CHAPTER TWO

BETWEEN HOME AND EXILE IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S 
*MOTHER OF 1084*

Chandra Talpade Mohanty remarks in *Feminism Without Borders*:

The early history of the emergence of women’s struggles in India thus encapsulates tensions between progressive and conservative ideas and actions. No contradictory or pure feminism is possible. In India, the middle class women’s movement essentially attempted to modernize earlier patriarchal regulation of women and pave the way for middle class women to enter the professions and participate in political movements. (63)

An attempt is being made by Mohanty and many other feminists to stress not just the differences between the western and the nonwestern women but to further destabilize the notions of homogeneity within the Indian women.

The historical specificity and the cultural diversity that informs the lives of women within the third world makes the possibility of universalist arguments purely gestural and imposes what Bhabha calls the ‘myths of the nation’. Homi K. Bhabha remarks in *Nation and Narration*:

We live in a world obsessed with national pride and rampant with boundary wars, with nationalism on the banner of countless parties, no matter how conflicting their place or destination. At the same time we study literature in a discipline with roots in a philological tradition first formulated with the idea of nations in mind, in the very period when the modern nation states were first being formed. The interplay of these factors is everywhere behind contemporary criticism but rarely expressed openly. (44)
Clearly then all the distinctions within a nation are obscured so that any kind of arbitrariness cannot be questioned. Unfortunately, it is also in the Third world Fiction that the term has been most extensively used. The nation is precisely what Foucault calls a discursive formation – not simply an allegory or an imaginative vision, but a gestative political structure which the Third world artist is consciously building or suffering a lack of. Julia Kristeva also speaks of nation as a symbolic denominator, a powerful repository of cultural knowledge that erases the rationalist and progressivist logics of ‘canonical’ nation.

Consequently there is a need felt for the urgency and necessity to rethink this kind of framework that answers Third world women as a simple, monolithic category. As a result the very concept of homogenous national cultures, consensual transmission of historical traditions and organic communities are in a profound state of redefinition.

The wider significance of suggesting an alternative framework that exposes the heterogeneity among women, hardly needs to be stated. After all the epistemological limits of ethnocentric ideas are also the suggestion of other dissonant as well as dissident histories and voices.

The text in question here, Mahasweta Devi’s Mother of 1084 is an articulation precisely of such dissident voices. The text originally written in Bengali is a text in translation. However before the text can be studied as yet another evidence of heterogeneity immanent within the Indian women writers, it is important that one turns attention to the aspect of translation and its implications on the search for home and identity.

A translator seeks to transport words from one language to the other. In the process of accomplishing the same, says Anuradha Dingwaney in Between Languages and Cultures:

The translator cannot search merely for equivalent words in the ‘target’ language to render the meaning of the ‘source’. Rather the
translator must attend to the contexts ("a world, a culture") from which these words arise and which they necessarily evoke and express. Thus it seems entirely appropriate that translation theory and practice has in recent years, turned to both ‘source’ and ‘target’ cultures as something to be studied before the translation of a word cannot proceed. (3)

In translating work in cosmopolitan languages, from what is supposed to be the third world, this fact acquires even greater significance. Therefore before one looks into the translation of languages, it is imperative that one focuses on the translation of cultures. After all, translation is not just the case of language transfers; it also facilitates the transfer of third world cultures.

The process entails the potential dangers of an arbitrary attempt to make another culture comprehensible. Often alien cultural forms or concepts are translated but it is desirable that the translator uses metaphors that are appropriate. Translation, is an effect, an exercise in cultural anthropology. However, it is not to say that translation is a form of violence and that it should be scuttled. In fact it is one of the primary means through which cultures travel. It is therefore both important and necessary.

Walter Benjamin in his The Task of the Translator points out the path that the translator should adopt. He says:

Our translations even the best ones, proceed from the wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek and other languages into English. Our translators have far greater reverence for their language than for the spirit of the foreign languages...the basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. (72-73)
Accordingly there can either be the reduction of a foreign text to target language cultural values or a pressure on the target language to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text. The latter condition is eminently desirable for successful translation between and across cultures to take place.

The task of the translator becomes even more challenging when it deals with the writings of women. Attention has been drawn to the fact that language is not just a tool for communication but also a manipulative tool. Scholars have posed many questions that seek to answer women’s use of language and its differences from men’s. Accordingly two different approaches were developed about women and their relation to language.

According to Louise Von Flotow in *Translation and Gender*:

There were two different approaches to questions about women and language, they could be broadly viewed as reformist and radical. The reformist approach was to view conventional language as a symptom of the society that spawned it, accepting it as a conceivably reform able, if good intentions prevailed. the radical approach was to view conventional language as an important cause of women’s oppression….in the radical approach , women located themselves in the role of the individual that is excluded, insulted or trivialized by conventional patriarchal language.(9)

Creative work further stretched the bounds of language. Writers began to refer back to hundreds of precursors which both supplemented and supplanted the standard works and helped create women-identified language .Such experiments that continue even today and that too, on a much larger scale not only seek to dismantle the power invested in patriarchal language but also describe and develop ideas about women’s utopias somewhere beyond the pernicious influence of patriarchal structure and language institutions.
But there is a major problem with all such writings. How does one read a language that on one hand, according to the radical view is a medium of oppression and on the other tries to be innovative in its own structures and forms.

 Particularly the proliferation of experiments on a global scale and cooperative ventures between European and Anglo-American Feminists, commentaries on third world feminism by western feminists etc have rendered the discussion of women’s language even more diverse. The picture gets even more complicated when translation enters into the arena of women’s writing.

 However, a lot of such experimental feminist writing and its translation has not escaped the charges of elitism. ‘Opportunism’, ‘hypocrisy’ and terms like ‘theoretical incoherence has been used by Brazilian critic Rosemary Arrop to feminist activism and interventionism in translation.

 But returning to Indian women writing, the most scathing critique of feminist work translation comes from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, of Bengali origin. She is a literary theorist and practicing translator of third world writing. In The Politics of Translation, Spivak formulates extensive criticism of ‘with it translationese’ used for third world literature and the ideology that makes possible such careless, homogenizing work.

 Spivak confesses in The Other Worlds that there is “a ravenous hunger for third world literary texts (by women) in English translation”.(253) The hunger has been triggered by benevolent liberal feminist interests as well as by the vague desire to homogenize the third world women. The situation is made worse by the fact that such Anglo American feminists seem to wish to describe third world women writing as a realistic description of life while literature of the first world seems to have graduated into “language games”.

 Spivak lashes out at the “old colonial attitude {that} is at work in the translation market.”(87) The translators, it has been said, “know little about the history of the language or the history of the author. Such translators hardly engage
with the rhetoricity of the original. In effect, these translations, construct a third world as well as third world literature that corresponds to western tastes they provide a facile way of being democratic with the minorities.”

Painstaking labor and research are necessary for a translator to become intimately familiar with ‘source’ language and culture in order to identify and respect the rhetoricity of their writings. The effects of colonialism often cause these translators to exoticize or denigrate third world literature.

Another problem with such translations lies in the fear that the translators make an assumption about women’s solidarity. Therefore it is not easy for any privileged western feminism to give voice to or otherwise represent women they deem oppressed in third world societies. In fact the attendant difference of political affiliations, ethnic backgrounds, religious beliefs, racial and economic differences are important enough to blur the understanding of these myopic critics.

