Chapter 4  
Insight

To survive in this world, the outcast’s struggle is continuous, the methods vary.

- Mahasweta Devi (qtd. in Katyal 24)

Basic to patriarchy is the conflation of sex and gender roles. The social roles assigned to women go hand in hand with a division into the public and private domains, the first being the sphere considered proper to men and the second to women. Women become ‘the second sex’ in Simone de Beauvoir’s telling phrase. Milton’s poetic line, “He for God only, she for God in him” (qtd. in Das 89-90), could well be cited as an example of the almost universally held assumption that man’s purpose in life is to serve God, the state, the society, not least his own self-advancement, while woman’s purpose is to serve man. Man is seen as the norm, woman as the ‘other’ not merely different but inferior and lacking. Though all cultures claim to praise and value the ‘womanly’ quality, one can cite an equal number of passages denigrating women while the verbal praise masks her actual relegation to a secondary position.

The concept of patriarchal hegemony suppressed and oppressed women in the guise of protection. Violence against women is as old as the world. The type, frequency and intensity of violence may vary from time to time and place to place but it is there everywhere. Even today in the twenty-first century, in an age of globalisation, where there has been tremendous progress in human achievements, crimes against women continue to exist. The gender based violence threatens the well-being, rights and dignity of women.
The 1991 Convention of Women and Violence categorically states that violence includes any act, omission or conduct by means of which physical, sexual or mental suffering is inflicted, directly or indirectly, through deceit, seduction, threat, harassment, coercion or any other means. Violence is overt when it is in the form of explicit sexism or legal discrimination. This works at the surface level and is visible. But violence is not just about overt hurt and an important component of domestic violence often ignored is the realm of passive abuse—emotional abuse—leading to violence that is epistemic and not corporeal.

Emotional violence is a violence perpetrated by fiddling with the emotions of the individuals. Disharmony between husband and wife results in a disturbance and turbulence making that important relation a rigid and frigid one. Viewed from this perspective, this type of attitude or cold demonstration or outlook projected by the husband towards his wife can be a type of violence that is pain inducing.

Endurance is commonly perceived as the key to a successful marriage in a hegemonious society. Every Indian woman who masters the skill of enduring the oppression whether it is physical or emotional is hailed as a benevolent wife. Law of patriarchal hegemony enshrined in Manusmriti meant for protection of women, over the centuries has turned out to be traditions that relegate her to the secondary status. Ironically in a country like ours where woman is deified, there are umpteen instances of dehumanisation of the very woman who is a mother, a wife and a daughter.

There are two widely different images of Indian womanhood—one which equates her with ‘Shakti’, the goddesses Durga and Kali, and the other which considers her existence as entirely dependent on the male-governed and male-defined social structure, treating her as a piece of property to be passed on from one
to another. Both these images successfully combine to keep her out of main-stream and deny her individuality. Generations of women have been mute victims of physical and mental abuse and have borne the ill treatment by the grit of their willpower and endurance. Survival instinct is the only driving force in the lives of many Indian women whose dreams are crushed and trampled by the custodians of patriarchy.

Nancy Julia Chodorow in her article “Gender, Relation and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective” points out that while for the male child growing implies being not feminine and not womanly, for a female child the “unquestionable knowledge that one is a woman is problematic”. (qtd. in Eisenstein 12). She further elaborates that since men have power and cultural hegemony in our society, a notable thing happens, “men have come to define maleness as that which is basically human, and to define woman as not man” (15). Women are ordinarily referred to as ‘nature’ and men as representing civilisation. This tends to create a dichotomy which places man (not “human”) at the centre of the universe and pushes woman into the wilderness as with the non-human. Man becomes historic and woman is rendered a historic. Women are marginalised through cultural institutions and religious rituals. What feminist movements are seeking all over the world is at least a reduction if not removal of this marginalisation.

From the cradle to her grave a woman faces a lot of injustices and almost all times her greatest misfortune seems to be that she is unaware of her rights. In an article on violence against women titled “Battered” Madhu Kishwar, a woman’s rights activist and editor of “Manushi” investigates the reasons for this violence. According to her, the most important cause of domestic violence is lack of awareness on the part of women and their parents:
Men's power is fuelled by the assumptions on which marriage in our society is based. The primary assumption, shared by all concerned, including the woman and her parents, is that she, as a wife, exists to serve the purposes of her husband. All aspects of her life are to be determined by this service role of hers. (qtd. in Illustrated Weekly. Sep. 24 (1989), 12)

Women are unable to pursue higher studies or pursue career goals for everything remains hinged on to the kind of man she will marry. In Shoba De's novel Snapshots a mother advises her daughter:

Remember, a woman in our society is nothing without a husband. Study as much as you can. Win prizes. Get a good job. But don't let all these things affect you, give you a big head. You may be the Prime Minister of India tomorrow, but when you come home, you automatically become your husband's wife. If you forget that you are finished. Your marriage is finished. (24-25)

Marriage, home, the claims of the family are traditional goals set for the female child. It is only by examining and exploring the restrictive aspects of this value system that any change can be affected. Formal education does not equip women for this kind of self or social analysis—but literary and media projections are likely to be of a greater relevance.

