

**Women's Quest for Autonomy and Impairing Oppressive Social  
Factors in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084***

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**Abstract**

Man is inserted in a society which depends on participation and reliance. This structures social relations that are basic components for developing self-sufficient autonomous self. Autonomy is to be managed in its relational terms. A study of the psychological trauma of three prominent characters namely Sujata, Somu's mother, Nandini in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* accentuates their sufferings out of choking oppression and their struggles to free themselves from repression for self-assurance. Mahasweta Devi's characters show diverse faces of self-governance in its social terms.

**Keywords:** Mahasweta Devi, *Mother of 1084*, Autonomy, Oppressive socialization, Episodic autonomy, Programmatic autonomy, Dynamic autonomy, Enhanced self.

The notion of autonomy is principally connected with an individual's self-governance. It is a sort of self-coordinating freedom. The idea of autonomy on a basic level is individualistic and in the male oriented society, it is trusted to be intrinsically masculinity. Lorraine Code's outline of character ideal of the autonomous man interprets individualistic nature of autonomy.

Code defines:

Autonomous man is -- and should be -- self-sufficient, independent, and self-reliant, a self-realizing individual who directs his efforts towards maximizing his personal gains. His independence is under constant threat from other (equally self-serving) individuals: hence he devises rules to protect himself from intrusion. Talk of rights, rational self-interest, expedience, and efficiency permeates his moral, social, and political discourse. In short, there has been a gradual alignment of *autonomy* with *individualism*. (qtd. in Mackenzie and Stoljar 6)

Autonomy is a fixation of European culture. Today it has become a pattern of post modernism. Post modernists view it as a kind of chimera or illusion of the enlightened subjects.

It is a sort of pride. It can be fantasized but it can neither be acknowledged nor be realized in the light of the fact that man is a social creature.

Society is structured on collaborations and associations. People are socially installed. Their identities are shaped and realized inside the setting of social relationships and developed by interrelated social institutions like race, class, gender, ethnicity, family etc., Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar in their introductory chapter 'Autonomy Refigured' of their anthology *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self*, point out, Annette Baier's view that "persons are not casually isolated from other persons; indeed, the development of persons *requires* relations of dependency with others" which substantiates the intellection that social relations are imperative constituents for shaping one's identities (7). Her notion of autonomy negates individualism.

These fundamental notions of associations and man's essential relation to society together with the postulation that women and marginalized are metaphysically, epistemologically and ethically inept for autonomy weakens the theory of absolute autonomy and give extension to social way to deal with autonomy. More specifically in the context of social and political traditions that have been adverse to women's interest and freedom and women's inculcated tendency towards socialization process and care practice undermine women's capacity for autonomy. To grasp the significant attitudes of women towards autonomy and their conception of self, it is vital to understand dependency, oppression, and subjection and their impact on the self because "it is complicit with structures of domination and subordination, in particular with the suppression of others – women, colonial subjects, blacks, minority groups – who are deemed incapable of achieving rational self- mastery" (Mackenzie and Stoljar 11).

When extreme forces like caste, gender bias, social system, cultural practices, social injustices, poverty, exploitations, and social relationships become so oppressive and excruciating; the encumbered self tries to get rid of the suffocation, claustrophobia of socialization, to breathe freely. The resultant consequence is either failure or undermining their capacity for rational mastery or enhancing their self.

Mahasweta Devi, as a humanist has wielded her artistic sovereignty in exposing familial, economic, social, and political conditions which are oppressive factors that undermine insidiously the dignity of marginalized. Her *Mother of 1084* is a story that deals with the trauma of the protagonist Sujata in the Naxalite backdrop of Calcutta of 1970. The narrative is closely interwoven with the experience of three prominent women characters such as Sujata, Somu's mother and Nandini. They belong to varying echelons of life in terms of social and economic seams.