However the context of the present text is different for the simple reason that this particular translation has been done by an Indian/ non-western translator known to the author and thus aware of the cultural backdrop of the source language. But such a translation poses its own challenges.

Translating from an Indian language into English leads one into an unusual position. The dilemma has been expressed by Sujit Mukherjee in his essay “The Craft Not Sullen Art of Translation in Translation” in Text and Theory. He says:

The unusual position in most literary cultures of the world is to translate into one’s first language a work from some other language one understands at a literary level. We have, for about one hundred years or more reversed the process in one area. (30)
By aspiring to translate Indian literary works in English a translator takes on a grave responsibility. Some even say that there is a measure of hegemony involved there. Even after more than half a century of conscious decolonization, the English language continues to hold such a spell that those who translate literary works into English somehow convince themselves that they are doing a favor to the Indian language writer by presenting him or her through translation to a wider world. However, a more important issue here is the impact multilingual culture has on translation. Normally any Indian translator will grow up within several languages. None of these languages retain its purity in this complex process of use, misuse, abuse and hybridization that they are subject to.

Therefore unlike the attempts of western feminists/theorists to homogenize all third world literature and language, one has to take into cognizance the multilingual character of our society and the ways in which this multilingualism impinges on our existence. It is necessary to recognize that the source language-target language equation or the author-text-receiver = translator-text-receiver becomes even more complicated in a multi-lingual situation. Aijaz Ahmed too has pointed out that the entire history of Indian reformism revolves around competence in one or two Indian languages but never any reflection of English for virtually all of them wanted it. Obviously then there is a counterpoint to the whole situation.

As Joseph Chandra Bagal has stated in the introductory remarks to his magisterial survey of the nineteenth century Bengali translation literature in My Translation. He remarks:

It is true that no literature can reach fullness without the help of translation...a hundred and fifty years ago intellectualists paid attention to the development to this particular aspect of Bangla literature. The history of the development/shaping of Bangla prose literature is, in fact, the history of this translation literature. (5)
The translation of an Indian text by an Indian translator of the same cultural milieu to a certain extent avoids the dangers of colonization or power dynamics being enacted, yet he/she as a post-colonial narrator must attempt to deconstruct essentialist master narrative and make an attempt to expose the myths of nationalism- secularism, tradition, nationhood etc that suppresses heterogeneity in a country such as India that is by nature Multi-cultural and multi-lingual. As Homi.K. Bhabha, using the model of literary criticism maintains that when nationalism takes over, it represses the ideological and discursive construction of difference.

In the context of the present text, Mother of 1084, by Mahasweta Devi, that has been translated by Samik Bandhopadhyay. Apart from meeting the above said challenges this translation entails two other challenges. One, the problem posed by the fact that the text in question has been authored by a woman and therefore, its translator is weighed down by the added responsibility of capturing the woman’s language as originally evoked in the ‘source’ language. Two, it deals with a politico-historical movement in India. The act of remembering however as Bhabha has stated is “never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. On the contrary it is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.” However, Samik Bandhopadhyay seems to have accomplished both these tasks with effortless ease.

Mahasweta Devi wrote the first version of Hazar Churasir Mat(Mother of 1084) in 1973.the book has in its backdrop the Naxalite movement( a movement of the youth in West Bengal and surrounding areas for the resurrection of a system and society that would be fair and just). The uprisings, from time to time, led to ‘encounters’ or ‘clashes’ that used to leave several dead. The massive repression often took its toll and scared away a lot of these urban student radicals, ultimately exposing the movement in many acts of betrayal.
Mother of 1084 is the story of one such act of betrayal that leaves Sujata’s son dead, it is the story of a mother’s grief over her son’s death, it is the story of a wife’s mistreatment by her husband, it is the story of a “society that gave the dead a right to live and denied it to the living.”(116), it is the story of the young of the society who as a result “developed a burning faith in the faithlessness of everything that spelt establishment.”(76) and it is the story of many questions that preceded and succeeded Brati’s death.

But above everything else, it is a narrative about a woman’s search for an explanation of the death of her son. Seeking an answer to this and many other questions, Sujata gets to take a closer look at the society and finds the entire social system cadaverous. It is in response to this awareness that Sujata steps out of her ‘home’ and evolves a new selfhood and identity for herself.

Unlike Nisha in Manju Kapur’s Home whose sense of self and identity are defined largely within the constraints of her ‘seeming’ home, Sujata’s longing for the same is consummated outside her own home. Fatima Chowdhry in her article titled “Mahsweta Devi: A Living Inspiration” in South Asian Women’s Forum says:

In her book, Hazar Churashir Ma(Mother of 1084), Mahasweta Devi brings a sense of understanding and rationality to one of Bengal’s most turbulent times through her protagonist Sujata Chaterjee, a traditional, passive, upper, middle class woman devastated by the death of her favorite son Brati. In order to cope with her loss, Sujata tries to understand Brati’s political ideology and commitment to the Naxalbari movement that led to his ultimate demise. But what began as a journey to find rationality to a tragedy ends as a self discovery of a woman. (March 7, 2005)

More importantly, Kapur’s narrative disassembles the concept precisely in the domestic sphere, whereas with Mahasweta Devi, the narrative allows
simultaneously for an evocation of home at all levels ranging from the domestic to the social to the political.

The narrative however begins with the exposure of the morality of a family. The patriarch, Dibyanath is a cruel and ruthless dictator who has neither love nor respect for his wife and instead has an alleged affair with his typist, whose rent he reportedly pays. The only time when he enquires after the health of Sujata is when he wants her to bear another child. “Sujata knew Dibyanath only too well. When Dibyanath showed concern about her health, it could have only one meaning.”(3)

Sujata, the wife of Dibyanath and the mother of Neepa, Tuli, Jyoti and Brati suffers the violation until Brati dies and Dibyanath responds to the incident by using his contacts, to completely wipe out Brati’s existence. “Dibyanath had succeeded in his mission, his string pulling. The next day the newspaper reported the deaths of four young men. Their names were reported. Brati was not mentioned in any of the reports. That was how Dibyanath had wiped Brati away. But Sujata had never been able to do that.”(8)

While Sujata welters in her own ‘pain’, the husband is busy in his ‘illegitimate’ affairs. But like a dutiful wife and mother, she continues to serve her family though with Brati’s death, Sujata ceases to be what she had always been, “subservient, silent, faithful and without an existence of her own.”(9)

Sujata’s husband as also the other good citizens in the home, her other children respond with both indifference and contempt to Brati’s death. Dibyanath himself uses many things to ‘hush up the news that his son had died such a scandalous death.’(7). Following years of subservience and submission, Sujata is stunned at such venomous display of apathy by Dibyanath. “That day with Brati’s death, Brati’s father had also died for Sujata. The way he had behaved that day, that moment, had shattered numberless illusions for her. It had burst upon her with explosive force. Like one of those massive meteors crashing upon the ancient
world billions of years ago. Like one of those explosions that broke up the solid mass of the earth into continents separated by the oceans.”(8)

The pain that these events leave behind takes Sujata out of her home to let her meet and interact with others lying beyond. She makes a few visits to Somu’s place (a compatriot of Brati who too had died in the same encounter) and sees a world beyond her own ‘class’, a world stricken by poverty. Ironically she is more at ‘home’ with these poor people in her few moments of ‘exile’. She also meets Nandini (Brati’s love interest) and sees a world beyond her own ‘self’ defined solely by her family and domestic interests. Had Sujata ever spared a thought for life that existed beyond her own ‘home’.

