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## Language of Defiance: Female Emancipation in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*

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## A Committed Social Activist

Mahasweta Devi is a well-known Indian woman writer in the twentieth century. She is a committed social activist. Her writings portray the poverty, hunger, oppression and corruption in the society. As Sujit Mukherjee states, Mahasweta Devi turns “to recording the present instead of reconstructing the past.”



Her novel *Mother of 1084* is a fiction of documentation in which she seeks the roots of the revolutionary fervor of the urban rebels. In the novel, Mahasweta Devi deals with an immediate past in order to comment on the present in which many mothers and their sons are driven to martyrdom.

Mahasweta Devi's works concentrate on the issues of exploitation and marginalization as long continuing socio-historical process embedded in social and cultural practices, a focus on the interlocking structures of oppression, the criss-cross of multiple hierarchies of class, caste and gender. Her works fill the gap within

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literature on what must be considered the most significant peasant movement in the India of the last third of the twentieth Century. This paper focuses on the language of defiance in relation to female emancipation in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*.

### **Women- An Exploited Group**

Mahasweta Devi believes that “a responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take a stand in defense of the exploited” (18). She considers women as one group among the exploited and under subjugation. Her writings provide scope for viewing her work from the feminist angle. Mothers bearing the brunt of social and political oppression, enduring all, and later offering resistance with indomitable will, dominate her writing.

### **Psychological Crisis of a Mother**

*Mother of 1084* focuses on the psychological and emotional crisis of a mother who awakens one morning to the heart-rending news that her dear son is lying dead in the police morgue, and is demeaned to a mere numeral – corpse No. 1084. This article to examine how this emancipation leads her to a journey of discovery, in the course of which, struggling to understand her Naxalite son's revolutionary commitment, she begins to recognize her own alienation, as a woman and wife, from the complacent hypocritical, bourgeois society her son had rebelled against.

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Mahasweta writes:

I set an apolitical mother's quest to know her martyred Naxalite son, to know what he stood for; for she had not known true Brati ever, as long as he had been alive. Death brings him closer to her through her quest and leads the mother to a journey of self-discovery and discovery of the cause of her son's rebellion (31).

### **Mother's Journey**

After Brati's death, his mother Sujata journeys into the past and undergoes a process of self-introspection and wonders at herself and her family members, or at the society which is responsible for his death. As she seeks an explanation for the death of her son, she too finds that the entire social system is cadaverous and as she takes a closer look at the society, she finds no legitimacy for his death.

She discovers that Brati had rebelled because he was not happy with the way things were. He found that hypocrisy and corruption was rampant throughout society – in the administration, in the police, in the politics, in cultural-intellectual establishment and in fact, in every individual belonging to a particular class. He had lost faith in the social system itself which did not care for moral and human values, he wondered why only the corrupt and immoral people occupy the highest position in the society and people who care for morality and their country are killed.

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### **Mother's Probe – Who Is the Criminal?**

As Sujata probes deeper into the causes of her son's death, she realizes that the killers in society, those who adulterated food, drugs and baby food, had every right to live; the leaders who led the people to face the guns of the police and who found themselves the safest shelter under police protection had every right to live, but Brati and his friends, who wanted to reform the society had no right to live. She wonders whether her son, or his killers are the criminals.

She discovers that her son was the criminal because he had lost faith in this Indian society ruled by profit-crazy businessmen and leaders blinded by self-interest, and had protested against injustice. The mother becomes aware that death was the sentence reserved for every one of them, for all those who had rejected a society of spineless, opportunistic, time-serving corrupt people, masquerading as artists, writers, and intellectuals. The men who rejected the Parties of Establishment were killed in a ruthless manner and to kill these faithless men, one did not need any special sanction from the court of law or the courts of justice.

Brati was killed because he had come to place such absolute faith in the cult of faithlessness. Brati had decided for himself that freedom could not come from the path the society and the state followed. He did not remain content with writing slogans on the wall; he had to commit himself to the slogans and this was his offence.

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His firm conviction in the right cause, his courage and his selflessness, his exemplary integrity and his irresistible passion, led to his death.