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This paper analyses how pernicious effects of feminine socialization, poverty and social and political injustices encumber the self and their complex effects on women's capacity for autonomy. Further it draws the attention to the emotional experience of the three prominent characters under oppressive socialization and how they display different levels of understanding the society and its numbed limbs of human values, and how they exercise different skills that comprise autonomy at different situations.

Mackenzie and Stoljar, while discussing feminists' claim for refiguring the concept of autonomy, point out three interrelated ways in which oppressive socialization and social relationship can impede autonomous person. A close examination of agonies of Sujata validates Mackenzie and Stoljar's words: "The first level is that of the processes of formation of an agent's desires, beliefs, and emotional attitudes, including beliefs and attitudes about herself" (22). Sujata's awareness of victimization to oppressive socialization and cultural practices in the thirty-two years of her married life with Dibyanath inflicts her and subordination by her own children intensifies the injuries that damage her self-esteem. "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" (Devi 45). Dibyanath, an archetype of patriarchal system, expects his wife to love, to respect, and to obey him without reciprocating those attributes. The consciousness of subservience maims her too much. She is marginalized in her own family and she keeps herself alienated from others.

Friedman's integration model elucidates the oppressive socialization and its effects on autonomy. In an oppressive social context, the agent keeps a "kind of self-alienation that characterizes failures of autonomy" (Mackenzie and Stoljar 15). The total internalization of the insurmountable childhood training to be dutiful becomes an inhibiting factor to form her desires, beliefs and emotional attitudes. She adopts a kind of passive attitude towards her husband and family.

Sujata, when triggered by her son's question, "Why are you so passive, Ma?" has enunciated her silent suffering. She says, "What else can I do? I was trained to be passive about my children. Your father, grandmother . . ." (Devi 45). When everything is seemed so well, organized, orderly, neat and beautiful, she inclines to be "subservient, silent, faithful and without an existence of her own" (Devi 9). This subservience is considered to be autonomous by some critiques who view autonomy as ". . . entirely a matter of the internal, psychological condition of agents" (Westlund 28). Sujata approves willingly her own subservience and develops a sense of pride at being so dutiful and unquestioning attitude and philosophical moorings that no one has uninterrupted happiness in life.

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Sujata is not entirely submissive and un-protesting to oppressive socialization. She creates her own space to move. It assures her self-worth and dignity. Her refusals to leave her job and to become a mother for the fifth time are determinations that reflect her rebellious spirits against patriarchal system. Those determinations are within the boundary of traditional values. They neither affect her family peace nor diminish the social status of Dibyanath. Diana Meyers perceives this self-determination as programmatic autonomy that is a “. . . capacity to critically and reflectively decide major life issues such as whether or not to be a mother or whether to dedicate oneself to the pursuit of career, . . . ” (qtd. in Mackenzie and Stoljar 18).

On seventeenth January, on Brati’s birthday, Sujata is summoned to identify Brati’s dead body in the police morgue, Kantapukur. In this traumatic situation, Dibyanath’s pulling up many strings to hush up the news that his son’s scandalous death and his prime concern to his social status have shattered her numberless illusions and made her realize the meaninglessness of her subservience, her sense of pride in being so dutiful, and her enduring all the indignities. “That day, with Brati’s death, Brati’s father had also died for Sujata” (Devi 7). Her own family members become strangers to her. Estranged, Sujata cannot let her emotions drained before her family members who are silent and stunned and deeply disturbed over not at the death of Brati but over how to explain Brati’s death to the others. She confines herself within a cell of private grief. She becomes an alien in her family. Mahasweta Devi writes:

Sujata could well envisage the solitary cell that her existence would be from now on, with Dibyanath, Jyoti, Neepa, Tuli, Bini and the colleagues in the bank; all outside; and within, Brati, only Brati, but why just Brati, also Somu’s mother, Nandini, the grief of separation from everyone of them held within her. From now on she would be alone, totally alone. (Devi 79)

Before the death of Brati, Sujatha’s alienation is imposed upon her. It is a kind of stoic acceptance and impaired autonomy undermining her ability to think for herself. But after the death of Brati, her alienation is a kind of imprisonment. Like mortally wounded prey that seeks its hideout, she hides herself. It is a psychological alienation of homeless. It is a reaction of the agonized soul to her family’s inhuman behaviour which has erased even the memory of the existence of Brati.