Mahasweta Devi quite often refuses to have connection with any particular school of thought, yet her sympathetic portrayal of the subjugation of women and consequent revolt invariably adds a feministic dimension to her work. Mahasweta Devi employs her creative energy more often than not to explore the causes for women's eternal sufferings in the patriarchal society and suggests solution which,
according to her, lies in the hands of the oppressed. When they rise and fight back, only then history can be changed. It is this message which is also basic to her literary work.

Mahasweta Devi's avowed commitment to the cause of tribal communities in India has deflected attention from other aspects of her work, such as her interest in the idea of motherhood. Her fiction offers an array of maternal figures, as well as diverse figurative constructions of the maternal idea. Samik Bandyopadhyay comments in the introduction to Five Plays, “...characters that have dominated Mahasweta Devi’s stories and novels in the seventies are the mothers bearing the brunt of social and political oppression and enduring and resisting with indomitable will” (ix). He states further, “They are too earthy and emotionally charged to bear overtones of any mystical-mythical or archetypal motherhood. They are invariably located within a network of relationships defining their personalities into absolute clarity” (ix).

Out of the five plays in the anthology Five Plays, “Mother of 1084” and “Bayen” which are ‘gynocentric’ demonstrate how the traditional deification of motherhood can often conceal a collective attempt to circumscribe women within socially prescribed roles while denying them the right to articulate their individual need and desires. They not only inscribe the agony and pain of being a mother but also the traumatic experiences of being a wife to a man who callously betrays her at the most agonising moment of her life. The stories also describe the strategies often evolved by women to survive and circumvent the forms of containment inflicted upon them by society. The mothers in these stories awaken through a painful experience related to motherhood, to a deeper insight into the social injustices they
ought to resist. The maternal thus emerges as an ambivalent concept with both restrictive and emancipated potential.

In both the stories, motherhood functions as a way of addressing larger issues pertaining to societal double standards with their economic and political underpinnings. In fact, the relationship between a mother and a son, which forms the core of these two plays, "Mother of 1084" and "Bayen", acquires a metaphysical dimension, as both the mother and the son are engaged in the pursuit of fulfilment in each other's martyrdom. While Sujata in "Mother of 1084" is in search of her son Brati, a missing part of her soul, Bhagirath in "Bayen" sets out to learn of his mother, Chandi, a victim of decadent social conventions.

Mahasweta Devi's "Mother of 1084" originally appeared as Hajar Churashir Ma, a novel, in the special autumn festival issue of the periodical, Prasad, in 1973. She herself dramatised the novel in 1972-73, though her original script has never been staged. But there have been productions of several other safe and neutral dramatisations of the novel in Hindi. Tamil writer and journalist Gnani has translated "Mother of 1084" into Tamil under the title Enn Magan. It was published in January 2008 and the play was staged on 13 October 2008 in Chennai.

The peasant movement in Naxalbari in the spring of 1967 showed a peculiar coalition of peasant leadership and the leadership of Calcutta-based middle-class intelligentsia. The seventies was a decade when newspapers were full of horrifying details of Naxalite activities in the villages and of police repression in jails. This was a time when deaths in police lock-ups and from police firings were everyday occurrences and when no young boy could move about in security in and around Calcutta. And yet no one really wanted to delve into the deeper causes of the united rage of many such intelligent and dedicated youths. No one really tried to investigate
into the horrible tortures and the numerous deaths in police custody. Saroj Bandopadhyaya, a noted Bengali critic remarks:

An encounter with numerous heart-rending events became unavoidable in this decade. The taut excitement of determination, the helplessness of the shot arrow that has missed the mark, the self-destructive structure of the headless ideal, and above all, the watchful, advantage seeking silence of the larger intellectual elite, and the clever inhumanity of the state machinery—all these contributed to a cloudy silence that absolutely choked the decade.

(qtd. in Parichay: Critical Issue. No.10-11, (1980), 6)

In this scenario, Mahasweta Devi’s *Hajar Churashir Ma* came as a whiplash to the Bengali reading public. Speaking of this novel, Saroj Bandyopadhyaya writes, “The author here fully uncovers the source of this rage and its basis in reality” (7).

