

## Un-Liberated Mothers and Subversion of the Joys of Motherhood in the Texts of Mahashweta Devi

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### Abstract

In the texts of Mahashweta Devi the readers are a witness to the contradictory facet of a social construct that though adamant to ordain Motherhood on women; refuses to have them the joys of mothering simultaneously denying the spirit of motherhood to flourish, depriving them of their right of decision-making or accessing a space of their own. Whenever “Mothers” act saviors, leaders, healers or emerge powerful in the rumblings of social strains the patriarchal set-up reduces them to a ‘vile, dangerous woman’ and in the process they suffer unjustifiably imposed separation from their progeny. The ‘Othering’ of mother due to apprehension of empowerment of women through motherhood and the forced separation of mother and child on issues of poverty, morality, tradition etc causes heart-rending trauma and anguish in helpless mothers. In case the ‘apolitical’ mother becomes socially and politically assertive, she is denied the natural right over her child/children.

In this paper, some of the texts of Mahasweta Devi as discussed are set in the pre-independent Bengal and yet they are analyzed to show those moments in history that have their repercussions and shadow over present times as well. The absence of the voice of mothers since history depicts a silent process of disconnection of the self with the society. Deprivations, destitution, powerlessness that form the core of Mahasweta’s thematic concerns assume an altogether different dimension when it comes to her female characters. Placed at the locus of multiple victim hoods due to caste discrimination, economic exploitation, the Motherhood of woman succumbs as the defeated mother has to shun the innocent joys of mothering quite involuntarily.

**Key Words:** Motherhood, Ideology, Nation, Tradition, Religion, History, Apolitical, subversion

Mahasweta Devi in her texts successfully empathizes with women who are “Mothers” belonging to different social categories and portrays their mental conflicts vividly. A preoccupation with the maternal figure in a number of her stories outlines another dimension of Mahasweta’s engagement with gender. The circumstantial differences which are an outcome of their belonging to different caste, gender, class show the relative struggle the intensity of which has an equal wavelength and the tone and fervour of their emotional turmoil is same. All of them have to submit to one or the other form of oppression. They are fearful of the social set-up that poses a survival threat to their sons or daughters. This concern and efforts for providing them with a congenial/conducive living-condition makes them undergo psychological conflicts, and henceforth a difficult life. At times, they’re a witness to the horrors of survival that their children suffer or ordain upon them a forced separation that destroys the living spirit of mothers.

The issue of motherhood is a gendered construct which is based on the existing master-definition of mothers fashioned on the binaries of ‘male-female, mind-body nature-culture, reason-emotion, public-private and labor-love.’ (Glen, etl.13) The usual approach is to link cultural and romanticized imperative, ‘motherhood’, with women rather than evoke the more suitable term ‘mothering’ that both man and women can accept as equal partners, however idealistic that might appear. “Mothering’ here, entails the practice of ‘the daily management of children’s live and the daily care provided for them’ whereas ‘motherhood’ is more of ‘an institution’ replete with meanings and ideologies.’ Mothers are romanticized as life-giving, self-sacrificing, and forgiving, and demonized as smothering, overly-involved, and destructive. They are seen as all-powerful-holding fate of their children and ultimately the future of society in their hands- and as powerless- subordinated to the dictates of nature, instinct, and social forces beyond their ken. (P.11). The same women circumscribed within the periphery of tradition face a series of disasters when the motherhood strengthens, empowers or mobilizes them or fills them with emotional vigour. In such a case, the usual joys of ‘mothering’ are taken away from the mother. The situation worsens when the relationship is that of a mother and daughter as the patriarchal set-up detains mothers and their daughters to survive on their own.