“No Sujata had not. Sujata had not pledged her loyalty to the smile of a stranger on the street, to the snatch of a tune floating in the air, to red roses, to the bright street lights, to the hanging festoons across the streets. Where had Sujata pledged her faith? To which things.? (78)

But even as Sujata wanders in search of her dead son, she realizes that these moments of exile must end somewhere and eventually she must return ‘home’. “Sujata would never visit Nandini again, nor would she go to Somu’s mother. Where would she go then, searching for Brati? Or would she to, stop, searching for her some day.”(104)

With questions still unanswered, Sujata eventually returns home at last and then makes one final desperate effort to accept its norms and adjust to it. The sheer weight of leaving the ‘exile’ with a self at ‘home’ for a ‘home’ with a self in ‘exile’ leads to the final collapse. The narrative ends not very differently from how it had begun. ‘Pain’ is what ties the beginning to the end.

From the beginning where “Sujata’s face twisted with pain again and again, she clasped her teeth on her lips to check the cry”(1), to the end where “Sujata’s long drawn out, heart rending poignant cry burst, exploded like a massive question.”(127)...pain and cries are what define Sujata’s life.
Both the beginning and the ending make it abundantly clear that the author despite the political/ historical backdrop does not intend to give any historical account of the Naxalite movement. While in her later works, Mahasweta Devi may have explored the politics and passions of revolts, in this text she seems to have a more limited objective.

However at the same time, she evokes and recreates even in Mother of 1084 the killings of the Naxalites as also the memories of those horrible days and those who had lived through the days of violence in simulated insularity. The historical backdrop therefore cannot be denied to the narrative. In that case two such tensions- political and historical are crucial determinants of the text- for it is from here that a strategy of subversion emerges. As already stated, historical and political facts in the narrative are not an end in themselves but simply a means of depicting social processes operating upon the subject.

Politicians, Police Force and their ruthless power are depicted at many junctures of the narrative. The agents of social system that are supposed to be its preservers ironically become its destroyers. It is this dialectical hinge between the birth and the death of the subject that Mahasweta Devi evokes in the narrative. She negotiates her goals in the narrative through an interesting acknowledgement of differential notions.

The death of Brati is the birth of Sujata’s grief and pain, the birth of political power is the death of the young, the birth of betrayal is the death of the entire movement, the death of the young people is the birth of poetry for the likes of Dhiman Roy.

Literally too, the two worlds i.e. ‘birth’ and ‘death’ have been repeated copiously in the narrative. Between the two signs and their signification, there emerges a map of reading that embarrasses the seeming righteousness of a family, government and the society.
The agony of the author upon seeing these dispatches of hypocrisy is rendered when she says “One could kill and go unpunished for the killers were extremely cunning. Can any society be in a more terrifying situation? Why is there no one to identify those who initiated the killers into killing the youth? How could they go unscathed? Why does it all still remain so baffling?” (19) Unfortunately, even when the young protest, the voices of dissent remain individual and sporadic and collective dissension is calculatingly repressed by those at the centre of power.

The discovery of this narrative then is at once a moment of originality even though it takes recourse to history. But what makes it remarkable is that the book goes beyond its own immediate vision. Often narratives that are a historical act of enunciation and carry a political intent are lost, a few years later. But this book by turning a conflictual political moment in the History of an Indian state into a constitutive discourse on a myriad issue has become an important text in the discursive transfiguration of text and context.

If one talks about history, that cannot be without addressing the issue of temporality in the narrative. In fact at a deeper level, time is more properly historicality. But very often the same is ignored. According to Paul Ricoeur in Time and Narrative:

The structural reciprocity of temporality and narrativity is usually overlooked because on the one hand, the epistemology of history and literary criticism of fictional narratives take for granted that many narratives take place within an uncriticized temporal framework. (169-76)

It historicality be seen in terms of the emphasis placed on the weight of the past, and even more in terms of the power of recovering the connection between birth and death, then traces of it are found in the narrative and gets linked to temporality in the plural unity of future, past and present.
In the narrative too, though it is just a description of daylong enlightenment two years after Brati’s death, yet even through that one day divided into ‘Morning’, ‘Afternoon’, ‘Late Afternoon’ and ‘Evening’, the past is effectively and vividly reconstructed. Everything else is also placed in the neatly structured grid of time, defined so elaborately in so many different ways, from the series of references to dates and specific moments in time and an extremely precise amounting for time lags/ intervals and time sequence particularly in the first few pages. (“a morning twenty years ago”, “the pain had come at eight in the evening”, “Jyoti was ten at that time, Neepa eight, Tuli six” etc.)

Also there is the time locus of the chapters which are set in the morning, the afternoon, the late afternoon and the evening respectively. Most importantly, the concept of time is not limited to simply the evocation of such features as mentioned but there is in the narrative, a more important movement from time to timelessness, or a point in time extended to future history, “But time past is time lost. Time is a ruthless killer, as cruel as destiny. Time is the river Ganga with grief for its banks. The tide of time carries alluvium in to cover up grief. And then fresh sprouts of greenery break through, reaching figures to the sky, young shoots of pain and joy and ecstasy.”(77)

Not only are these references to time in future, there is also in the narrative a curious mix of Heideggerian concept of within-time-ness where time can be gained or lost to almost Beckettian concept of timelessness.

The representation of self and identity in this text take place not through just one framework but many. If there is the narrative of history, there is also the narrative of class difference, there is also the narrative of desire and dreams, there is also the narrative of time and timelessness.

Moving beyond history and time, the narrative also reveals capitalism as that ‘great unfinished story’ which further oppresses women and alters their ‘self’ and ‘identity’. The narrative successfully chronicles the struggles of poor
women like Somu’s mother in a class ridden society as also the commonality and differences amongst women based on an understanding of shared location and needs.

In fact not just women’s lives but even the Naxalite movement and the other kinds of protests spoken of in the narrative owe their origin to the triumphal rise of capitalism in the global arena. But interestingly the narrative touches upon the relatively invisible ways in which it affects women.

Ordinarily the psychic economy of home and work has always been the space of contradiction and struggle, but given the predicament of Sujata, work for her is a self-chosen exile from the stifling constraints of home.

The rise of global capitalism has further strengthened hegemonic forms of organizing production and reproduction, as a result of which class relations within and across national borders has become more complex. But given the spatial scope of the narrative, analysis here is not limited to the way gender identity structures the nature of work women are allowed to perform.

Even if women like Sujata go out and work in a bank, it is not considered enough to wipe out the pre ordained differences between men and women in the society. After all, a woman that she is, her foremost duty is to sacrifice everything at the altar of her home. “He was neither very attached nor indifferent to his life. The way he saw it, a wife had to love, respect and obey her husband. A husband was not required to do anything to win his wife’s respect, love and loyalty.”(45)

The impact of capitalism looms large on the society. Unequal distribution of wealth is micro cosmically represented through two class extremes. On one hand is Sujata, the wife of a well-to-do public servant and on the other is Somu’s mother, the wife of a poor man. The politics and economies of capitalism is an urgent locus of struggle in the narrative. The analytic framework is attentive to the micro politics of everyday life as well as to the macro politics of global economic
and political processes. The link between political economy and culture is crucial to the understanding of the narrative.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty makes a similar point in *Feminism Without Borders* when she says:

> It is just that global economic and political processes have become more brutal, exacerbating economic, racial and gender inequalities, and thus they need to be demystified, reexamined and theorized. (230)

But what is conspicuous in this narrative is the fact that despite these class divides, there is a connection that the two mothers feel, at least temporarily during their moments of shared agony.

