

Water as a Literary Device in Mahasweta Devi's
Mother of 1084 and Water

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Abstract

Food, clothing and shelter are the basic needs of any human being. Among these, food is vital. Water is looked upon as a great source of food when there is no solid food around the corner. Literature has been reflecting society and life from time immemorial wherein writers adopt literary devices to enrich the force, style and understanding of their writings. As anything under the sky turns into a literary device, water has also been used as a device so effectively in writing.

The present paper aims at exploring how water has been successfully handled as a literary device by Mahasweta Devi in two of her plays "Mother of 1084" and "Water". In "Mother of 1084" water travels as a psychological reflection of the protagonist. Though the device is used in a few situations, it stresses significant mental state.

In "Water" obviously the literary device plays a prominent role. In fact, the river Chasra is a metaphor of the doms themselves. As the river remains calm except during the monsoon, the doms seem still. Just like the monsoon rains trigger Chasra's force making her break the boundaries that contain her, the doms dare to knock down the injustice done to them after receiving hope from a selfless, generous and genuine guide.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, *Mother of 1084*, *Water*, Psychological reflection, water as substitute, survival value, metaphor, psychological transformation.

Mahasweta Devi, the veteran Bengali writer and political activist, had been ingrafting precious stones to the crown of Indian literature. She was born in 1926 at Dhaka. More than a writer, she had been an activist all through her career. Her struggle was for the rights and uplift of the marginalized tribes with whom she spent a considerable period of her life. In her writings she recorded the life of the marginalized in its naked reality. She wanted to document her own time as a professional writer. She transformed her novel *Mother of 1084* and four other short stories into dramas in order to reach the illiterate audience. Her five plays have reached the minds of her readers as well as audiences in an efficient manner as she has skillfully handled dramatic techniques.

Professional writers differ from the ordinary ones as they know the nuances of reaching their readers. Writers of literature excel in handling the literary devices and techniques in their writings. Mahasweta Devi is no exception for it. In her dramas she has used literary devices that enrich the understanding and realization of her works. This paper expands the idea of water being used as a literary device excellently in two of her plays *Mother of 1084* and *Water*.

Mother of 1084 deals with an upper-class family whereas *Water* is in complete contrast to it. In *Water* the readers find the lower-class doms who find it difficult even to quench their thirst. There is water in both the plays and the mention of it finds its relevance in its own way.

Sujata, being an upper-class mother, is not rich in happiness. Her mental agony finds its expression every now and then throughout the play. Devi has excellently brought in water to express the pain both physical and mental that Sujata experiences. While speaking with her daughter Tuli, Sujata tells that she has had a tablet to soothe her pain in the morning. Obviously, water has also been taken along with the tablet. Hera starts water's journey with Sujata's psyche. Except a few cases, whenever there is a mention of water in the play, there is Sujata's expression of her wounded mind and pain. In another case, having realized that she will not meet Somu's mother anymore, Sujata is seen in utter melancholy. The stage direction expresses her state: "*The curtain is still down when Sujata's voice, sad and exhausted, is heard on the tape (24).*" At such a psychological torment, she meets Nandini, Brati's ladylove. After a while of silence, Sujata is seen taking a Baralgan tablet and a sip of water which again symbolizes the mental agony along with her physical pain. More than her aching body, it is her aching mind that seeks to find solace somewhere.

The final scene of the play deserves a special place, as one can find Sujata's outpouring of her thoughts for one last time. Again there is a reference for "ice water" and "cold bath". It is Tuli's engagement and everyone is in celebration mood. For Sujata, it is just a day of Brati's birth and death. She speaks to herself that she had been with Brati the whole of the day. Though she wants to be a dutiful mother for all her children, the similarities she finds between herself and Brati, forbid her from becoming one with the celebrations that are taking place around her. She is found immersed in Brati's memories. The reflection of Sujata's aching body and mind is expressed in the following lines:

The Kapadias move over Dibyanath and Dhiman. Bini comes to Sujata with a glass of water.

BINI. Must be paining a lot, Mother?

SUJATA (with a strained smile). No.