In *Hajar Churashir Ma*, Mahasweta Devi for the first time shows her interest in the Naxalite movement. She did not interest herself in this movement just because she wanted to write a novel. It was the other way about, and her questionings about the movement led her into the roots of the problems that were responsible for this movement. This inquiry naturally led her to the oppressive and unjust systems of society in the Bengali villages, into the unspeakable conditions in which the tribals and the Harijans had to live. She saw the Naxalite movement as the only possible mode of revolt of the peasant community and her involvement with Naxalite cause started off what became for her, her true vocation as an artist. Trying to understand the peasant-intellectual coalition movement, she tried to understand the peasant community with its roots in centuries of oppressions.
Mahaseta Devi outlines in her work the repressive measures taken by the Calcutta police against this middle-class leadership and the Naxalite movement in West Bengal. Set in the urban Bengal, the play, "Mother of 1084", realistically portrays the climactic phase of the annihilation of the leaders of the masses and its aftermath during the 1970s. References to the Barasat killing in November 1970, when the bodies of eleven young men with their hands tied behind them were found slaughtered on the road to Barasat, and the Baranagar killing on 12 August 1971 when more than a hundred Naxalites were hounded out from their dens and decapitated and killed in broad daylight, connect the killing of Brati and his group to the organised massacre of the Naxalites in 1970-71, perpetrated by the police, the party in power, hired assassins, and even parties of the Left Establishment acting in unholy collusion.

It would be unfair, however, to consider "Mother of 1084" as Mahasweta Devi’s ‘documentation’ of the Naxalite movement. Here she keeps out of view the economic and social exploitation in rural Bengal that had drawn landless peasants and tribals to the Naxalite movement, a process that she studies closely in her works written after "Mother of 1084", especially in Agnigarbha, Chotti Munda O Tar Teer, and Sri Sri Ganesh Mahima. In "Mother of 1084", even while she evokes and recreates the killings of the Naxalites, she concentrates on “the reactions of a cross section of the survivors, both those who bear the scars and wounds of those horrible days, and those who had lived through the days of violence in simulated insularity” (Goel 13). The adoration of godmen, the euphoria over the Bangladesh war, the pretences of radicalism, and scandals commercial and amorous, constituted for the latter a life style that guaranteed their security. At one level at least, the urban guerrillas were reacting against the immorality of this life style, and rejecting the
social-familial system that had nurtured them. The rebellion against the middle class mores need not be an explanation even of the urban Naxalite rebellion, but that would be the one aspect that could rationalise the movement in retrospect to a fairly affluent, sensitive and enlightened mother, who had not known till the shock of an early morning phone call from the police morgue that her favourite son had become part of the movement. Thus it is a typical play in which Mahasweta Devi seeks the roots of the revolutionary fervour of the urban guerrillas and in their discontent with the system that upheld a corrupt and insensitive establishment both in the family and in the state.

In an interview to Samik Bandyopadhyay in April 1983, Mahasweta Devi said:

Once I became a professional writer, I felt increasingly that a writer should document his own time and history. The socio-economic history of human development has always fascinated me. The Naxalite movement between the late sixties and early seventies, with its urban phase climaxing in 1970-71, was the first major event after I had become a writer that I felt an urge and an obligation to document. (qtd. in Five Plays vii-viii)

So in “Mother of 1084” she presents the counter insurgency or retaliation against the Naxalites by the state machinery. Sumanta Banerjee in In the Wake of Naxalbari writes:

With increasing help from the Centre and imported paramilitary and military forces, police retaliation against the CPI (M-L) urban guerrillas began to gain momentum from the last quarter of 1970.... The mid-term poll was scheduled to be held in March
To ensure smooth voting for its supporters, the CPI(M) sought to clear its strongholds of ‘Naxalite element’... A bloody cycle of interminable assaults and counter-assaults, murders and vendetta was initiated... leaving the filed open to the police and the hoodlums. It was a senseless orgy of murders, misplaced fury, sadistic tortures, acted with the vicious norms of the underworld, and dictated by the decadent and cunning values of the petty bourgeois leaders. (qtd. in Five Plays x)

The Naxalite rebellion has been a significant political movement of our time and has interested many writers creatively. It has occupied the centre stage for the better part of the century in the ongoing political discussions and creative writings. Asif Currimbhoy, one who has been hailed as “a dramatist of the public event” (qtd. in Kumar 55), prefers to register a telling commentary on the historical movement that shook West Bengal during the 1970s in his play Inquilab. It portrays the conflict between the existing order and the new order anticipated between conservation and forces of revolution. It is the Naxalite Amar who tells his father Prof. Datta:

Look around, father open your eyes: the poverty, the terrible poverty....People dying of hunger...the gap between the rich and the poor. It’s growing father, dangerously and unfairly. The bustees growing, enveloping the city with the stench of faeces and dirt.... We’re drowning under the Hoogly, silting up with doomed humanity....And you talk of EDUCATION, father! (13)

The play is full of scenes of violence and terrorism and ends with the death of the professor and the landlord. After the holocaust Amar realises that the Naxal
short-cut is no solution; that his father’s way was not quite so outmoded after all; and that the answer to the evil and hatred of the world’s generosity of understanding and woman’s radiant love. In fact Amar who was a radical rebel comes to realise that the constitutional democratic norms are the best to redress the problems.

