother of 1084*, a politically significant narrative situated within the Naxalite movement in Bengal. The study examines the simultaneous suppression and shaping of women's identities through the protagonist Sujata's journey of grief and awakening within patriarchal structures. Sujata's understanding of her oppression in both domestic and political contexts converts her grief into a manifestation of self-awareness and subtle defiance. The different female characters – Nandini, who is rebellious; Tuli, who follows the rules; and Somu's mother, who survives without fighting back – show the different ways that women can make choices in oppressive systems. The paper contends that Devi's depiction of "existence" and "exit" functions as a crucial metaphor for establishing women's autonomy within patriarchal and class structures. Devi's nuanced exploration of motherhood, grief, and solidarity highlights that female agency is neither uniform nor universal, but rather dependent on socio-political and personal circumstances.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, female agency, patriarchy, Naxalite movement, motherhood, resistance

Mahasweta Devi's *The Mother of 1084* (*Hajar Churashir Maa*) was first written as a periodical *Prasad* in 1973; Devi later revised and enlarged it into a book form in 1974. The novel itself focuses on a mother's grief following the death of her son, which, however digs deeper and comments on the systematic oppression and patriarchal society that often silences the voices of women. The novel is set against the backdrop of the Naxalite uprising of the 1960s and the 70s Bengal, it elucidates on the elaborate interconnection between political, social, and familial dynamics that contributes to this type of silencing of women in our society. Mahasweta Devi's storytelling in the novel *Mother of 1084* is both moving and poignant, and apart from conveying the personal grief of a mother in the narrative, it also serves as an in-depth exploration of the broader social problems and concerns, emphasising on the continuous struggle of women's agency and empowerment within oppressive systems of society. Mahasweta Devi's narrative centres on the protagonist Sujata, a mother who learns of her son Brati's revolutionary involvement in the Naxalite movement only after his death. As she tries to understand his son's motivations while reconstructing his other life, Sujata's own life and position in a patriarchal society come under scrutiny.

The novel raises important questions about what it means for women to "exist" within oppressive patriarchal systems and whether to "exit" from these systems, whether through rebellion or self-awareness, is even possible. As Sujata steers through her grief, she comes across a variety of female characters, each of whom reflects different responses to patriarchy. These encounters allow Sujata to reflect on her own life and move toward reclaiming her agency.

Through the reading of *The Mother of 1084*, this paper will investigate and explore the central theme of female agency, focusing on how Mahasweta Devi portrays the tension between submission and resistance in the novel. By examining the choices that different women make—whether to "exist" within patriarchy or to "exit" through forms of resistance—the novel reveals the complexities of women's autonomy in a politically charged and patriarchal world. Through the character of Sujata, as well as other key figures such as Nandini, Tuli, and Somu's mother, the novel presents a nuanced analysis of the intersecting forces of gender, class, and politics.

The personal and political events unfold in *The Mother of 1084* against the backdrop of patriarchy. This patriarchal system is so apparent and subtle that it controls not just the public lives of women but also their private lives in *The Mother of 1084*. The experiences faced by Sujata in her own family become symbolic of how women are pushed to the margins. Dibyanath, her husband, is the epitome of a traditional patriarch – emotionally distant, politically driven opportunist, and dismissive of Sujata's

emotional needs. As Sujata reflects on her relationship with Dibyanath, she realizes that her entire existence in the family has been defined by silence and submission.

In the opening scenes of the novel, Sujata is informed of her son Brati's death not by her husband or her family but by a stranger. This disconnection between Sujata and her son's life speaks to the broader theme of how patriarchal societies divide women from meaningful participation in both family and political life. Even in her grief, Sujata is expected to perform her role as a mother in ways that conform to societal expectations, but she is not allowed to question the conditions that led to her son's death. She is not important enough to be answered by her husband and the family. Sujata, led by these indifferences, chose to unearth the truth herself. As Samik Bandyopadhyay, the translator of the English version of the novel, notes in the introduction, the novel "challenges the accepted norms of a mother's mourning" by showing how Sujata refuses to follow these norms and instead embarks on a journey of self-discovery (Devi xiii).

The other women in the family, which includes Sujata's daughter Tuli as well as her domestic servant, are also confined by the societal expectations of the mainstream patriarchal society. Tuli's choice to marry into a politically well-connected family mirrors the path Sujata initially took. Tuli's marriage, like her mother's, is presented as an act of submission to patriarchal values. While Sujata begins to awaken to her own lack of agency, Tuli remains ingrained in a life of passivity. This also highlights how patriarchy gets transmitted from one generation to another, showing how women are socialised and conditioned into accepting their gender roles as passive beings within a male-dominated structure.

