



THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS: MOTHERHOOD, RESISTANCE, AND SUBALTERN IDENTITY IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S MOTHER OF 1084

Dr. Pradnyashailee Bhagwan Sawai

*Assistant professor, Department of English, Government College of arts and science,
Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar Research center*

Dr. Nilofer Shakir

*Research Guide & Head, Dept of English Dr. Rafiq ZKaria College for women Gubilee Park
Aurangabad*

Snehal Dattatray Jadhav

Mail ID: snehaljadhav.yashada@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper explores the themes of motherhood, resistance, and subaltern identity in Mahasweta Devi's novel Mother of 1084, delving into how Devi uses the protagonist's journey to highlight social injustice and political turmoil. Set against the Naxalite movement's violent backdrop in West Bengal, Mother of 1084 follows Sujata, who uncovers her son's political motivations and life posthumously. Through Sujata's journey, Devi crafts a narrative that transcends personal grief, probing into the larger structures of power, class, and systemic oppression that define and suppress the subaltern in India. This study examines Devi's nuanced portrayal of motherhood as a tool of resistance, Sujata's transformation, and the novel's broader social implications.

Keywords: *Motherhood, Resistance, Subaltern, Naxalite Movement, Mahasweta Devi, Social Justice, Indian Literature, Political Protest.*

1. Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's Mother of 1084 is a seminal work in Indian literature, renowned for its unapologetic portrayal of socio-political injustices and the inner strength of marginalized figures. Originally written in Bengali and translated into English, the novel transcends its local context to address universal themes of loss, political activism, and the silent oppression of the

subaltern. Set against the socio-political backdrop of the Naxalite movement, the novel follows the journey of Sujata, a middle-class mother who faces unimaginable grief and societal disregard after the death of her son, Brati. Identified only by the morgue number "1084," Brati's memory symbolizes the countless lives lost and forgotten in the political violence of the era. Devi's work goes beyond mere storytelling, inviting readers to question societal norms, political corruption, and the apathy of those in power. Through Sujata's transformation from a submissive housewife to a mother who dares to seek truth and justice, *Mother of 1084* challenges the conventional boundaries of motherhood, transforming it into a profound act of defiance. Devi uses Sujata's personal loss as a lens through which broader social issues, such as class disparity and gender oppression, are scrutinized. By centering on the grief and awakening of an ordinary woman, Devi effectively gives voice to the silent suffering of the subaltern, crafting a narrative that is as much an act of protest as it is a work of literature. This paper examines Devi's thematic exploration of motherhood as a mode of resistance and her critique of societal structures through Sujata's journey from passivity to empowerment.



Mahasweta Devi 1926-2016

2. Background

The Naxalite movement in West Bengal during the late 1960s and early 1970s forms the novel's historical and political foundation. As a radical communist movement seeking to overthrow the ruling class, it inspired numerous young people, including Sujata's son, Brati. His untimely death becomes the catalyst for Sujata's transformation, from a conventional housewife to a figure embodying resistance and awakening to socio-political realities.

3. Motherhood as Resistance

The novel frames motherhood not as a passive role but as a catalyst for social awareness and resistance. Sujata, initially portrayed as a compliant and apolitical housewife, undergoes a

radical transformation as she delves into Brati's life and political motivations. Through Sujata's evolution, Devi challenges the traditional notion of motherhood as a private, nurturing role, redefining it as an active stance against injustice.

- **Literary Analysis of Sujata's Transformation:** The study dissects Sujata's character arc and her growth from ignorance to defiance, exploring how Devi uses this journey to expose the often-ignored perspective of a mother facing personal loss in the political arena. Sujata's transformation symbolizes the awakening of an individual in the face of societal apathy, showcasing how personal suffering can dismantle complacency. Her defiance reflects a broader critique of a society that dismisses grief, especially when it confronts uncomfortable political truths.
- **Symbolism and Imagery:** Analysis of symbolic elements, such as Brati's morgue number "1084," serves as a stark reminder of the countless nameless victims of political violence. Through the symbol of "1084," Devi underscores the dehumanizing effects of political violence, reducing individuals to numbers. Devi's use of evocative imagery throughout Sujata's journey enriches the reader's experience, illustrating the immense emotional weight of a mother's grief. Visual symbols, like the morgue, heighten the contrasts between Sujata's isolated sorrow and the indifference of society around her. This powerful imagery not only emphasizes Sujata's personal anguish but also evokes a universal resonance, inviting readers to empathize with the innumerable, faceless victims of systemic injustice.