Unlike Asif Currimbhoy Mahasweta Devi aims at giving an artistic expression to the indescribable agonies of sensitive mothers who have been forced to part with their beloved sons - the young activists. In fact, Mahasweta Devi makes the past events comment upon the present as a cautionary tale universalising the human experience—an experience which drove many a mother and son to martyrdom. Though the play, at one level, reads like a mere account of the inhuman suppression of the Naxalite revolt in Bengal, it is a tragedy of an ‘apolitical’ mother who awakens one day to a greater truth and dies like a martyr. The realistic surface details such as the mass killing of the young activists, the torture scene and the elaborate party scene are provided only to enable us to penetrate that surface to the hidden truth beneath. “The play is an insightful exploration of the complex relationship between the personal and political….It focuses on an individual’s independent realization and ‘the awakening of an apolitical mother’ and is a journey of discovery for the protagonist” (Goel 123).

The play enacts a single day in the life of the principal character, Sujata, the mother of corpse number 1084. The story unfolds around the solitary grief of this upper middle-class mother whose son Brati has been murdered by hooligans actively supported by the police because of his involvement with the Naxalites. When Chandrasekhar, a Jawaharlal Nehru University student and CPI-ML sympathiser was killed by the Ranbir Sena in Bihar, his mother Kousalya Devi expressed herself very spiritedly against her son’s killers a news item on television (qtd. in Surya 11).
But Sujata in "Mother of 1084" in a similar situation, being an apolitical, inhibited upper class woman, is confused by the contradictions in her life. She has hardly understood the implications of what happened to her son.

Exactly on Brati’s second birthday after his death, Sujata sets out on her quest for him, the missing half of her true self. She goes through the painful process of discovering the true Brati. It is two years after Brati’s death she comes to know a part of her son’s she had never known. She is now fully aware of the situation she lives in. The more she learns about her son, the closer she gets to him. And her encounter with the followers of Brati provides her with an insight into the reality of the struggles of the oppressed.

The barriers between the hapless mothers, whose sons have also been killed along with Brati, and Sujata seem to be dwindling away, as she frequents their huts. She can find an echo of her silent scream of torment and desperation in their unending sufferings. Having realised the significance of Bratis’s sacrifice, she feels no regret at her being classed with him. The vacuum created by his death is thus filled and she decides to take on the fight against the present time, represented by the likes of Dibyanath Chatterjee, her husband. In fact, her discovery of Brati helps her rediscover her ‘self’ and her cause as a mother and a human being. At the end of the play Sujata, shorn of all prejudices, finds herself drifting towards a kinship with her son’s ideology as she bursts out angrily at the lassitude of the audience and then collapses down.

Mahasweta Devi’s social indictment is evident in the way she exposes the hollowness and depravity of the society Sujata’s family represents. Sujata, wife of an affluent and self-centred chartered accountant, feels suffocated under the dead weight of the patriarchal system. Sujata’s husband Dibyanath Chatterjee, a profligate
openly having affairs with a number of women, has always treated his quiet, sensitive wife with contempt and neglect. He does not hesitate to risk the private sentiments to keep his public stature untarnished, as it is revealed in Vijay Tendulkar’s play *Kanyadaan* which is an indictment of “the success-oriented male dominated society where women are often victims or stepping stones in man’s achievements”. (Banerjee 583) Dibyanath’s negligence as a hypocrite father towards his children and as a hypocrite husband towards his wife along with his dominant actions and attitudes leads the story to the culmination of Sujata’s spiritual struggle and to the turning point of Brati’s life to total destruction.

Dibyanath knows how to play the cards cleverly in order to improve his domain on the established lines. This attitude is vividly depicted in the opening scene of the play when they receive a phone-call from the police to identify corpse number 1084, which is in fact Brati, their dear son who is lying dead in the police morgue being demeaned to a mere numeral. While Sujata is totally shattered and feels helpless, Dibyanath searches for the ways and means to hush up the incident. As the play opens, an impersonal voice of police officer is heard in the telephone asking for Dibyanath Chatterjee. The officer asks Sujata:

VOICE. What’s Brati’s relationship with you?