BINI. I noticed you were drinking ice water, you had a cold bath.

Sujata holds the tumbler to her chest and shuts her eyes.

SUJATA (voice on tape). Brati's fingers, his eyelids, how cold they are to the touch. Nothing can be colder. I was with Brati the whole day (37).

Again, the reference to water, insinuates a sense of Sujata's psychological state, thus traveling with her as her psychological reflection.

A huge difference is found between the use of water in *Mother of 1084* and *Water*. In Sujata's case it is a submissive force that reflects her inner self every now and then whereas in the case of *Water*, the device is portrayed as an obstinate force that symbolizes the doms themselves.

Chasra village is a dwelling place for both the doms and the upper-casts. Santosh is the village's head, who happens to be a representative of a domineering community. He is entrusted for the distribution of government's relief materials to the really affected victims. But he does not perform his duty as the head of the village. Rather he hoards and sells the relief materials and adds wealth to his own family while the people of another community starve. As drought is a routine in the village, the government regularly sends relief materials to the inhabitants. Apart from the relief fund and materials, the government also devotes fund for the public well as the doms do not have drinking water. Public wells are dug for use of the public in general. But in Chasra the public wells are for the personal use of Santosh and his people. Even when the doms demand their relief materials, he does not provide them any. He steals the relief materials, the supplies for the government school and above all water which is a life-saving precious thing the doms need. The pathetic thing is that it is Maghai who divines water for the wells to be dug but his own community is denied using water from the wells. As there is no possibility to fetch water in the public wells, the doms scratched at the sands of the river Chasra for a cupful of water.

Unable to fight for their rights the doms try to find alterations in order to fulfill their needs and quench their thirst. For the doms water is the very supplement of food as they do not have food to fill their stomach. They have never had a full stomach. Drought snatches away the yield of their land on one side and on the other Santosh snatches away every available relief material and even water, leaving them deserted. As a result, the destitute find their refuge at the banks of the river Chasra, scratching the sands with their hands in the night to get some water, which is their primary food. Maghai, who is the very source of water for the entire village, is fated to leave his people starve without sufficient water.

E. Sathyanarayana says, "... Maghai, though alive to pains of the abject poverty and oppression, never tries to rebel against the society. Rather, he firmly believes that he is fated to starve." (*The Plays of Mahasweta Devi A Critical Study*) (111)

The doms of Chasra know the value of water's survival value, yet they are unaware of the possibility of getting water until a selfless and generous leader opens their intellectual eyes to build a dam across the river in order to save water for themselves. When Maghai is

carried by Dhura and others after a heavy work and argument in Santosh's land, he is offered water to keep his spirit alive. Also, the people who helped in carrying Maghai, are provided water which is more valuable than food for them. Though their struggle is for the relief materials, their main demand and struggle is for water.

Another important thing to notice is that water is a metaphor of the doms. There are many similarities between the doms and the river Chasra. As the river is away from the mainstream people, the doms are away from them. Chasra remains calm all through the entire year being content within its banks. In the same manner the doms remain calm whatever happens. Even when Santosh openly pretends that he did not receive any large relief materials from the government, they remain still; when they are denied to fetch water in the public wells on the ground of their untouchable fate, they remain calm; when they are threatened to be branded as naxals, they remain calm. The monsoon rains give Chasra enormous power that she finds it unable to stay within her banks. She overflows and comes out of her suppressing borders. Likewise, Jiten, the village school teacher, like the monsoon rains, enlighten the doms on the possibilities of a dam that could be built across the river. Like the river overflows its banks, the doms are overjoyed on hearing the possibility of a dam which could hold the water that can be used all through the year. Forgetting the threats of Santosh against building the dam, they act with superhuman power and build the dam. They become relentless and brave humans like the Chasra during the monsoon.

Thus, Mahasweta Devi presents the image of water in two different extremes effectively. The painful psychological condition of the upper-class mother is expressed efficiently by giving reference to the presence of water during her realization of her mental agony. In the same way the psychological transformation of the doms is expressed through the gushing Chasra especially during the monsoon rains.

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