It is important to examine the historical and political backdrop of *The Mother of 1084* as it further throws light on the agency of women that is portrayed in the novel. Brati was involved with the Naxalite movement which Sujata was unaware of, but as she came to know more about his involvement with the movement, she started to become more politically aware. After Brati's death when she comes to know about Nandini, when she interacts with her, she becomes aware of her own 'self' as well as of Brati's. Nandini's experiences give Sujata the glimmering hope of resisting the systems that have oppressed her throughout her life. Nandini represents that kind of female agency that is explicitly rebellious. Nandini was imprisoned and tortured due to her involvement with the Naxalite movement along with Brati. Though she had to pay the price, she chose to "exit" from the established concept of womanhood and morphed her subjectivity into political activism.

Nandini's character is particularly significant because she is one of the few women in the novel who actively resists both patriarchy and the state. Unlike Sujata, who remained passive for much of her life, Nandini has chosen to confront the forces that oppressed her. Though Nandini chose to confront, her defiance is not shown as completely heroic; rather, she had to face bitter consequences for her resistance towards the oppressive forces. Nandini had to pay the price for her involvement in activism as she was tortured brutally and her body bears those scars; she also eventually gets emotionally isolated. In one particularly poignant scene, Nandini tells Sujata, "They have taken everything from me—my family, my home, my body—but they will not take my soul" (Devi 105). This particular conversation underlines the cost of resistance for women in patriarchal and politically oppressive societies. Nandini chose to "exit" from the traditional parameters of womanhood set by the patriarchal norms. She chose to engage herself with political activism thereby challenging the patriarchy which Devi portrays as both empowering and tragic, as it leads to her physical and emotional suffering.

Despite this suffering, Nandini's defiance has a profound impact on Sujata. Through her interactions with Nandini, Sujata begins to see that her own life has been shaped by similar forces of oppression. Nandini's resistance serves as a model for Sujata's own awakening, but Sujata's journey toward agency is more internal and personal than political. While Nandini has chosen direct confrontation with the state, Sujata's resistance is more subtle. She begins to question the role she has played as a wife and mother and starts to reclaim her right to mourn Brati in her own way. As Nandini tells Sujata, "You have a voice. You just need to use it" (Devi 117). This is the point which becomes a critical moment for Sujata. She at this moment understands that to reclaim her agency, she at first have to reclaim her own voice.

Sujata's journey toward agency is also marked by her growing awareness of the connections between personal and political oppression. Throughout the novel, Devi emphasizes that the oppression women face within the family is linked to the larger structures of state power. Initially, Sujata could not come to terms towards Brati's decision to join the Naxalite movement. Sujata remains confused and dejected by Brati's rejection of the family and its values and a comfortable life. But when she explores more about the other life of Brati, she comes to know more about his political beliefs. Sujata realises that Brati's revolt is not merely against the state but also against the patriarchal family which he was part of. Brati's decision to "exit" from the family structure mirrors Nandini's exit from traditional womanhood. In both cases, the act of rebellion is a rejection of the systems that seek to control women and young people.

The novel *Mother of 1084* explores in detail the connections between personal and political oppression which is further emphasised by Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of the state as a patriarchal entity in itself. The way patriarchy uses emotional and social control to suppress over women's agency, the state too uses violence and torture to suppress the dissents of the people. This parallel is most evident in the character of Dibyanath, who, like the state, seeks to maintain order and control at all costs. Dibyanath's refusal to acknowledge Brati's death as anything more than a political inconvenience reflects the state's refusal to acknowledge the humanity of those who oppose it. In this way, Devi critiques not only the patriarchal family but also the larger structures of state power that perpetuate oppression.

Apart from Sujata and Nandini who are the central figures in the novel to explore the theme of female agencies, there are other characters too which shed light into the theme of "exist" versus "exit." All these characters offer varied responses towards

oppressive patriarchal systems and give insights on different female experiences. Tuli, Sujata's daughter, represents the choice to "exist" within patriarchal structures without questioning them. Tuli's marriage to a politically connected man is presented as a pragmatic choice, one that ensures her security and social status. However, Tuli's decision to conform to societal expectations comes at the cost of her autonomy. Unlike Sujata, who begins to question the role she has played as a wife and mother, Tuli embraces her position within the patriarchal family without resistance. In this sense, Tuli embodies the idea of "existence" within patriarchy, an existence that is defined by submission and conformity.