Samik Bandyopadhyay’s statement in his introduction to his translation of *Mother of 1084* adds insight into comprehending Sujata’s inner struggle for self-assurance:

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. . . Brati's death to a fairly affluent, sensitive and enlightened mother, who had read in her son's special concern for her his understanding of her daily humiliation as a woman and her quiet, determined struggle for self-assertion and independence, which ironically gathers force and momentum from Brati's death.  
(xv)

As opined by Samik Bandyopadhyay, the suppressed self of Sujata struggles to free itself from the traditional bondage. She sets out a journey to discover the moral grounds for the brutal murder of Brati, who is demeaned to the number 1084. This turns out to be the inner journey of self-discovery that enhances her true self which is perceived as dynamic autonomy by Evelyn Fox Keller. She identifies herself with Somu's mother in her uninhibiting heartrending lamentations and identifies Brati in Nandini's ideological commitment. Her interactions with them bring her a painful revelation that she knows little about her son. Her journey becomes complete when she discovers materialization of her silent protest against her family in Brati's revolt against the corrupt society at larger level. B. Gopal and S. Ananda Babu aptly states that "she feels satisfied when she finds in his revolt a parallel to her silent protest against her own corrupt household" (172).

Significant influence of Nandini's ideological commitment and analytical outlook on Sujata and her identification of Brati in Nandini fortify her authentic self enough to cut and turn over the eternally trained subservience. A deep insight into Sujata's hysterical shouts at Dibyanath authenticates Diana Meyers's argument, as discussed by Mackenzie and Stoljar in their anthology: ". . . agents subject to oppressive socialization may exhibit high degrees of episodic autonomy, that is, the capacity to decide what one wants in weighing up one's desires or how to act in a particular situation" (18). For instance, Sujata challenges Dibyanath and speaks cuttingly, when he chides her for her late return, with her menacing voice. She threatens, "If . . . you . . . don't leave . . . this room . . . at once, I'll . . . leave . . . this house . . . and never come back again" (Devi 93). This audacity, for the first time on the part of Sujata is a kind of clout on his face. Earlier she has never pronounced such admonishing words to him. When Dibyanath utters, "Don't I have the right to ask you where you've been all day?" (Devi 93). Her point-blank answer 'no' tends to be her determined denial of his right to question her.

Verbalization of her long suppressed silent questions to him and her strong commanding words "Yes, why not? Why not today? Get out." (Devi 93) are instances of establishing the validity of Diana Meyers's argument that oppressed self may display 'high degrees of episodic autonomy'. Her words, "Yes, get out", "hit him like a whiplash". Dibyanath gets out tamely, "wiping the nape of his neck" (93) with defeated male egoism.

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There is an inner conflict between her desire to act as her heart dictates and oppressive socialization, sticking to her duty. “Her nerves, veins, heart, blood” screams, “No-no-no!” (Devi 102) to fulfil her obligation. Remembering Brati’s question, “Ma, how can you go on doing your duty?” (103) and the normalcy of the party with all its corrupt behaviour try her inner strength and mental stability. Tuli’s arrogant call to welcome the special guest Saroj Pal, DCDD and his words “I’m on duty . . . I’m in a rush” (Devi 125) make her relive the past and imagine Brati running to escape. She falls down with a loud and poignant cry “Brati . . . that smelt of blood, protest, grief” (127). The soul becomes liberated with an unfulfilled autonomous desire of leaving her home and living alone but with the satisfaction of her protest against Dibyanath and her family as Brati wished.

