

## Quest for Self in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*

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**Abstract.** The paper is an attempt to explore woman's quest for self in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*. Mahasweta Devi is a prolific Bengali writer and a social activist. She stands as a distinguished personality in Indian literature with her feminist approach. She writes about the agonies of human beings and their ill-treatment in the society. Besides, her writings are concerned with the subjects related to strong women, who fight for their self-respect till the last breath of their lives. Women have played the subordinate role as mother, wife, and daughter since ages. Besides, they have been regarded as inferior in this male-dominated society. These women often found their self-respect and identity at stake and thus they felt the necessity of living an honourable and respectable life. Sujata is one of those women in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* who finds her existence in her own house as meaningless. Though she is well-educated, simple housewife, she is treated as a neglected part in the family. Being dissatisfied with her own existence, Sujata revolts against the existing society. Thus, the paper intends to focus on Sujata's quest for herself throughout the novel. It will also highlight Mahasweta Devi's views and concept of a new woman.

**Keywords :** Exploitation; suffering; male-dominated society; identity; dissatisfaction.

South Asian Literature touches upon the authors' writings from the end of the Colonial age to the present. Besides, these authors' writings negotiate their diverse cultural identities in form of writings – English language, fiction, short fiction and poems. South Asian Literature widely and broadly highlights the Indian subcontinent by describing varied themes. Historically, in earlier writings, women were often presented as victims in male-dominated society, though contemporary women writers have made a significant contribution in Indian writing in English. They took up new subjects for their writings. The women of these writers are no more silent sufferers; they are the women who no more want life against their desire. These new women want to lead life on their own terms and conditions. If they feel themselves being imprisoned, they walk away from that place in order to live an honourable life. These writers include Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Manju Kapur, Meera Syal, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Geetha Hariharan, Shobha De, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and many others. They mainly focused on the theme of women's self-awareness.

The concept of 'New Woman' was a feminist ideal that stemmed from the west in the late nineteenth century. The term 'New Woman' was popularised by Henry James, an American author. He portrayed women living life of their own

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choice against the patriarchal norms of the male-dominated society. In Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, Nora is the earliest example of new woman.

Though, Indian women writers in English have added a new dimension to Indian English Literature, the fact is that these women writers have spread their respective individual fragrance. They explored significant themes of the age that grappled with many complex issues like sensuality, servility, subjugation, alienation, identity crisis, feminism and free sex. Anita Myles rightly observes:

Women have been the nodal point of several literary writings in postcolonial India, literature having reflected on the changing plight of Indian women placed in traditional cultural backdrop of the Indian society. It is also evident that the upsurge of political and social consciousness has encouraged women to shed off the shackles of their placid stoicism. Consequently, women in Indian fiction have been treated both as symbols of retreat, personal regression and self-pity as well as symbols of growth, purity and development in the urban and rural milieu depicting women who make frantic efforts to define themselves questing for a respectable place in male dominated society. (Myles, 214)

Today's women writers are much more conscious about their role in society as well as they are well-aware in redefining its parameters. Mahasweta Devi is one of such prolific Bengali writers. Besides, she is a journalist, social activist and an eminent feminist writer. She was born in Dhaka but migrated to India after the partition. Mahasweta Devi was profoundly active in working for the betterment of the tribal communities and she worked extensively for them. Therefore, the main source of inspiration behind her writing were those people, who were victims of exploitation and oppression in the semi-colonial Indian society. As a social activist, she had always raised her voice against the injustice in terms of their suffering and discrimination. But the fact is that she fought not only with the tools of language for these exploited people but also wandered in villages, forests, small or big towns and made them aware of the necessity of struggle for the sake of their own dignity and basic human rights. Like this, she became a hope for those thousands of such people and formed more than thirty organizations of different tribal groups in many parts of India.

Mahasweta Devi wrote about hundred novels and twenty collections of short stories. She wrote all her works primarily in Bengali but later on they were translated into other languages. Her first novel was *Jhansir Rani* (1956) which was based on the life of Rani of Jhansi. Moreover, her major works are *Hazar Churashir Maa* (1974), *Aranyer Adhikar* (1979), *Murti* (1979), *Neerete Megh*

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(1979), *Stanyadayani* (1980), and *Chotti Munda Evan Tar Tir* (1980). These were translated into other languages as well. She was awarded many literary honours such as Sahitya Akademi Award (1979), Jnanpith Award (1996), Padmashree (1986), and Magsaysay Award. (1997).