So even while Mahasweta Devi links everyday life and local gendered contexts and ideologies to the larger political and economic structures, she also allows for women of different classes/identities to build coalitions, even though they may not be very long lasting. “She realized that Somu’s mother with her little learning, her limited intelligence and her inability to put her ideas into words, thought the same thoughts as she with all her learning, clarity of vision and competence in articulating ideas.” (53)

Thus despite the differences amongst these women who belong to two different classes, there is a felt sense of cross class solidarity. The connection between Sujata and Somu’s mother also brings into reckoning mother based theories that encourage critics to investigate relationships among women. Critics like Elaine Showalter have traced a literary history in which women writers create a community of influence that transcends class, nations and even generation.

Somu’s mother—Sujata—Nandini bond is indeed that ‘female sphere’ of intense intimacy and interdependence that was estranged from the male public.
sphere. Where one might have read only overt plots concerning betrayal and grief, there emerges also a crucial subtext built around relationships among women.

As a consequence of women's flexible ego boundaries, says Abel Elizabeth in *Making a Difference* females define themselves and one another:

> Through intimacy which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying through relation to another who embodies and reflects as essential aspect of the self. (16)

Even in this narrative, the emotional priority of bond between women can be seen. Sujata's fleeting bond with Somu's mother as also Nandini is a triumphal fantasy of female power, the power to withdraw from traditional homes.

The translator of the novel, Samik Bandhopadhyay is making a similar point when he says in the introduction, "In *Mother of 1084*, Mahasweta attempts a variation of her narrative style more characteristically evident in her historical novels, in the same effort to make the particular situation not paradigmatic (for that could amount to simplification) but to locate it at the hub of a more complex situation or chain of developments in history. There are three homes, representing three different cultures/locations/economies in *Mother of 1084*- Sujata's, Somu's mothers, Nandini's."(16)

What is even more remarkable is that the entire journey of Sujata has been depicted by the writer through dramatic condensation. It is in the scenic space of a single day that Sujata recalls, year after year the events that followed the morning when she was called to identify her son. Within this limited time space, Mahasweta Devi manages to create conflicting, competing, co-opting and intersecting spaces of identity nexus formations, whether geo-political, socio-economic, cultural or ideological. The framework also through various turns in the narrative makes transparent the matrices of oppressive, hierarchical and discriminatory ideologies, practices and politics. In many ways this intersectional approach also complicates the concept of emancipation and decolonization to
include historical and culture specific engagements. She explores in this multi-layered narrative the nexus of gender and historical-social disability as a contested site of denied citizenship, exploitative economics and the myth of Indian progress and the myth of one Indian home for women.

In Mahasweta Devi’s *Mother of 1084*, which deals with dissident and dissonant history of a particular Indian state, the characters are cast into definite social categories. The same carry identity implications of being embedded in particular relationships for which the categories are practically consequential.

For instance, race, class and gender are deep reservoirs of self-construction resources comprising influential conditions for self narration. At the same time it may be pointed out that though these are significant parameters for the storying of the selves, yet one cannot essentialise the narrative that result from them. As penetrating as racial or gendered identity may be, it still shares experiential space with myriad other sources of the self; self construction is not one-dimensional.

As Judith Butler (1990) points out in *Gender Trouble* with relation to gendered identity, for example, it is problematic to discuss women in general because:

Gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.(3)

Various concerns of everyday life which also shape women’s selves from their intimate relationships, marriages and their other affiliations should be taken into cognizance. As Trinh Minh-ha (1992) suggests that the question of identity is moving away from traditional queries into who am I to where, when and how am I.
Noting that “there is no real me to return to, no whole self that synthesizes the woman” (157) She underscores the need to view the various incarnations of a gendered or racial self in relation to an individual’s full round of everyday going concerns. For instance in *Mother of 1084*, there are many other concerns which also shape Sujata (Brati’s mother) from her intimate relationship with her dead son Brati, her lifeless marriage with Dibyanath, her affiliations with Barti’s friends and confidantes etc.

Mahasweta Devi accomplishes the same in this narrative. She includes any and all experiences that can be accountably incorporated in the space of her narrative ranging from brief recollections of events to blow-by-blow renderings of a virtual lifetime of experience. She develops both self coherence and diversity by resorting to a persistent interplay between what is available for conveying a story and the exercise of various narrative options. The narrative options that she has employed in *Mother of 1084* will enable one to understand better how she constructs selfhood and identity in this narrative. Once again it is according to Trinh. T. Minh-ha as she writes in *Feminist Thought* “a diverse recognition of self through differences and unfinished, contingent, arbitrary closures…” (114)

But returning once again to the construction of self, it takes shape through active narration. The writer or the narrator itself contributes the circumstances of its own narration. Significant to mention here therefore that narrative practice does not simple unfold within the interpretive boundaries of going concerns, but contributes to the definition of those boundaries in its own right. Like Mahasweta in the novel, even though she evokes and recreates the killings of Naxalites but yet she focuses more on the later reactions of those related to them, making it thus more a narrative of relationships than a narrative that simply takes recourse to history.

The meaning and the coherence of a story, and of the self it conveys are drawn from the linkages built between what is available to construct personal accounts of characters and the related work of contextualizing work of who and
what we are. *Mother of 1084* highlights the variable narrative linkages that exist between received cultural categories like gender and race and the way those categories are referenced to convey identity. More importantly, there is in this novel sufficient narrative play at work in the way power, politics and social discrimination are used as linkages to bear on matters of self definition. What is even more interesting is that Mahasweta Devi does not invoke linkages of culture, race, politics and gender in any abrupt or automatic fashion but instead provides them as narrative resources for constructing Sujata’s story.

“Refusing to leave her job was Sujata’s second act of rebellion. Her first act of rebellion was when Brati was two. She had refused to be a mother for the fifth time.”(46) As is evident, Mahasweta Devi links elements of various themes, putting her own artful gloss on Sujata’s superintendent story. She doesn’t suppress themes of inequality and discrimination but rather links them together with into the story of a strong and resilient self. Her narrative as a result uncovers layers of vulnerability or strength of Sujata.

Mahasweta Devi not only establishes narrative linkage but also skirts a few issues. The story at once also highlights considerable narrative slippage. Recognizably, cultural images of race and discrimination, as well as standard themes of power and discrimination are certainly apparent in the narrative, but they are applied partially, contingently, judiciously and variably. As these lines themselves indicate how the text is primarily dedicated to the search of Brati. “Sujata had found him again after searching all day, he was in the midst of everything, he was everywhere”(126)

Discourses are selectively tailored to the life under consideration. The beginning and the ending of the novel are indicative of the fact that the narrative uses various cultural and class parameters only as a means of depicting Sujata’s life story. The narratorial voice in *Mother of 1084* submits to Sujata’s emerging voice which in its turn rises above all other voices. The work thus is all about a woman finding her dead son. “A Bereaved Mother Speaks. They won’t let Brati
be with her. Yet the whole day she had been with Brati. See... My son was... The fashionable ladies of Bombay, wives of those who owned Racing horses, industrialists, the film stars, all of them reading about Sujata and Brati."(115)

Given the potential linkages and slippages that may be used reflexively to signal possible plots and themes, various narrative options are brought into use. In the process, the possible narratives adumbrate alternative selves. As Mahasweta elaborates Sujata’s story, she weaves elements of history and politics into her own narrative, assembling the story in relation to these linkages. But as she narrates the story, attention gradually turns away from history and politics to Sujata’s married life as if to inform the readers that Sujata’s identity draws from more than one factor. She weaves common themes into a distinguishing story of her own, creating alternative identities for Sujata out of both shared and distinctly individualized linkages.