Being considered as “symbol of community, any attempt to change the position of women gets perceived as an assault on the community.” (Menon P. 10) Mahashweta’s *Dewana, Khoimala and the Holy Banyan Tree* is set in pre-independent India. The pre-independent Bengal in the texts is evidently, a microcosm of the entire India and the Indian way of living. As she writes, “The history of the past and the history of the present both constitute history. There are some histories that are for all times. It is my conviction that a storyteller should be motivated by a sense of history that would help her readers to understand their own times.” (Preface to Shrestha Galpa P.02). Khoimala’s mother is an upper caste Brahmin widow, a fearful and submissive woman who is all the while cautious and at guard lest any sort of social disgrace may befall her daughter or she herself unknowingly transgress some firmly rooted tradition. Khoimala, as a young girl child is a duty or in more severe words a ‘burden’ to her mother. On bearing a girl-child she is terribly sad and fearful. “She had given birth to a girl, she had brought her up. In the eyes of the world that made her a sinner. She would have to suffer every humiliation, silently bear every blow; in this great wide world, no sin was greater than that of birthing a girl child” (P.18). Discrimination and deprivations start at birth as the Patriarchal set-up never encourages or cherishes the birth of a female-child. Poverty strikes women more than it does men and the situation gets worse if the women belong to the upper caste. Being a Brahmin’s girl Khoimala can’t have the joy of catching fish as it was a sport for the lower castes. “Not for a Brahmin girl no matter how destitute orphaned and utterly poor she may be,” writes Mahasweta Devi. Her daughter had to wait till the time of distribution of evening *Prasad* in a nearby temple or she persuades her to observe a fast which is too often. Succumbing to the social pressures laid down heavily by her mother, Khoimala couldn’t resist her marriage to the old haggard though the inner

urge makes her move forward to meet the boatman's son Golak and they meet death in the process of union. Being her only child, Khoimala is the only companion for the old widow but she helplessly has to bear a separation forcing her into an early marriage that eventually causes the physical death of her child. The social constraints degrade the potentialities of the female who is mother of a girl-child, prohibiting her to take decisions regarding the future of her daughter. There are instances from those times, when subversions against the dominant order existed in the form of popular songs and lullabies which played upon the miseries of married life that separated young daughters from their mothers and playmates. (Rumina Sethi P. 23) Adrienne Rich in "The Burning of Paper instead of Children" says that the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us [Women] more than a chapter in critical history; it is an act of survival." Re-vision does not simply mean, "looking back" nor is it a mere "act of survival". Rather it refers to a re-visionist remaking of the past and re-invention of a new tradition so much so that it becomes an act of creation."

For Mary's mother of the story *The Hunt* belonging to a casteless society of tribes is of no relief. Being a victim of colonial violence in the form of rape; her only child, Mary is a half- white, half-Oraon woman. For the sake of sustenance of her only daughter she bears all the atrocities of the landlord for whom she works. Both the mother and her daughter become a living symbol of exploitation as her daughter's existence is torn between her sense of alienation and her need for belonging. For the sake of securing some dignity, for the need of security and sustenance; Mary's mother tries to take some aid out of religion converting many a times to different folds but religion never shows a path towards a better life.

In both the societies, it is a son that raises/ protects the stature of the mother. Daughters and their physical, emotional or social oppression render the mothers clueless about their predicament. The daughters-in-laws who do not bear a male child have to face insults, negligence, and unfair treatment from all quarters and are bound to suffer separation from those with whom they have a natural bonding. Moynaburi's words state the predicament of a female child in the social sphere. She'd say, "She's got a lifetime of kicks and whacks ahead of her, so let me tend to her a little now." (P.19) Moyna is a Brahmin widow who thrives at the mercy of the compassion of the well-to-do Brahmin couple laboring herself hard on household chores. Being a victim of child-marriage the injustices done to her has soured her temper and her retorts bring forth the social evils; making her a spokesperson of the women of her type.

The hapless Chinta, a young widow, works as a housemaid in one of Calcutta's middle class households. Her two year old daughter is made to sit on the porch with a rope tied around her waist to prevent her from running around and dirtying the house. Very soon Chinta has yet another daughter. It is at this time that her in-laws from the village arrive and it is known that

Chinta had eloped with a man who had promised to marry her. Now her in laws wish to take her back but the children begotten through the sinful relationship will have to be abandoned. The two girls are sold off and Chinta is herded back to the village. The middle class locality which is abuzz with discussions of Chinta's debauchery is unconcerned and indifferent towards the fate of her two minor girls as they are crude towards the turmoil and anguish that the mother has to undergo. Mahasweta shows Chinta and her daughters as the worst sufferers of middle class morality and patriarchal inhumanity. It is the author's account of their sufferings which is vocal and pricks the conscience of the readers. Mahasweta's women have the characteristic of speaking up their mind and in the process they reveal the exploitative social set-up. Women become a natural though helpless sympathizer as they can vividly perceive the future that is in store for a girl in the crude patriarchal set-up. The females like Moynaburi, Kadu, Damini, Khoimala, and Kanaka are dislocated women who helplessly yearn to find a root in relations that can enable them an identity and respect. Dislocation is from the family since they do not have a dignified space of their own.