The novel, *Mother of 1084* (1974) is popularly known as *Hazar Churashir Ma*. The novel centres around female protagonist Sujata Chatterjee and her self-awareness. Sujata belonged to a rich and orthodox family in particular. She graduated from Loreto College only as a preparation for her marriage. When she was married to Dibyanath, he was not from a rich but from a well-known family. Sujata accepted unquestionably all those values, comfort and security that came with them. Therefore, Sujata herself lived happily with her in-laws. Since beginning she was taught by life to accept things as they came to her. She neither questioned nor did she know her right to ask question. She had been hurt several times. But 'she had consoled herself with this thought that nobody in life had interrupted happiness'. (*Mother of 1084*, 31) Sujata's way of living can be observed in the following lines :

Sujata herself never wore anything more than a  
bangle on her wrist, a pair of small earrings and a  
thin chain around her neck. (35)

Sujata's personality reflects her simplicity of life wherein she cannot even purchase a sari of her own choice. This is quite ridiculous that in spite of being well-educated she cannot take any decision of her life. If we go through the history of Ancient India, many scriptures tell about women's situation that they enjoyed the equal status not only in education but also in terms of rights. Here, Sujata is subordinate to Dibyanath wherein she does not enjoy any right. On the contrary, she tries her best to find her happiness in his world. Sujata's opinion in the following lines will show her effort to adjust herself with her family:

How could I expect everyone to be the way I would  
like them to be? They are like themselves. If they  
are happy I am content. (44)

Even her own son, Brati questions Sujata about her being so passive for domestic life. On this, Sujata justifies herself saying:

I was trained to be passive about my children, your  
father, grandmother... (44)

Sujata even did not hold the most common right as a mother owing to Dibyanath's dominating nature. As a matter of fact, her identity as a mother is invisible among her own children. They too, saw their mother playing a subsidiary role. Therefore, her own children also could not take her into account regarding her existence in their life. Besides, her mother in-law holds the reins. The following lines will explain it more clearly:

Dibyanath never knew that one could honour one's mother without humiliating one's wife. His wife under his feet, his mother held aloft. That was his ethos. (45)

Here, Dibyanath's thinking bears a close resemblance to what Simon de Beauvoir said in her book *The Second Sex*, "women have always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality." (Beauvoir, 20)

Therefore, Sujata holds a strong sense of dignity and pride regarding Dibyanath's mindset. So, she realised soon after her marriage that the more she kept herself aloof from the household the more satisfied the others (Dibyanath and her mother-in-law) became. In fact, Dibyanath had never cared for these deep wounds. He often undervalued Sujata. He believed that Sujata could not think beyond a home's four walls:

The way he saw it, a wife had to love, respect and obey her husband. A husband was not required to do anything to win his wife's respect, love and loyalty. He had built a house of his own, he kept servants, and that was enough he thought. He never tried to make a secret of his affairs with young girls outside the house. He felt it was within his rights.(45)

The moment comes soon to Sujata when she thinks as a self-conscious individual rather than as a housewife or a mother. She gets to see the true face of society in course of searching truth behind her loving son's death. There grew disgust and hatred in Sujata as well when she reaches to conclusion. Sujata realises that the society for which she had been silent and valued its tradition is in fact, good for nothing but merely an exposition. She liberates herself the very moment from the conventions and its traditional values. The best example for this can be seen when Dibyanath questions her for being absent without information. On this Sujata replied curtly for she never questioned him for thirty two years, where did he spend his evening. She declares openly his extra-marital affair with the ex-typist. She clearly says, "she hates, detests the man. Dibyanath and the typist. Dibyanath and a distant cousin. Dibyanath and his cousin's wife". (94) In fact, it was a smart slap on Dibyanath's face. Sujata had never behaved or spoken in such a manner, since thirty four years of their married life. This was not enough, she made him feel more humiliating which can be seen in the following lines:

When I was younger, I didn't understand. Then your mother covered up your sins- yes, sins and I didn't feel like raking things up. Then I had no interest to know. But I have never spent my time, like you, stealing away, slinking away from your

home, from your family, the way you have done  
all your life. Would you like to hear more? (94)

Sudha Murthy's novel, *Mahashweta* bears a close resemblance to Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* in respect of protagonist – Anupama's self-discovery is very close to that of Sujata. In *Mahashweta*, Anupama like Sujata is disrespected by her husband, Dr. Anand. He simply loves her due to the fact that Anupama had an incurable disease after their marriage. Anupama like Sujata is also meek and submissive in the first half of the novel. But later she emerges as a confident and respectable woman finding her own identity like Sujata in the second half of the novel. In a way, these women endured all the sufferings as they could. But when they found their existence at home meaningless they had a strong sense of revolt for the sake of their meaningful existence and their identity as a human being.

To conclude, Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* explores a strong sense of self-awareness in Sujata in course of her life. Sujata is not a silent sufferer throughout the novel. In a way, she is one of those women in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* who in the beginning finds her existence in her own house as meaningless. But later she searches for the meaning of her life. Though she is well-educated and a simple housewife, she is treated as a neglected part in the family. As a result, her dissatisfaction with her own existence comes out in form of her revolt against the existing society. Sujata is a woman within the threshold in the beginning but later she is a woman beyond the threshold of patriarchy. And finally, Sujata asserts her individuality and establishes herself against the existing social order.

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