### **Anindya and the Grim Facet of the Society**

At times, the mother feels guilty and wonders whether her hungry clinging love was indirectly responsible for his death as Brati had stayed on in Calcutta on that fateful day only to avoid hurting her. Mahasweta explores a grim facet of the society where people like Anindya exist. He is, in fact, responsible for the deaths of Brati and his friends. Money, jobs, power did not mean a thing to Brati, but these were the temptations which seduced those who had joined them only to betray them.

### **Moral Rationale of Sujata**

Sujata can find a moral rationale for her son's revolt only when she can piece together a part of her son's life she had never known. Unaware in her situation of life of the politics of economic deprivation and exploitation, the more she can see in Brati's revolt is the articulation of the silent revolt she has carried within herself against her corrupt, respectable husband, her other children and their spouses and friends. She feels sorry for her dead son and she feels the loss very poignantly. In a sense, she can find in his death a fulfillment she had yearned for and never dared to claim for herself.

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One day in the life of Sujata is spent in ‘discovering’ Brati for the first time, in a series of encounter with people beyond her circuit of experience; it is spent in forging a connection with Brati, or rather with what he strove for and died for.

### **Brati’s Death - A Moment of Self-Discovery**

Brati’s death is a moment of self-discovery for the mother. She journeys into the past to look back into her personal life too – her daily humiliation as a woman and her silent, determined struggle for self-autonomy and freedom which ironically gathers momentum from her son’s death.

For the first time, she realizes that all her life she has had a shadowy existence and she has been very subservient, silent and faithful. Her husband Dibyanath and his mother constituted the centre of attention in the home. Sujata held on unquestioningly to all these values, comfort, security and all that went with them. Whenever Sujata was expecting a child, her mother-in-law would leave the house to go and live with her sister. Even Dibyanath never accompanied her when it was delivery time. He had not allowed Sujata the most common rights that a woman possessed. His mother held the reins and he never understood that one could honour one’s mother without humiliating one’s wife.

### **A Male Chauvinist Husband**

Sujata’s husband’s ethos was that his wife should be under his feet and his mother held aloft. He was a male chauvinist and thought that as an Indian wife,

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Sujata's primary duty was to love, respect, and obey her husband and he was not required to do anything to win his wife's respect, love and loyalty. He used to say, "I am the Boss in this house. What I say goes – thousands of times" (43). Sujata was aware that her husband flirted with women, but she did not possess sufficient courage to interrogate him. When her husband had financial problems, she was advised to take up a job and later on when his condition improved she was asked to give up her job. Even Brati said that "father used you like a doormat" (81). Initially, she took injustices lying down and did not have the courage to protest.

### **Transformation from Passive to an Independent Woman**

The novel traces her transformation from a passive to an independent woman. Her husband always complained that she wanted to be independent and did not like to share the responsibilities of running the household or bringing up children. Refusing to leave her job was Sujata's second act of rebellion. Her first act of rebellion was when Brati was two and she refused to be the mother for the fifth time. She rebels for the third time after Brati's death when she shouts at her husband,

For thirty-two years, I never asked you where you spent your evenings, or who accompanied you on your tours for the last ten years or why you paid the house rent for your ex-typist. You are never to ask me a thing. Never. (94)

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Her son's death makes her discover that she is not all that submissive and meek now. Her husband's accusation that she is responsible for Brati's death accelerates the process of her recognition of her ideological moorings. She now feels relieved of the burden of guilt she has all along been bearing.

### **Do Not Remain Silent Sufferers**

The novel ends with Sujata breaking down at her daughter's engagement party, passionately exhorting the audience not to be silent sufferers, but respond actively in the face of social reality. She lashes out at the police and the brutally complacent and ignorant people of the richer, or rather, upper middle class that have lately come into being. She says:

Why don't you SPEAK? Speak, for heaven's sake, speak, speak, speak! How long will you endure it in silence? Speak!...

Let it tear down the happiness of every one cooped up in his own happy happiness.(80) Sujata's voice comes out as a universal protest against the heartless society in which we all live. From silent suffering and a sense of imprisoned guilt within, Sujata moves in the direction of issuing a clarion call to women in society to awake and arise or be forever fallen (81).

The novel is an insightful exploration of the complex relationship between the personal and political. It focuses on an individual's independent realization and 'the awakening of an apolitical mother' and is a journey of discovery for the protagonist.

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