Religion in the novella *The Armenian Champa Tree* has been portrayed as a thought-denying camouflage which provides a safe rostrum for religious leaders or fake sadhus, pundits etc. Even the leadership initiatives are destroyed by religious creeds. The writer calls Mato's Mother as a 'natural leader.' "She would, go, do all the talking and finalize the deal on behalf of the Bunos. Then she would come back to their quarters and inform everybody (P.30). It is through the symbology of 'motherhood' that women could enter public life a bit comfortably. Nationalist ideology employs the image of woman as mother in contradictory ways articulating both power and powerlessness. In colonial contexts, the mother-image is extremely powerful as a trope which is used to appropriate the nation-in-the-making. Images of motherland and mother-goddesses are constantly evoked in the construction of nationalist ideology. (P.20) Mato's mother exercises a charismatic authority over her tribesmen. She appears to them as an independent, worldly, empowered woman capable of taking decisions for her family and community as well. Her persona instills vigour, optimism and strength in her people. But it is again difficult to make out the beginning or end of the vicious circle of exploitation which takes her into its grasp subsequently making her their prey. She lives in constant fear of losing her sons and the religious leaders be it a Sadhu or a Father try to act out a 'saviour' to her sons thus reducing a bold woman into a superstitious one. She suffers the 'absence' of her sons and their possible murder or killing drains down her otherwise turbulent spirits.

Living a secluded existence within her own community Kalya's mother 'Tejota' in *The Book of the Hunter* is another tribal woman who is a symbol of perseverance, strong will and kind compassion; equally loved and respected by those outside her community (by the upper-caste Hindus) for her knowledge of the herbs and roots of the forest that bear medicinal qualities. Within the tribe she is a respected older woman in whose memory reposes the secret and

precious wisdom of the tribe, passed on to her father, Danko Shabar. She is a responsible mother who denies passing it on to her son despite his repeated pleas as she has seen his impatient and immature behaviour occasionally and as a result not yet fit to hold a place of power and importance that the knowledge can confer on him. Unlike the high-caste born, cruel, heartless Saraju's mother-in-law; Tejota is a compassionate and protective mother-in-law for Phuli, Kalya's wife. She chides her daughter-in-law for silently bearing the extremities of Kalya's behaviour. In her society women do enjoy an equal position to men and she can't tolerate or keep quiet on Kalya's beating Phuli. Gender-discrimination and its exploitative mechanism is less functional in tribal societies where women get an equal footing with their male-counterpart and also have access to public spaces, marketplaces etc. Tejota demanded to know, "What kind of Shabar woman are you, anyway? Why do you put up with it? Tejota said, "Why don't you go to your mother's house and sulk for a while. Don't Bulge and Kalya will show up and beg you to come back." As Phuli refuses she even offers to call a meeting and set Kalya up for a trial. This sweet and compassionate account of two tribal women is quite relieving and their values can be approved of for the establishment of a humane and an equal society. Tejota is a mother who suffers the pain of the death of a loving son and a dutiful daughter-in-law for upholding the values of courage and bravery that Tejota had instilled in him. Despite the loss, she moves on with her community for their sake.