A careful study of the competencies of Somu’s mother, a sans moniker, for exercising autonomy endorses Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar’s opinion that oppressive social context affects “. . . the development of competencies and capacities necessary for autonomy, including capacities for self-reflection, self-direction, and self-knowledge” (22). The notion that every individual is “psychically internally differentiated and socially differentiated from others” (21) attests the truth that individual difference in developing capacity for autonomy. The capacity for autonomy is compatible with the psychological condition of an individual in differentiated social context. The conception of the self is conditioned in the social context. When the social context is so oppressive, the capacity for autonomy is nevertheless impaired.

Acute oppressive forces like poverty, the loss of the only hope, that is the death of Somu, caused by political atrocities and consequent death of her husband asphyxiate Somu’s mother. Her struggle for survival becomes her major concern that blocks her developing capacity for autonomy. Her concrete words “A woman’s life is like a tortoise’s. She’ll find peace only if she dies” (Devi 56) depict not only the unbearable throes of woman’s suffering but also represent the universal sufferings of dispossessed. The image of tortoise’s life illustrates the life of marginalized. As tortoise tugs its legs inside the shell, the oppressive socialization, exploitations, political and social injustice make them shrink. They are primarily engulfed in their struggle for survival that stymies their developing skills for autonomy. They accept uncritically their sufferings as their destiny, though consciousness of their oppression hurts them.

Somu’s mother’s intellectual capacity doesn’t allow her to understand the Naxalite movement and its impact on youth apart from what Somu is doing is not any evil. But the ghastly murder of Somu that paralyses her heart makes her think and discern the injustice that exists in the society. She senses the political oppression, social injustice, the power of money that can hush up things and the class difference. Sujata realizes that “. . . Somu’s mother, with her little learning, her limited intelligence and her inability to put her ideas into words, thought the same

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thoughts as she with all her learning, clarity of vision and competence in articulating ideas” (Devi 53-54). Her voicing against the murder of Somu, is nothing but crying aloud the thoughts that cause her so much pain. Her questions are not for justice; rather it is an appeal for mercy from the ruthless society:

. . . Why did they have to kill them, Didi? They could have maimed them but let them live! At least I would have known my Somu was alive! . . . He could have lived far from my sight. They could have kept him in prison. Still, at least I’d have known that he lived! Tell me why I’ve been punished like this!” (Devi 54)

Pernicious oppression forces Sujata to change her attitude. She enhances and establishes her true self. On the other hand, poverty deprives Somu’s mother of her capacity for autonomy. Abraham Harold Maslow, an American psychologist, in his hierarchy of needs, points out that physiological and safety needs are to be fulfilled to move towards the pursuit of intrinsic satisfaction on a higher order. Somu’s mother struggles to meet the physiological needs and intensely suffers from political violence. Certainly, she is unlikely to move intrinsically towards self-realisation and to develop competencies for autonomy. Rather, she moves to Abraham Maslow’s third need of love and belongingness and develops a competency for connection and interdependence. Virginia Held’s account of the notion of the self is very much apt to understand the possible ability of Somu’s mother:

The self . . . is seen as having both a need for recognition and a need to understand the other, and these needs are seen as compatible. They are created in the context of mother-child interaction and are satisfied in mutually empathetic relationship . . . Both give and take in a way that not only contributes to the satisfaction of their needs as individuals but also affirms the ‘larger relational unit’ they compose. Maintaining this larger relational unit then becomes a goal, and maturity is seen not in terms of individual autonomy but in terms of competence in creating and sustaining relations of empathy and mutual intersubjectivity. (qtd. in Mackenzie and Stoljar 9)

The need for recognition and understanding brings Sujata and Somu’s mother together and each contributes to their satisfied empathetic relationship. Somu’s mother finds peace in sharing her thoughts with Sujata. Sujata shares her precious grief that Brati was dead on his birthday. “What’s there to be grateful for! Those who suffer understand suffering” (Devi 69). These words shed light upon Somu’s mother’s caring response to Sujata’s gratitude and her ability to create and sustain relations of empathy.