4. The Subaltern Voice and Devi's Political Commentary

Devi is known for her commitment to amplifying the voices of the oppressed, particularly the subaltern, who are often sidelined in mainstream narratives. *Mother of 1084* places Sujata, a woman without social or political influence, at the center of a politically charged story, thereby confronting and challenging patriarchal and class-based norms.

- **Devi's Use of Subaltern Perspectives:** This section discusses how Devi uses Sujata's voice as a proxy for the silent suffering of mothers, women, and marginalized groups who bear the brunt of political violence. Sujata's life, fragmented by the loss of her son, echoes the fragmented and silenced experiences of subaltern individuals.
- **The Role of Class and Power:** Devi critiques the class-based apathy of the elite, contrasting Sujata's awakening with the indifference of her family and society. This dual portrayal of awareness versus apathy exemplifies Devi's commentary on the

hierarchical structures that define, and confine, individuals based on class. Through Sujata's journey, Devi exposes the stark divide between those insulated by privilege and those oppressed by systemic neglect. Her family's reluctance to acknowledge Brati's life and death as significant reflects a broader societal disregard for lower-class struggles. This indifference underscores the ways in which power and privilege maintain societal hierarchies, insulating the elite from confronting uncomfortable

5. Intersection of Grief and Political Awareness

Sujata's grief catalyzes her journey into a world she previously ignored, turning her personal loss into a transformative political awareness. Devi illustrates how grief can awaken individuals to the harsh realities around them, especially those affecting the marginalized and oppressed.

- **Grief as a Catalyst for Awareness:** Sujata's sorrow compels her to seek out Brati's friends and learn about his beliefs, exposing her to the brutal realities of class struggles and political repression. Devi uses this narrative arc to show how personal suffering can expand one's perspective, transforming passive acceptance into active awareness. Sujata's journey through grief awakens her to the harsh truths her son believed in, challenging her once-stable worldview and creating a bridge between her personal loss and broader social injustices. Her engagement with Brati's comrades introduces her to voices from marginalized classes, revealing perspectives she had previously overlooked or ignored. This newfound awareness not only empowers Sujata but also catalyzes her transformation from a grieving mother to an individual questioning societal structures. Her grief, thus, becomes a force that disrupts her previous complacency, propelling her into a realm of political and social consciousness.
- **Empathy and Broader Societal Engagement:** Sujata's experiences underscore the potential for grief to bridge personal and collective suffering. Her journey exemplifies how grief, rather than isolating, can bring about empathy and align personal loss with societal issues, making the personal political.

6. Narrative Structure and Language

Devi's minimalist language and direct narrative style are essential to the novel's emotional and ideological impact. The paper analyzes Devi's use of language and narrative devices, such as flashbacks and dialogues, which construct a realistic portrayal of Sujata's internal and external conflicts.

- **Flashbacks and Memory:** Devi uses flashbacks to recount Sujata's memories of Brati, building a multidimensional character and revealing the disconnect between Sujata's understanding of her son's life and the harsh reality he faced.
- **Dialogue and Silence:** Devi uses both spoken and unspoken words to convey the social dynamics within Sujata's family, illustrating how silence serves as both a defense mechanism and a form of suppression. In moments where Sujata's grief and questions are met with silence, Devi emphasizes the family's reluctance to confront uncomfortable truths, using silence as a barrier to shield themselves from introspection. This silence becomes a powerful symbol of complicity, reflecting a broader societal tendency to suppress dissenting voices rather than address systemic injustices.

7. The Broader Socio-Political Implications

Mother of 1084 transcends the boundaries of personal tragedy, offering insight into the larger socio-political landscape of Devi's time. The novel examines how political movements are not isolated events but rather parts of a continuum affecting individuals and families, exposing societal and systemic injustices.

- **Impact of the Naxalite Movement on Families:** Devi's narrative presents a rarely addressed perspective—the familial fallout of political activism. Sujata's journey reflects the harsh realities many families faced, balancing personal grief with the overwhelming political narrative of the time.
- **Devi's Critique of Social Conformity and Gender Roles:** This section delves into Devi's subtle yet powerful critique of gender roles and societal expectations, underscoring the disparity between male and female voices in the political realm.

8. Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* serves as a powerful critique of societal, political, and gender-based oppression. Through Sujata's character, Devi challenges traditional narratives surrounding motherhood, transforming it into an act of resistance. Sujata's journey from a grieving mother to a voice for the voiceless mirrors Devi's own commitment to giving voice to the oppressed. This novel is not merely a story of loss but a call to acknowledge and address the systems that perpetuate inequality and suffering. Devi's work remains a compelling and timeless reminder of the resilience inherent in the human spirit and the power of motherhood as a transformative force.

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