In the process of reading the texts are found the contrast in situations and characters. Whereas Mato's mother is fearful and full of reverence for the rituals and dogmas another tribal woman; in the story *Sanjh-Bhoor ki Maa (The Mother of Dusk and Dawn)* takes recourse to the religious dogmas and symbols as a ruse to provide succour to her only son. She ekes out a livelihood under the false halo of being a woman having an access to some divine power. Here, is a mother who partakes an unusual identity and routine; becoming a 'Jati thakurain' to the people around so that she could secure some kind of security from the ill-intentioned lot. To be honoured and respected, in fact, to safeguard the very sanctity of her being, the tribal woman has to become her son's a dusk to dawn mother. Mahasweta exposes the ultimate ironies hidden behind the reification of a woman's role as mother by hinting at the fact that Jati's significance to her son co-extended with her capacity to satisfy his endless hunger. Mother here stands exploited both in her biological as well as spiritual incarnations. In *Sindhubala* Mahasweta again dislocates the sublimation of motherhood by placing the female into the trajectories of the spiritual. The reification of Sindhu into the role of a divine healer necessitates a suppression of her own physical and emotional desires. Abandoning of her identity and aspirations as a woman is a prerequisite for holy motherhood which she is forced to act out in order to make a living. Sindhu's disillusionment with such a self-denying divinity, finally subverts the stereotypical mythical maternity.

In the story, *Batorni ka Beta (Batorni's Son)* is the mention of a tribal woman who suffers extreme deprivations under the exploitative social set-up. Having lost her husband who is killed by the Mahajan who falsely accused him of theft; Batorni lives in perpetual fear of losing her son too and becomes fierce when the Mahajan again tries to charge her son Judan of theft. Then, to the surprise of all the people around this illiterate, tribal woman becomes loud and vocal in bringing forth the account of all the injustices that the Mahajan put them through.

The story *Bayen* reveals the vulnerability of the tender maternal sentiments in the face of dogmatic, superstitious ness of a male-dominated social system. The poignant, chastening tale of Chandi's suffering not only underlines the inhumanity of superstition, it also recounts a tale of gender containment. Samik Bandyopadhyay in his "Introduction" to *Five Plays* notes: "The metaphoric core of Bayen, in which a mother is branded as a witch and separated from her son till the latter acknowledges the dead woman as his mother, lies deeper than the obvious protest against the inhumanity of superstition. In the one scene in which the son confronts the witch-mother who herself fears the confrontation more than the son, Mahasweta touches the larger space of the social spaces that separate mother and son in a male-dominant system."

Chandi's independence, self-respect and pride in her own position in the community and in her family threaten to transgress the social norms. The patriarchal community which could not withstand Chandi's independence, self-respect and pride casts her away and in the process deprives her of her natural rights to motherhood. Out of fear of ostracism by his superstitious community, the husband abandons his loving wife and the community that is suspicious of her maternalism and interrogates her simple joys of motherhood never considers her maternal sensibilities for her little son compelling her to live a doomed life in the outskirts of village.

Brati's mother Sujata in *The Mother of 1084* is an upper-caste, middle-class unhappy woman who suffers the loss of her son and tries to move on with life bearing all sorts of opposition coming her way from family and society. This submissive quiet woman gets into psychological trauma and mental unrest when she discovers the brutal murder of her son by police and comes across the indifference that the family, neighbourhood, administration etc. show towards their crime. The novel *The Mother of 1084* is openly confrontational to the social, political set-up and to the administration as well. Tanika Sarkar points out that the construction of the Hindu wife enabled the Bengali intelligentsia to create a paradigm of the colonial relationship, this time practiced on the domestic level. This representative mother-construct was to bear the burden of defining the Bengali middle class. Hindu identity was to be conceived in the abstract shape of the Hindu mother. Dibyanath, Sujata's husband never cared for her and as she felt used her just for giving birth to their children. Like their father, the other two children do not care for her except Brati whom she initially considers as an unwanted one. However, when the mother in her could not hate him, he turned to be her only hope. And then she gets the shocking news that Brati was

brutally murdered as he was a naxal. Using the power, Dibyanath prevented the news flashing through the papers etc, and consider him a closed chapter. But the bereaved mother keeps the zealous ideal of her son alive through her social work. The suddenness and stinging agony of her son's untimely end acts as a catalyst to cudgel her numb conscience. In the same vein, Sujata who accepts the hypocritical norms of the patriarchal society for a long time decides to begin her own journey from an illusioned ignorance, submission, compromise into the realm of awakening and knowledge as she suffers the agony of Brati's death. Visiting Brati's political comrades who survived the struggle and their families, she uncovers the face of her own alienation.