SUJATA. Son

VOICE. Son? Come to Kantapukur….You have to identify Brati. (1.4)

The father who cares more for his public social image does not want his car to be seen outside the police station. So he says, “I need the car. I’m going to Chaudhari. You ring up Dutta. Tell him…why don’t you go over straightaway?...
Joti there may be time still. Isn’t there a relation of your mother-in-law’s in the police?... Ring him: Chaudhari must help hush it up” (1.4-5).

Sujata often dreams of the morning of twenty two years ago when Brati was born. She remembers the agony she had to bear. In the Kantapukur police morgue there is once again the same anguish when she tries to identify her dead son. It is more painful for her that her husband did not care to identify his dead son. He did not allow Sujata to take his car; because somebody would identify it.

Dibyanath has succeeded in his mission, his string-pulling to hush up the news that his son had died a scandalous death. The next day newspapers report the death of four young men, but Brati is not mentioned in any of the reports. Dibyanath is successful in wiping Brati totally from his life, whose mission in life was totally different from his own mission. His indifferent attitude is the most characteristic of the elite section of the society which can only indulge in self-care and self-love. The mask of detachment these people put on is only a pretext to cover up their misdeeds.

This opening scene satisfies every requirement of a successful first scene as the opening scenes in the plays of the great dramatist William Shakespeare. As the noted critic C.V. Venugopal observes: “A playwright invariably has to be very careful with his first scene if he is to be assured of a satisfactory impression on the audience” (qtd. in Naik 171), this well-written exposition scene not only suggests the central conflict but also impressively introduces the major characters of the play Sujata, Brati and Dibyanath.

Sujata is trapped in the conflict within herself between a sympathetic mother and a silent protestor against the immoral life which her household stands for. She is reduced to a mere cog in the patriarchal family system. Though she feels suffocated under the weight of the stifling values enjoined on her by the patriarchal institutions,
she never ventures to disentangle herself from them. She does not react against her husband’s womanising and corrupt practices. She is subservient, silent, faithful and almost without an existence of her own. Being dominated by her husband she has been quite meek.

Sujata is aware that it takes only minutes to destroy what has taken years to build, i.e., what has been built between her and her husband. She withdraws into herself and accepts life without questioning, caring only for the home they have made together and the life they lived together. She is not under any illusion, nor does she let herself be disillusioned. It is not a willing suspension of reality but an attempt to come to terms with it for the sake of security of a home. She is no ‘Nora’, Ibsen’s heroine in A Doll’s House to be able to defy the social norms. When her husband reminds her, “Before all else, you’re a wife and a mother” (3.77), pat comes the reply, “I don’t believe that any longer, I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as your are” (3.77). As she walks out she challenges the conditions of the society in which she lives by saying, “I am going to see if I can make out who is right, the world or I” (3.78).

Sujata’s passive acceptance of her husband’s infidelity very much resembles the attitude of the heroine of Shashi Deshpande’s short story “A Doll Like Any Other”. Though disturbed by her husband’s infidelity she takes it in her stride through an extraordinary act of introspection and nationalisation. Sujata’s fate is prototypical of that of the mistreated, humiliated women suffering at the hands of male chauvinists found in every country and in every age. Even in the twenty-first century the women’s condition has not improved materially despite the efforts of the feminists and the movements like the International Women’s Liberation Movement. It is a condition characterised by the acceptance of the dictum that she has to seek
the meaning and purpose of existence only within the orbit and ambience of the family through passivity which is deeply ingrained in her.

The affection, respect and support which she should have got from the family, she lacks and that is the reason of her decision to stick to her job. Though her husband complains that she wants to be independent and does not like to share the responsibilities of running the household or bringing up the children she never resigns her job.

Domestic violence is a global issue reaching across national boundaries as well as socio-economic, cultural, racial and class distinctions. It not only causes physical injury, but also undermines the social, economic, psychological, spiritual and emotional well being of the victim, the perpetrator and the society as a whole. It has serious consequences on women’s mental and physical health.

As J. Krishnamurti sees it:

Violence is not only outward in the form of war, riots, national antagonism, class conflict but also in ourselves, violence in not merely killing one another, it is violence when we use sharp words, when we make a gesture, to brush away a person, when we obey because there is fear. Violence is not merely organized butchery in the name of God, in the name of country or society.

Violence is much more subtle much more deeper. (qtd. in Iyer 84)

In “Mother of 1084” this is a major contributor to the ill health of Sujata who suffers from appendicitis and heart problem. The doctor suspects her appendix to be gangrenous. If it is not removed at the proper time, it can develop gangrene and it will become worse if it bursts. It is the indication of her anguish and agony which she has suffered throughout her life. The dominant and neglecting behaviour of her
husband, all the grief of her suppression, and the agony of her son's unfortunate
death all that is gathered in her mind and heart as appendicitis. Sujata tries to escape
all the constraints and her refusal to resign her job is in itself a form of protest and
self-assertion against the authority of her husband, but she cannot help obliging the
familial responsibilities.