Mackenzie and Stoljar in their discussion on Autonomy Competency refer Diana Meyer's argument which provides an insight into our understanding of Nandini's strong authentic self:

Autonomy is a competency comprising a cluster of different skills and capacities, in particular skills of self discovery, self-direction and self-definition, all of which involve reflection. Autonomy involves the capacity to exercise these skills to achieve an integrated but dynamic self. (17)

Nandini is a dynamic revolutionary with a strong integrated self. Her loyalty to the revolutionary Naxalite ideology is to bring in a new age. "To be self-governing" is, Jean Keller says,

. . . a person must first develop the capacity to reflect critically on one's reasons for action; that is, to question why one is acting in a particular manner and to assess whether it is really in accordance with one's actual beliefs, values, or desires. Then one must be able to act in accordance with one's actual beliefs, values, or desires. Then one must be able to act in accordance with the outcome of one's deliberations. (156)

In Keller's sense, she is a woman of self-governance. She critically reflects upon society and its norms, social relationship and its obligations and corrupted society and its complacency. Her competency to assess her own desires, values, beliefs etc. makes her to have strong commitment to the Naxalite ideology.

Nandini's analytical skill proves that she is free from self-deception. She anatomizes her own confidence and failures as:

When I didn't know of the betrayal, I had tremendous self-confidence. But that confidence was unfounded. Still, when I started doubting, when I thought and thought over the facts, I began to feel much more sure. Now I know where I stand. . . .how naively we had assumed that an era was coming to an end. You are bringing in a new age. Brati and I . . . Felt loyal to all and everything. I'll never feel the same way again. It will never come back. Total loss. An era is really over for good. The person I was then is dead. (Devi 76-77)

She deduces that their program for a new age is defeated by the program of betrayal. Her interrogative expressions show the various forms of betrayal that prevails in the society:

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How else can one explain the walls raised higher around the prisons, the watchtowers? Why doesn't a single person raise his voice when thousands of young men are still rotting in the prisons? And when they do, they keep the interests of their own political party in mind? How is it that we who would like to carry on, cannot print a single bulletin? Why are we denied the simple facilities of a printing press and newsprint, while innumerable journals come out, continue to come out, and one hears that they are all sympathetic to the cause? Betrayal. (Devi 78)

Nandini's commitment to her ideology is suppressed and thereby to act on autonomous desires, which are more for the society than for herself, is restricted by the scheme of betrayal – betrayal by the media, betrayal by her own fellow friend, betrayal by her own society, betrayal by the politicians, and betrayal by the legal power. Here, it is apt to remember the words of Mackenzie and Stoljar:

The third level is that of an agent's ability to act on autonomous desires or to make autonomous choices. Autonomy can be impeded at this level not just by overt restrictions on agents' freedom but also by social norms, institutions, practices, and relationships that effectively limit the range of *significant* options available to them" (22).

For her, betrayal and frightening normalcy of society become so harrowing, she desperately feels incompetent, disturbed, and confused. She verbalizes her dejections as "everything seems so strange, so unreal. I can't identify with anything. My experiences over the last few years have made me unfit for this so-called normalcy. All that you people find normal, I find abnormal" (Devi 87). But in spite of all these oppressive elements -- defeat, loss, incarceration, physical pain, torture -- her spirit for revolutionary ideals is neither bowed nor bent. Her spirit of resilience finds expression in her words, "You might here that they have arrested me again. Who knows" (87).

Autonomy is considered as exercising a range of skills like self-discovery, self-direction, self-determination etc. Under oppressive social context, the skills may be either forced or encouraged to be developed and coordinated. Exercising these skills depends on the psychological condition and the self-conception of the self of an individual, embedded in differentiated social context, and then it is a matter of degree. While Nandini exhibits higher degree of autonomy in certain domains, Sujata displays only narrowly programmatic and episodic autonomy and Somu's mother who is in the lowest strata of society, stands in the stage of recognition and understanding and creating and sustaining empathetic relationship. Through

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the analysis of the three female characters that belong to various classes in the society in *Mother of 1084*, it can be presumed that the relational autonomy is viable while absolute autonomy is challenging.

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