It is only after her meeting with Nandini that Sujata can ask her husband to leave the room. She faces him squarely and reminds him of his total insensitivity. When Dibyanath leaves the room, her sole regret is that Brati had not lived to see his mother come into her own. Her final rejection of the society she lives in comes in the form of a severe physical agony while in her mind she vows never to abandon the Bratis of the world. Her husband rationalizes it, by saying 'the appendix has burst' but Sujata's mind echoes her protest:

"Did Brati die so that these corpses with their putrefied lives could enjoy all the images of poetry of the world, the red rose, the green grass, the moon lights, the smiles of mothers, the cries of children- forever? Did he die for this? To leave this world to these corpses? Never.

The waves of pain and nausea those envelopes Sujata are as real as her inability to make peace with her social circumstances. In *Mother of 1084*, Mahasweta portrays motherhood as a basis of protest and identity despite its apolitical nature. Tejota and Sujata may be two different women, belonging to different statuses, class and caste and despite a vast spatial and temporal distance between them; both endure the pain of the sacrifice of their young, grown-up sons for a cause. Their consciousness for the need of betterment of a society that is lacking in many humane aspects and the required efforts for its growth is a positive signal of some change.

The narratives that portray the unethical victimization of youths branding them as naxals, the spatial difference provides a relief, a hope that may be those who have escaped the metropolis might have survived. The readers get a faint hope or are forced to conclude that in such grim political situation, Sujata may have saved Brati if they lived not in Calcutta but in some far-off, remote belt so that they could've secretly run away to some other unknown land leaving all shackles behind like the Nishat Majhi and Majhin (*Nishat Majhi ki Bhutan Yatra*); who having lost one of their two sons try to save the other one from the clutches of the police that is bent on killing the other one too brandishing him as a naxal as they did previously. Majhin appears placid awaiting the return of her sons while there is a storm inside her, a never-dying rage against the injustices and atrocities of the administration and police.

There is a continuum between Mahasweta Devi's mothers and leaders of men, between the cold, growing awareness of the former shaping into resistance, or stopping at the very edge of defiance, and the evolving militancy of the latter (P.09). Thus, Mahasweta Devi's women characters across the social spectrum express a wide range of sensibilities, maternal affiliation, compassion and courage in the face of death and numerous untold anxieties. Motherhood, as a political activity, has the potential to be an active source of subjecthood within hyper conformism. The sensitivity and ironic intensity of Mahasweta's idiom multiplies manifold when she documents the tensions and struggles in the lives of the gendered subaltern. Her ironic humour and her subversive barbs become particularly biting in her woman-centered narratives.

In *Panchkanya* the women of "Janavritta" or the commoners teach the young widow Uttara how to cope with her life which is rendered meaningless due to widowhood. Among the Royals, a woman is allowed only a half life when her husband is no more. In young Uttara's case the trauma is manifold as she loses her husband barely six months into her marriage. For Uttara, life becomes an endless wait for death as she knows that her joys of motherhood will be short lived as the Princes of the Royal families are reared by the wet nurses. In the narrative of *Kunti and Nishadin*, Kunti who has proceeded to the forest as part of the 'Vanaprastha' period of her life ponders over the unprecedented destruction caused by the wanton war which killed her first child Karan whom she had forsaken at birth as he had been sired out of wedlock. Kunti questions the tenets of patriarchy which maintains that if the husband should wish it, a woman can beget a child sired by another. But no woman can become a mother of her own free will. Kunti's bitterness with herself is portrayed in a vivid manner. "Would women ever be truly free and equal with men until we had liberated mothers?" asks Dora Russell. (Rumina Sethi P.24) As writer C.S.Laxmi puts it: 'The 'notion' of an unbroken tradition is constant and attempts are made to write this notion of tradition on the body of the woman to dictate its movement, needs, aspirations, and spheres of existence even while the body is moving along time, space and history. (p.125)

In Postcolonial times, in the contest between tradition and modernity, the woman is held to be the repository of all that is 'good' in the culture's traditions, even as colonial/postcolonial modernity and tradition seek power over the familial and domestic space. When everything else in that postcolonial culture is in a state of flux and transformation, its woman needs to be projected as stable and safe.

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