One is reminded of Nissim Ezekiel's play Don't Call it Suicide which exposes the unfair treatment given to women by saying that the choice for all the
millions of women in our country is between being a happy slave or an unhappy
slave and there is no other choice. Malti, a character in the play says, "I'm a nobody
and nothing since I got married. I can't call my mind my own. I can't even call my
body my own. Hari can do anything with it whenever he wants to....I am his slave
and wife, what I have become is a happy slave. It is better than being an unhappy
slave" (qtd. in Iyer 83-84).

The constitutional mandate of India provides particular attention to women
under Article 14, 15 (1) and 15 (A) (C) by maintaining emphatically that the State
shall not discriminate against any citizen on ground of sex along with any other
ground. All citizens are told to regard women and not to do anything derogatory to
the dignity of women. Special provisions are made through Five Year Plans in order
to strengthen and mobilise this long-submissive section of society. But in spite of all
these efforts, the reality, however, is rather scary. Women still remain objects to be
appropriated, possessed and bargained in male domain. Contemporary consumer
culture has further devaluated the status of woman. Under various crowns of power,
freedom and glamour, she is, in fact, being machine tooled to play custom-designed
roles. Indian women's identity is one that is usually connected to and defined by
societal and cultural norms of a patriarchal family structure. Her identity is defined within the parameters of her social relationship to men.

As Sujata is victimised by her husband, the male chauvinistic womaniser Dibyanath, in “Mother of 1084” in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Mammachi and Ammu are victims of male chauvinism and domestic violence. The novel very pointedly portrays women’s fate inside and outside Indian home and hearth. Roy probes into female psyche and shows that women could not enjoy much freedom and autonomy in Ayemenem society. As between Sujata and Dibyanath, male dominance is quite obvious in Pappachi-Mammachi family. There also the familial relationship is devoid of love. Mammachi’s pickle-making job earns Pappachi’s jealous frowns instead of favour. He greatly resents the attention she gets in the society for her skill in it. Roy comments, “He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man but alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning…. Wife is but a slave who can be driven out of the house at his will” (180-181). His wife and children are overtaken by his black moods and sudden bouts of temper.

Ammu’s marital life like Sujata’s is a story of loveless marriage. She too has been depicted as if she has no ‘self’ or no identity or no autonomy but just a show piece. She is also a victim of her husband’s routine violence. The repelling man even feels no trace of shame or guilt or morality when his English boss makes an indecent deal demanding Ammu to sleep with him and the husband agrees and goads Ammu to gratify the Boss. Ammu’s so natural declination draws his fury and she is thrashed black and blue.

In Sujata’s family, except Brati, the reactionary, all her other children belong to her husband’s rotten world. So after Brati’s death, Sujata cannot help herself
except living in her own world of imagination and talking to her dead son whenever possible. In portraying this rotten world, we find a full expression of the Mahasweta Devi canon. Everyone by enjoying the life of affluence accepts the values of the opportunist set, and is known to be rotten to the core. Sujata herself, appearing to suffer this inhumanity passively, is only bidding her time, like Saritha in Vijay Tendulkar’s play Kamala who foresees her future: “The day will come and I will be no more slave.... I will not be a thing to be used and to be thrown into dustbin. I will act as per my will and pleasure, nobody will have power to rule over me. The day is sure to come” (67). As revealed towards the end of the play, she is only waiting for Brati to grow up and become self-dependent. But she pays the price of her too long acceptance of an order she knows to be corrupt by losing Brati who alone among her children rebels against this set, and who alone remains a human being.

The natural relationship between a mother and her son is excellently evoked when the playwright attempts to create a sentimental situation in the fifth scene:

BRATI (lowers his eyes). Mother, you have to bear with a lot for me, don’t you?

SUJATA. No, Brati. Bear with a lot for you? Oh, no.

BRATI. Don’t they bully you a lot for me?

SUJATA. Let them.

BRATI. (with tenderness and concern) Why do you bear it, mother?

SUJATA. It hurt once, doesn’t hurt any longer. It hasn’t hurt from the time you came, because you’re there. (5.13)
Ironically, however much they respect each other's sentiments, the mother and the son remain strangers in a world where human relations are expendable and where conformity is the only alternative for material success. But both the mother and son are rebels in their own right. While Sujata, by taking up a job, breaks with tradition, Brati, a prospective heir, turns out to be a threat to the status quo by championing the cause of the oppressed. In fact, the suppressed protest in the mother finds an expression in the son's avowed battle against the establishment. Mahasweta Devi draws heavily on the stereotypical background of the rich boy-turned rebel: a generous assortment of corporate types, the then not so well-known new brand of living-abroad Indians and inter-community marriages. Brati has left behind ennui, little flirtations on the side, the ubiquitous whisky glass and chosen instead an ideology, Nandini and the violent oppressiveness of Calcutta's many slums. While Naxalites can be seen by historians as ruthless terrorists, Mahasweta Devi's focus is on the young intellectuals who were drawn to the cause because of their idealism and on peasants and tribals who were drawn to it because they were victims of centuries-old oppression.