Somu's mother, on the other hand, represents the intersection of gender and class oppression. As a poor, working-class woman, Somu's mother faces a different set of challenges than Sujata or Nandini. Her son's death in the Naxalite uprising mirrors Brati's, but Somu's mother is denied the recognition and agency that Sujata is beginning to claim. When Sujata visits Somu's mother, she is struck by the older woman's resilience, but this resilience is not a form of resistance. Instead, it is a form of survival. Somu's mother "exists" because she has no other option. Her position on the margins of society leaves her with little room to resist the forces that oppress her.

Devi's portrayal of Somu's mother highlights the ways in which class complicates the question of female agency. While Sujata and Nandini have the privilege of contemplating forms of resistance, Somu's mother's existence is shaped by the need to survive in a hostile environment. The disparity between Somu's mother's marginalisation and Sujata's comparatively privileged status highlights significant issues regarding the boundaries of agency for women who experience multiple forms of oppression. As feminist scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has noted in her analysis of *The Mother of 1084*, the novel "foregrounds the impossibility of agency for subaltern women" (Spivak 93). Somu's mother is the embodiment of this impossibility, as her marginalisation prevents her from exiting the structures that oppress her.

Through these diverse female characters, Devi shows that there is no singular path to agency for women. Some, like Nandini, choose to resist openly, while others, like Tuli, conform to societal expectations. Still, others, like Somu's mother, are unable to resist because their marginalisation leaves them with no room to do so. Sujata's journey toward agency, then, is not presented as a universal solution to the problems women face. Rather, it is one possible path, one that is shaped by her specific social position and personal experiences.

The influence of motherhood on women's agency is a major theme in *The Mother of 1084*. Devi portrays motherhood as a social and political role that women are expected to play in addition to being a biological fact. The loss of her son Brati compels Sujata to face the inconsistencies that come with this position. She must, on the one hand, grieve for her son in ways that are socially acceptable. However, her sorrow makes her wonder about the system that killed her son. In the book, motherhood is portrayed as both a potential site of resistance and a source of oppression. Sujata's early passivity as a mother illustrates how women are frequently limited to being nurturers and carers with little other agency. But Sujata starts to doubt her role as a mother as well as the circumstances surrounding Brati's death. Her relationships with her husband and other children are also being questioned, in addition to her relationship with Brati. Sujata's political awakening is thus facilitated by her role as a mother.

Sujata's interactions with other women who have lost their sons provide additional insight into the theme of motherhood. One example of maternal resilience that is based on survival rather than resistance is Somu's mother. Somu's mother does not have the luxury of considering her position in society or her role as a mother, unlike Sujata. Rather, she is forced to "exist" in a world that has robbed her of everything. In this sense, Somu's mother represents the limits of maternal agency in a patriarchal and class-based society.

Despite these differences, Devi suggests the possibility of female solidarity through the shared experience of motherhood. As Sujata reflects on her encounters with other women who have lost their children, she begins to see herself as part of a larger community of women who are all struggling against the same forces of oppression. This sense of solidarity is not based on shared political beliefs but on shared experiences of loss and grief. As feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, "solidarity is not the same as sameness; it is an acknowledgement of the differences that exist between women while also recognising the common struggles they face" (Mohanty 72). In *The Mother of 1084*, this solidarity is tentative and fragile, but it represents a potential source of strength for women as they navigate the oppressive structures that shape their lives.

A sophisticated and nuanced depiction of female agency in the face of political and patriarchal oppression can be found in *The Mother of 1084*. The conflict between passivity and resistance, as well as the political and personal repercussions of deciding to "exist" or "exit" from oppressive systems, are all explored by Mahasweta Devi through the character of Sujata. The book recognises the challenges and paradoxes that women encounter when navigating these decisions rather than offering a romanticised or oversimplified picture of female agency. Sujata's journey toward reclaiming her agency is both personal and political. It is shaped by her specific experiences as a mother, a wife, and a woman in a patriarchal society, but it also resonates with broader themes of political resistance and social justice. Through her interactions with Nandini, Somu's mother, and other women, Sujata begins to see herself not just as an individual but as part of a larger community of women who are all struggling against the same forces of oppression.

Ultimately, *The Mother of 1084* suggests that there is no singular path to agency for women. Some, like Nandini, choose to resist openly and face the consequences. Others, like Somu's mother, are unable to resist because their marginalisation leaves them with no room to do so. Still, others, like Tuli, conform to societal expectations in order to survive. Sujata's journey represents one possible path toward agency, one that is shaped by her specific social position and personal experiences. In this way, the

novel offers a nuanced and multifaceted exploration of what it means for women to “exist” or “exit” within patriarchal and politically oppressive systems.

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