From start to finish, Sujata’s narrative works both for and against her redemption. She is at once a rebel and a victim, at once a conformist and an iconoclast. This happens due to the narrative options exercised by Mahasweta Devi in the novel. The writer attempts a variation of her narrative style to be able to locate it at the hub of a more complex situation or chain of developments. As the narrative progresses, Sujata is placed in a space between the range of contradictory spaces that co-exist.

Other things being equal, we find that writers are not locked into particular narrative positions, but regularly and openly decide what direction to take in telling a story. The writer is in fact an editor who constantly edits, monitors and modifies themes and storylines invoking shifts in perspective, such as referring to the position from which a storyteller tells an account, is one prominent type of narrative editing.

Consider the progressive editing done by Mahasweta Devi as she recounts the experiences of Sujata. Beginning with the remark, “Sujata is fifty
three now”, Mahasweta informs her readers of how they should read the forthcoming story. Narrating several recollections of Sujata’s married life, Mahasweta adds to the particular narrative flavor of the story. Sentiments are not the whole story but support or distract from the authenticity of certain historical or political accounts.

In half of the narrative it seems as if Sujata’s Narrative identity is the story of a wife who is fifty three now but in the narrative that continues, it is evident that Mahasweta has other stories to tell and selves to present. She draws upon distinct perspectives (Somu’s mother, Nandini) to link together the experiences into one narrative. While she begins with Sujata as a woman who is lacerating in pain and suffering, yet as the narrative unfolds it becomes more the narrative of a woman-with-her-own-life-to-live, thus engendering the narrative in a different way eventually. The narrative thus gradually moves from confinement to autonomy. The images of pain, sacrifice and surrender thus give way to images of solace, autonomy and emancipation, even though temporary.

Feelings too are a part of the language games. At times predominance of words like ‘pain’, ‘death’ etc suggest suffering, word like ‘dreams’ and ‘desire’ signal the emotional underbelly of a life lived more for someone else than for one’s self, words like ‘betrayal’ remind one of remorse, words like ‘blood’, ‘body’ and ‘face’ evoke images of destruction and annihilation.

Perspectives are constantly switched as a result of which readers have no idea about the way she prefers her story to be, which self she promotes: the repressed or the liberated, or even if she conceives of the difference in such terms.

It could also be possible that the indeterminacy and indefiniteness that Mahasweta Devi resorts to is an extension of the modern society where the self has become hyper real. The following lines by Robert Penn Warren are not unlike Sujata’s situation and inability to break out of the cage that confines her. He writes in All The King’s Men:
By the time we understand the pattern we are in, the definition we are making for ourselves, it is too late to break out of the box. We can only live in terms of our definition, like the prisoner in the cage... Yet the definition we have made of ourselves is ourselves. To break out of it, we must make a new self. But how can the self make a new self, when the selfness which it is, is the only substance from which the new self can be made. (351)

However, she may indeed be deliberately informing the readers that Sujata is of two minds and thus momentarily multiplying her subjectivity. However one thing is clear: if we are to take feelings a warrant for the authenticity of accounts and the genuineness of the self in question, their expression must be appraised in relation to the editing that sorts the narrative options and their accompanying identities. Feelings do not stand on their own in stories of any kind.

Throughout, Mahsweta Devi adroitly builds contexts for Sujata’s identity. She not only actively constructs perspectives but simultaneously edits the contents of story as it might ultimately amount to the depiction of a woman trying to come in terms with her life after the death of her son.

In the narrative, circumstances themselves vary in the extent to which the use of diverse resources is acceptable. Sometimes Mahasweta Devi simply provides working templates for the iteration of particular narratives, while at other times tolerate considerable exploration and experimentation. Overall, the narrative interplay between discursive practice and discourse-in-practice makes for considerable elasticity in what is accountable in the course of social interaction. New narrative resources develop and are reflexively employed both to story selves and to revise expectations about the acceptability of accounts. All this diversifies the resources available for the construction of identity.
For instance, let's assume, *Mother of 1084* to be a study in Naxalite history. As the writer shows, how a community with a collective identity becomes, in narrative practice, a varied set of language games for articulating the self.

The Naxalite movement/history/community becomes the key to understanding the issues in question. Viewed in the context of self construction, Mahasweta Devi interprets these stories of Sujata, Nandini, Somu's mother in relationship to the story conveyed about the Naxalite movement as a whole. The broader story of the Naxalite movement as collectively representative of each of their individual identities is however carefully mediated by a related narrative of personal engrossment and isolation. The description of a common historical-political movement creates the risk of leaving women feeling bereft of identities of their own.

Narratively, speaking, it risks having few or no individual stories to tell about these women. On the other hand, guarding against this kind of engrossment risked narrative isolation. However given the common historical backdrop and a shared discourse of identity, the narrative strategy could work as much to threaten the self as to positively define it.

From these accounts it becomes clear that while all the women in the narrative have a sense of being part of a collective identity, in practice they construct its meaning and significance in relation to biographical particulars. Not to forget, this narrative is basically designed to prevent essentialisms. The kind of identity it speaks of tentative and oppositional. Mahasweta Devi’s understanding of the complexity of identity formation is not very different from Helene Cixous. She remarks in *Laugh of the Medusa*:

> We can no more talk about woman than about man without being caught within an ideological theatre, where the multiplication of representations, images, reflections, myths, identifications
constantly transforms, deforms, alters each person’s imaginary order. (96)

Clearly the self has been actively narrated and dynamically accomplished as already demonstrated through a narrative landscape just depicted. The same can be further understood through the examination of complex interactional frameworks within which stories of the self have been told.

But before these multiple selves and their consequent plurality can be pointed out, I return to the basic conflicts that the narrative showcases. One is an incessant conflict between the husband and wife. Within a supposed ‘home’, Dibyanath and Sujata work and live as antithetical forces.

"Sujata was suppressed. She had not expected her husband to come with her even if he had been in town. Why should the doctor expect it? Dibyanath never came with her when it was time. He slept in a room on the second floor lest the cries of the newborn disturbed his sleep." (3)

Both the husband and wife are victims of an impasse; one basic cause of their prolonged uneasiness is their inability to speak out. Right from the beginning, Mahasweta carefully piles up details to differentiate the husband and wife on the basis of their divergent attitudes. Not just that the long drawn descriptions of Sujata’s bodily pains at the time of child birth once again, by virtue of recalling essential physiological differences point to the inevitable and pre ordained suffering of women that they can never cast away.

The conflict thus is not limited to the emotional estrangement that is gradually wrecking the marital life of this couple but the narrative also, dexterously demonstrates differences of body among men and women Judith Butler remarks in Gender Trouble:

For inner and outer world to remain utterly distinct, the entire surface of the body would have to achieve an impossible
impermeability. The sealing of its surfaces would constitute the seamless boundary of the subject; but this enclosure would invariably be exploded by precisely that filth which it fears. (79)

Sujata’s refusal finally to bear another child is a similar attempt at impermeability but the same leads to an explosion as anticipated by Butler. The end of the narrative indicates how an attempt at drawing this boundary results in an alienation of a kind and degree that gives way to the rupture of Sujata’s appendix.