Divided into twelve scenes, "Mother of 1084" is a neatly structured play with a beginning, middle and an end. The identification of the corpse number 1084 forms the beginning of the play. Sujata's discovery of Brati constitutes the middle of play. Her passionate appeal to the people forms the ending of the play. The time-scale is moved backward and forward by presenting the past and the present in alternating scenes, very much in the manner of a memory play. As in her other plays, here also the stage is free of superfluous theatrical properties which gives the playwright great freedom to present different situations more by suggestion than by scenic displays. Furthermore, it allows her to be more faithful in her portrayal of the contemporary
realities. The shift in the scene is suggested by darkening the stage partly. Besides, the use of 'tape' as a device, assures the smooth flow of the action in the play. It is an effective alternative to the dramatic device of soliloquy which is often resorted to by the playwrights to acquaint the audience with what is going on in the character's mind.

The playwright herself declares in the introduction, "I set an apolitical mother's quest to know her martyred Naxalite son, to know what he stood for; for she had not known true Brati ever, as long as he had been alive" (xii). After Brati's death, Sujata journeys into the past and undergoes a process of self-introspection and wonders whether she herself or the members of her family or the society is responsible for his death.

As Sujata struggles to understand her Naxalite son's revolutionary commitment, she gradually begins to recognise her own alienation, as a woman and wife, from the complacent, hypocritical, bourgeois society her son had rebelled against. It is only with the help of others that she learns what he is really made of. The mother spends the day visiting and revisiting the mother of another young man killed by the police and Brati's girl friend Nandini who is brutally tortured by the police; the places Brati was wont to visit; memories of what he had done and said, what others had said and done, especially in the last few months of his life.

Sujata understands what happened, is happening, will continue to happen, beyond her sheltered upper-middle class world of superficialities. In her gradual comprehension we see one mother's grief reaching out to so many other mothers' grief, and we see the human aspect in a of chapter of Indian history, regardless of which side one might be on. Her meeting with Brati's frined Nandini provides Sujata with an insight into a part of her son's life that she had never known. And she
realises how he risked his life by staying back home on his birthday to honour her sentiments. Nandini says, “Otherwise, he should have left for the base on the fifteenth and escaped death” (21-22).

Brati’s total commitment to revolution reminds us of Asif Currimbhoy’s Ahmed in *Inquilab*. But unlike Ahmed, Brati remains a loyal son to his parents till his death though he knows about the decadent life of his father. Feeling so much for his poor mother he asks, “Mother do you know where the Boss [father] goes every evening after office?” (5.12) and Sujata wonders, “Does Brati know of the typist?” (5.13). He adores his mother, for he hadn’t seen in his life a person as totally honest as her. But as an ideal rebel, he never makes his true self known to her, because he does not want the familial sentiments prevail upon his revolutionary fervour. His mission in life is to emancipate mankind from the clutches of the hydra-headed exploitative mechanism and create a classless society where people enjoy equal rights.

As the mother seeks for an explanation of the death of her son, she too finds that the entire social system is cadaverous and as she takes a closer look at the society, she finds no legitimacy for Brati’s death. She discovers that Brati had rebelled because he was not happy with the way things were. He found that hypocrisy and corruption was rampant throughout society—in the administration, in the police, in the politics and in cultural-intellectual establishment. He had decided for himself that freedom could not come from the path society and the state followed. He had lost faith in the social system itself which did not care for moral and human values, and he wondered why only the corrupt and immoral people occupy the highest position in the society and people who care for morality and their country are killed. But the representatives of the ruling party like Saroj Pal regard
the young rebels like Brati as “a cancerous growth on the body of democracy” (3.9) which should be eliminated without delay. Sumanta Banerjee in an article entitled “Sting of Betrayal” rightly states:

There are hundreds of victims who are not being allowed to lead a normal life. For years the police have been trained to suspect every young man as a potential rebel, and they find ready prays even among those unfortunate youth who were perhaps once on the fringe of the Naxalite movement but have no political connections whatsoever now. (qtd. in Satyanarayana 39)

Hence, the conflict between the exploiter and the exploited leads to senseless assaults and counter-assaults and an orgy of violence and murder in the name of fake encounters. Brati along with his friends Somu, Partha and Bijit is killed in such an encounter with the goons of the ruling party.