“Sujata’s long drawn out, heartrending, poignant cry burst, exploded like a massive question, spread through all the houses of the city, crept underneath the city, rose to the sky. The winds carried it from one end of the state to the other, from one corner of the earth to another, to the dark piles and pillars that stood witness to history and beyond history into the foundations of faith that underlie the scriptures. The cry set oblivion itself, the present and the future atremble, reeling under its impact. All the contentment in every happy existence cracked to pieces.”(127)

The lines are suggestive not only of the constant oscillation of Sujata between the extremes of exile and homelessness leading ultimately to the demise of her selfhood and identity but also of the colossal sweep of the narrative belied by the seeming one day action.

The penultimate explosion is attributable not only to the conflicts pointed out but also to another set of binaries that the narrative develops. The narrative, though it deals with real facts, yet their construction through Sujata’s nostalgic yearning renders to the entire narrative a dreamlike quality. Sujata’s exile from reality to find a comfortable home in her world of dreams further accentuates the in-between ness of Sujata’s situation.

The opening lines are evocative of this narrative split.” In her dreams Sujata was back on a morning twenty two years ago. She often went back to that
morning. She found herself packing her bag: towel, blouse, sari, toothbrush, soap. Sujata is fifty-three now.”(1)

The word ‘dream/dreams’ has been repeated around fifteen times in this short narrative space, exposing not one but two Sujata’s at the same time: one who cannot extricate herself from the excruciating entanglements of the real world/home and the other who lives in a world/exile of her own dreams. The same binary is suggestive also of the workings of pre-conscious/unconscious and its attempts to provide a comfortable home space to Sujata.

There is apart from this also the conflict between social establishment and dissident individuals like Brati which given the narrative backdrop, triggers most of the events in the narrative. The same renders to the narrative a political significance, for the questions raised do not pertain to the mother or son alone.

“But Brati died so differently. There were so many question marks before his death and so many after. Question marks. Rows and endless rows of question marks. Then even while the questions remain unanswered, with not a single question answered, the file on Brati Chatterjee was closed forever, so abruptly.”(12)

It is this difference of Brati’s death that literally precipitates the actual exile of Sujata from her home. To be at home with her dead Brati, Sujata chooses an exile from her living relations. The journey takes Sujata on a difficult path altogether. A path that resonates with innumerable questions.

“One could kill and go unpunished, for the killers were extremely cunning. Can any society be in a more terrifying situation? Why is there no one to identify those who initiated the killers into killing the youth? How could they go unscathed? Why does it all still remain so baffling?”(99)

The questions raised at once tie the narrative of personal suffering and distress with a narrative of socio-political diabolism. The two collectively
contribute to the portrayal of an identity that is typical to Sujata. In fact our encounter with the identity of Sujata happens after Brati’s death. It occurs, in other words at a point where something eludes the eye, it exceeds the frame of the image itself. So much so it evacuates the self as a site of identity and autonomy- it leaves a resistant trace, a stain behind, a sign of resistance. (many references to the ‘face’ that is dead testify the same: the word has been used fifteen times in two pages). The questions used in the narrative, therefore cry aloud the fact that one is no longer concerned with an ontological problem of being but the discursive strategy of the moment of interrogation, a moment in which the demand for identity becomes, a response to all these questions.

“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 neon lights, the smiles of mothers, the cries of children forever? Did he die for this? To leave the world to these corpses?” (127)

This narrative strategy of punctuating the narrative with interrogatives intermittently contributes further to the depiction of agonizing mental torture that Sujata experiences as also to point to an internal drama of change/charge and rebellion growing in the process to the final point of eruption/explosion.

This interrogative flavor by drawing in the readers into the answer seeking process effects the rupture in authorial domination, making the narrative a more participatory and democratic ‘home’. The narrative by at least attempting to take ‘home’ the readers and sending the omniscient voice into ‘exile’ creates a reversal in the very social order depicted in the novel that tries to exterminate common voices.

“Yes, even now. Do you think there are no arrests because the newspapers don’t write about them? Have the shootings stopped? Has anything stopped? Why should it stop? What has ended? Nothing. Nothing has ended. Only a generation between sixteen and twenty four was wiped out. Is being wiped out”. (79)
The use of present tense form creates a deliberate effect of allowing the saga to outlive its own narrative confines. Sujata's struggle with these questions and her inability to answer them as also all the conflicts already spoken of make it finally a narrative of pain and suffering. This pain arises as much from her thwarted marital dreams to the untimely death of her son. It is attributable also to her bodily suffering as also the gradual discoveries about a world so different from her own.

In the narrative, the word 'pain' has been repeated fifteen times in the first four pages itself. A list of other important words used in the first four pages (womb, twisted, clamped, cry, terrible, withering, childbirth, groan, trembled, frightened, grope, burning, burning, violated, defiled, curse, gripped, crumpled, pierced, dripping, sweat, clutching, tearing) is enough to testify that the narrative intends more than anything else the suffering of a defeated wife and a shattered mother.

The narrative reveals the sifting between a state of home and homelessness stems from the depiction of yet another conflict. The world of Diyanath and Sujata represent a world of rationality and emotions respectively. The collapse at the end is the natural culmination of this struggle between two polarities that she lives with. The sharply contradictory perceptions that confront both from time to time are always insinuating towards a catastrophic end. The two are always steering in different direction. Dibyanath tries to wipe Brati out after his death while Sujata tries to reincarnate him, though only in her dreams.

Even when the narrative ends, Dibyanath’s gross physicalisation of the event (“the appendix had burst”) is indicative of the reconciliation that never took place. In a narrative that is replete with these multi-layered conflicts, images of darkness and death are many and varied.

Quite literally Brati’s death is what causes this narrative to come into being. Not just this, the death of Sujata’s dreams, the demise of her relationship
with Dibyanath, the death of individual voices of protest, the death of faith and justice make it a central metaphor in the narrative. Ironically, it is Brati’s death that brings Sujata closer to him through her quest. It is Brati’s death that causes Sujata to move out of her dead home into a new world, it is Brati’s death that takes Sujata to ‘homes’/people unlike her own.

Literally, the word ‘death/dead’ has been repeated 106 times in this short narrative. The profusion with which the word has been employed indicates above all things a mother’s illimitable ‘grief’ (used fourteen times) over her son’s death and her overwhelming desire to reunite with him.

In the words of Homi K. Bhabha in The Location of Culture:

The pleasure value of death/darkness is a withdrawal in order to know nothing of the external world. Its symbolic meaning however is thoroughly ambivalent. Darkness signifies at once both birth and death. It is in all cases a desire to return to the fullness of the mother, a desire for an unbroken an undifferentiated line of vision and origin. (117)

Despite its meanderings away from just a personal experience of identity (suggested also by the title) to work out the relationship of home, community and identity that expose the historical, cultural and social stakes in the construction of a coherent notion of home, it returns invariably to the story of Sujata’s personal loss. The narrative tries to locate itself in the geography and architecture of these communities that are their ‘house’ or ‘homes’ (there are at least sixty nine references to these two words). The same provides tangible points to the movement of the narrative.

“The colony that housed two hundred thousand people had not grown according to any plan. This was the first of the colonies in West Bengal where the residents had grabbed the lands and settled down.”(33)
This and many more such references to ‘home’/ ‘homes’ are significant for many reasons. First and foremost, there are at least three homes in the narrative that correspond with three different economies/ locations. But more importantly, the plurality of homes corresponding with selves/ identities is enough to substantiate the specificity of each woman’s suffering and her resultant heterogeneity.

In the narrative Sujata unearths homes quite unlike the ones she is familiar with, the ones with which she grew up. Mahasweta problematises the situation by juxtaposing the assumed history of Sujata’s home to the invisibility of the histories of people unlike her hiding beneath layers of exploitation and struggle, people for whom those geographical sites were also homes. The homes become the smallest frame through which the pain of globalization can be seen.

Homi K. Bhabha remarks in his preface to The Location of Culture:

The hegemonies that exist at home provide us with useful perspectives on the predatory effects of global governance, however philanthropic or ameliorative the original intentions might have been.(16)

But each of these three primary locations acquires meaning not just as geographical sites. ‘Being home’ or ‘not being home’ is not just a matter of realizing geographical coherence but an ability to shed illusions of coherence based on the exclusion of all other peoples/ classes/ histories. Particularly with the journey that Sujata undertakes, her understanding of home is always being turned around by the hidden discovery of ‘homes’ that are possible outside ‘home’. “It was a ramshackle house, with moss on the roof, cracked walls patched up with cardboard. Still this was the only place where Sujata found some peace for herself. She felt as if she had come home.”(35)

But traces of her own past constantly remain with her. She tries, temporarily to challenge and reinterpret them but there is no linear progression of

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her identity or self. Her identity incidentally is not linear and rigid like her husband’s, who sustains his appearance of stability by defining himself in terms of what he is not: not female, not poor, not anti-establishment, not Naxalite, not effusively emotional. Sujata’s self however is not an essence or truth concealed by patriarchal or social layers of deceit and lying in wait of discovery, revelation or birth. She tries to transgress this fortress but realizes the dangers of “being on the edge.” For most part of the narrative, Sujata is outside the experiences of her own people. “Nobody had cared to understand why Sujata wanted to work, why she had made all the enquiries herself and found a job for herself.”(9)

In fact it is this “being on the edge” that characterizes her and other women’s being in the world as it is. It is her situation on the edge that expresses the desire and possibility of breaking through the narrow circle called home as also her own body.

The three arenas- home (bodily), home (social) and home (emotional) also highlight the multiplicity of forces that construct the identity of a woman. Home is the immediate fragment of society. For man does not live in cosmos, he lives in a microcosm. Within its fold it contains the two most important bonds- matrimonial and filial. These fundamental relationships strengthen or weaken under the multi-dimensional pressures and tensions that operate already.

The feminine sensibility of the writer is evident not just from the dilemmas and conflicts she has depicted but the very fact that it deals with victimization and survival show the feminine psyche of the writer.

Various other symbols are indicative of manifold entrapment of women. Sujata’s marriage to Dibyanath which is emotionally retarded is one such symbol. Her constitution is very different from her husband’s but it is the husband’s wishes that must prevail. “Dibyanath and his mother constituted the centre of attraction in the home. Sujata had a shadowy existence.”(9).Mahasweta Devi
progressively etches the dilution of the destructive powers of marriage/patriarchy through Dibyanath.

Images of enclosure with a typical feminine flavor abound in the narrative. “She had felt herself violated and defiled throughout the nine months. The body gathering weight seems like a curse.”(4) Her being perceived only in bodily terms makes her sexually as well as emotionally frigid towards her husband.

The word ‘body’ has been used twenty eight times in the narrative. Some of these references are not to Sujata’s body but the bodies of those killed in prisons/naxalite encounters. But in all, the abundance of this word foregrounds the emotionally deficient behavior of the society and the husband in particular. Many of these references to body/corpses occur in the context of her allusion to prisons, a place that entombs bodies in a particular place.

Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish, a book on the birth of the prison remarks, “I would like to write the history of this prison, with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture.”(31) Seeing the prison as a storehouse of bodies and thus a fragment of the society, it becomes, at once like another microcosm of the society ‘home’. However this home/prison connection at once functions to strip home of its meaning as a bastion of peace and orderliness. In fact a reversal of significations occurs in that, the home becomes a site that ironically makes one insensitive while prison sharpens it. “The mind and the senses grew hypersensitive in that living with oneself.”(73)

At another level, these references to the body can be connected somewhere to the body of the text itself. Narrative openness of this text makes it a body that can be read in more than one way. It makes not just the novel but even the female body it speaks of a “galaxy of signifiers”.

The novel also affects careful ruptures in prevailing social order. According to most Indian scriptures, it is man from ancient time who has always
abandoned women and family to achieve higher goals. But in this novel, it is Sujata who partially attempts to do the same. Dazed by the death of Brati, she starts spending time out of home.

Adrienne Rich has remarked in *On Lies, Secrets and Silences*:

> Though the experience of motherhood is the experience of women, yet the institution of motherhood is controlled by man and this physical quality conditions her entire life. (35)

But once again in this narrative, it is the woman who decided the terms of her own motherhood. Tragically though, she is able do that only after the death of her son. One constantly sees in the novel, not just Sujata’s attempts at demarcating a home but even the writer seems to be seeking a home out of popular narrative stereotypes.

She too seems to be pained by the experience of gender as a ‘pain’ ful obstacle just like her protagonist. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have remarked aptly in *The Madwoman in the Attic*:

> Thus the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with a fear of the antagonism of the male audience, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art- all these phenomena of inferiorization mark the woman writer’s struggle for artistic self-definition. (246)

But returning to other subversions created by Mahasweta Devi, ordinarily Indian mythology depicts women more as an absence than as a presence. Woman’s sacrifice, surrender and effacement are supposed to ensure the victory of the males. An extension of the same idea, it is believed that a married woman
sans her husband is unhappy and incomplete. But the events in the narrative are enough to suggest that married women indeed may be better off occasionally.

In fact subversion is also affected in the way Dibyanath the patriarch, is sniffed out of action. The role of patriarchy portrayed through Dibyanath is gradually diluted and deactivated. Initially he manages to limit Sujata’s life but gradually it is his life that begins to seem fossilized and isolated (purely in terms of narrative space allowed to him).

Not just that, there are careful subversions in the portrayal of motherhood itself. Though the text is centered on the mother – son relationship, yet certain aspects of the novel dilute the consecrated and sacred status of a mother.

One, in a social context where a mother is supposed be attributed with divine powers in respect to her children, the same is proved otherwise in this narrative. “A mother’s sixth sense, a mother’s sixth sense- all nonsense! Sujata did not have a shadow of the premonition. If as they say, a mother always knows beforehand, shouldn’t she have sensed something was wrong?” (5) Not just that the images of giving birth are constantly fraught with pain and suffering. “The pain pierced her stomach through and through. Sujata woke up dripping with sweat, her hands clutching the white bed sheet.”(4) So much so the image of mother gets almost desecrated by the end with these lines, “women who could not suffer a child’s company, who roamed from one man to another, one glass of liquor to another, laughing, they were chosen to bring children into the earth, into a life devoid of love and affection. What a waste.” (110)

But returning to the essential question of women’s marginalization, the transformed patterns just suggested, at least represent a strong inclination to recognize the age old ethical imbalances in relation to women’s question. However unlike the previous text, home where the women have to primarily fight oppression from within home, here another problem is attendant upon women in
this narrative. Sujata moves out of her home only to discover multiple other social forces perpetuating their oppression.

For instance in this particular text, ideologies of imperialism are manifest not only through the in-home patriarch/ colonizer, but extend to issues of class inequalities (where men are the producers and women the consumers: Somu’s mother is an example of the same), social turbulence( where society is the oppressor and women like Sujata the oppressed: she is not an ordinary woman, her son died a different death) and even physical violation( husband is the imperial master and woman the slave: even reproduction and child birth are not within her own control). The same suggest the difference among the experiences of home and homelessness among Indian women.

The same differences amongst women have been rightfully acknowledged even by western theorists. Marnia Lazreg, formulates the idea by saying in *Feminism and Difference*:

“They have their own individuality; they are for themselves instead of being for us. An appropriation of their singular individuality to fit the generalizing categories of “our” analyses is an assault on their integrity and on their identity.” (98)

Having spoken of the subversions affected in the content, I turn attention finally to ruptures in the narrative style that further develop the multiplicity of meanings /identities immanent in the narrative. At the outset, there are two observations in this regard. One, the text seemingly chronicles realities that are external to Sujata’s life. Two, given the highly interiorized and monologised narration, the novel moves ironically towards the gradual elimination of these external details.

The readers begin to inhabit the dream world of ‘occult difference’ or ‘displacement’ of Sujata and belong to her camp than to the enemy’s camp of external reality. This narrative dichotomy is once again evocative of the difference
between individual women’s interpretation of justice and the supposed signification of social forces. This narrative strategy, suggests the need to organize collective spaces for dissent and work towards the creation of new homes/identities for women.

Secondly bulk of what is conveyed is communicated through memory, dreams and flashbulb insights. The devices eventually reduce the narrative to a twilight realm between consciousness and oblivion and the protagonist to a solitary and inward individual. The figure’s confrontation with its own consciousness, mind or memory- externalized as voices from the past, within or beyond- provides the mainspring of action. This twilight realm makes the narrative a refugee not very different from the women living on the edge whose story it undertakes to narrate.

Interestingly, in the context of the story, it is precisely this refuge like state where the woman is sacred. It is the source of her strength, her fortitude, her resilience, her ability to be for herself what no one else will ever be for her. In fact it can be said about this particular narrative that it is not just about something, it is something itself. The narrative has a form that fully incarnates women’s experience amidst all its ambivalences and introductions. Indeed its very haphazardness that is not in accordance with the sequential reporting of events as also the utter simplicity and neatness of one day scene result in an extraordinarily powerful narrative that echoes the similarly sifting prerogatives of women’s lives.

The novel has a symmetrical structure comprising four even length episodes. But within this symmetrical pattern is invested tension that so pervades the novel that the text itself alternates between the opposite poles of routinised speech and ponderous silence (the oscillation between speech and silence typical of a woman’s attempts at articulation followed by guilt and effacement), between dramatic vitality and contemplative stasis.
Another feature of the narrative is that space in the novel is depicted as simultaneously as physically boundless (Sujata wanders far and wide into communities hitherto unknown) but psychologically claustrophobic (because it is in essence devoid of alternative possibilities).

The motif of being imprisoned in a vast and narrow space at the same time is once again a delineation of a woman who remains incapable of extended mobility which alone could have given her a chance to escape from her miserable situation/home.

In normal human experience, space and time are organically linked. They constitute a continuum. However in Mahasweta Devi’s narrative, the two coordinates seem to be in tension. Time is at once existent and non-existent. Literally the abundant references to time frames suggest an acute awareness of the same. But at another level, only the haziest fragments of memory and no future prospects for Sujata show the non-existence of time. Particularly, given Sujata’s fond fixation on her past makes time at once a source of redemption and destruction.

Her playing around with the conventions can be seen as Showalter’s model of linguistic difference, wherein women speak men’s language as a foreign tongue. As Lillian Robinson has commented, “form, style and history are not independent of content, ideology or politics.”

Similarly, language in this novel with its dramatic overtones (“Yet the roses remained red as ever, the lights a bright as ever- betrayal! The rose and the lights too had betrayed Nandini and Brati” 92) and simultaneous emotional deficiency becomes an ecriture feminine that disrupts unities of Western discourse as well as notions of sameness in the Indian context.

But more importantly, language by adopting this double function becomes at once a source of separation and joining. In that, language becomes like motherhood. A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh.
The experiences of giving birth wounds physically, but the calm of another life bolsters psychologically. The narrative ultimately, not be overlooked is a study of mother’s suffering. “Who is Sujata? Only a mother. Who are those hundreds of thousands whose hearts, even now, are being gnawed by many questions? Only mothers.”(51)

Suzanne Clarke remarks about these concepts of Kristeva in *Rhetoric and the Woman as Stranger*:

She advocates the notion of a cultural and a personal identity which recognizes that the strangeness of the other is a strangeness within. ..This implies the recognition of the unconscious. Identity, then, must be seen as provisional rather than exclusive , constructed as an effect of the heterogeneous processes of the discourses.(306)

While the text hinges around motherhood , it also deals with the hostile treatment of father figure, that being the lowest common denominator of patriarchy/ imperial forces/ social systems. Brati rebels against the unjust, inhumane restrictions of the society. But the novel demonstrates a remarkable Freudian insight in that it links hatred for father to the hatred for society.

The narrative is redolent with female- maternal imagery. From the narrative matrix, arise a number of darkness and death images. Interestingly, Brati is dead when the narrative unfolds, yet it is he who is reborn at every narrative bend. It is this that brings alive the betrayal -of -faith theme.

The devitalization of the mother due to her son’s death in such circumstances makes corpses, violence, blood and darkness as important symbols in the text. Not just Sujata and her quest for identity, but even the younger woman, Nandini figures prominently. She represents a shallow, anemic romanticism. “ Nandini spoke again. On her thin, dark and weary face Sujata could see a permanent shadow under her eyes.”(76) She reveals in her self and her quest for identity the climate of darkness around her as the murderous feuds
are being enacted. Somu’s mother too is appealing for she embodies the extreme of marginalization—mother, victim, poor, dependent etc. but despite her unearned nurturing and her unread ways, she is the only mother who is not rejected by Brati when alive.

The narrative is de-centered, non-hierarchical and yet intimate. In its matter, it is a product of binaries—husband/wife, poor/rich, dreams/ reality, society/individual and a process of bonding—mother- son, woman/woman, home/ home. In its manner, it is a product of conventions/ subversions, realism/ romance. Amidst these, is the figure of a woman, who is in search for a home and an identity. As she meanders her way through the narrative, she sometimes relapses into a dreamy peacefulness and sometimes awakens to the debilitating clutches of the society. It is this in-between ness of the narrative that is also its only anchoring point.

Expressing the relevance of such narratives Homi K. Bhabha himself her remarked in The Location of Culture:

What is theoretically innovative and politically crucial is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These in – between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal-that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself.(3)

The typicality of this narrative lies in its tentativeness; it’s consisting of fits and starts, and the absence of linear progress towards a clear end. This tentativeness and the absence of a secure home identity from which to speak becomes even more pronounced in a case where the woman steps out of her own ‘nation home’. Such is the story of Sandhya Rosenblum, the woman searching her own self in the third chapter.