The massacre has posed so many questions, unanswered. Is Brati’s offence worse than all types of crimes that any one can kill him and his companions? Does not one need any social sanction from the law or the courts of justice to kill them? Is his offence so bad that he is shot dead so brutally and even the faces of Brati and his companions are smashed so cruelly beyond recognition? When Sujata wants to see her son’s face for the last time, the Dome tells her, “What’s there to see, Mother? There’s nothing left of the face” (2.6). Sujata is not even permitted to take the body of Brati home to do the last rites. “The sentence ‘No, you won’t get the body’—reverberates in difference voices, in different pitches, each time striking Sujata’s face like a whiplash, as Sujata kneels, her face staring upwards, shocked” (2.6).

Echoing Sujata’s tragedy, the sufferings of three mothers in Uma Parameswaran’s play Sons Must Die are heartrending. The play centres on the
partition of 1947 and it pictures the horrors of war. Though the mothers come from different parts of India, their goals are the same—to meet their sons who are fighting to save Kashmir from the enemy. Their maternal sensibility transcends political boundaries and sees only what Wilfred Owen calls the pity of war. They boldly face the challenges of life. The beautiful Kashmir unites the mothers but separates their sons. Mothers live but their sons die. They are shattered but not defeated.

After probing deep into the causes of her son’s death, Sujata realises that the killers in the society, those who adulterate food, drugs, and baby food, have every right to live; the leaders who lead the people to face the guns of the police and find themselves the safest shelter under police protection have every right to live but Brati and his friends, who wanted to reform the society had no right to live. She wonders whether her son or his killers are criminals and she discovers that her son was the ‘criminal’ because he had lost faith in this Indian society ruled by profit-mad-businessmen and leaders blinded by self-interest and protested against injustice. The mother becomes aware that death was the sentence reserved for every one of them, for all those who rejected a society of spineless opportunists and time servers masquerading as artists, writers and intellectuals. The men who rejected the parties of Establishment were killed in a ruthless manner.

Brati was killed because he had come to place such absolute faith in the cult of faithlessness. Brati’s firm conviction in the right cause, his courage and his selflessness, his irresistible passion led him to his death. Mahasweta Devi explores a grim facet of the society where people like Anindya a mole in Brati’s revolutionary group exist, who in fact was responsible for Brati and his friends’ death. Money, jobs, power did not mean a thing to Brati but these were the temptations which seduced men like Anindya, who had joined them only to betray them. Sujata can
find a moral rationale for her son's revolt only when she can piece together a part of her son's life she had never known.

The mother feels very bitter and guilty for not having known her son. Her quest for the discovery of truth about her son ends up as a self-discovery. She arrives at this discovery through a series of encounters and meetings with people beyond her circuit of experience. Through them she intends to forge a connection with Brati or with what he strove and died for. Unaware in her situation of life, of the politics of economic deprivation and exploitation, the more she can see in Brati’s revolt an articulation of the silent revolt she has carried within herself against her corrupt respectable husband and her other children and their spouses and friends. The closer she feels to her dead son the more poignantly she feels the loss. In a sense she can find in his death a fulfilment she has yearned for and never dared to claim for herself.

Sujata’s meeting with the mother of Somu, one of the fellow-activists of Brati, brings her face to face with the baffling reality when that poverty-stricken lady says, “You have yet another son. You can still hold him to your breast and forget your grief.... I lost my son, my son’s father, and I with this tortoise’s life of mine shall live on forever, the two funeral pyres burning within” (8.17). The reference to a ‘tortoise’s life’ hints at the self-protective and sheltered life which the woman needs to outgrow.

Although the rubble left by the Naxalite storm has been cleared, the memories of the upheaval still haunt the survivors. They could not reorient themselves to life’s mainstream. As it is narrated by Somu’s mother, “How can there be quiet with the mothers’ hearts burning like bodies on fire? It’s not easy
to...feed two souls, mother and daughter....Somu had to leave us behind, all at sea!" (4.10).

While talking about the effects of the Naxalite revolt on the life of the common man, Sumanta Banerjee in an article entitled "String of Betrayal" rightly observes that there are hundreds of victims, "who are not being allowed to lead a normal life. For years the police have been trained to suspect every young man as a potential rebel, and they find ready preys even among those unfortunate youth who were perhaps once on the fringe of the Naxalite movement but have no political connections what so ever now" (qtd. in Five Plays x).

Somu’s father is a timid man all his life, he had never learnt to cheat. At the outset, he, like others, believed that the government would come to his rescue, when the outrageous mob attacked and killed his son, Somu along with Brati. But all his hopes of saving them were shattered. Unaware of the enormity of the crime perpetrated by the Establishment with tacit support from the police, he feels cheated. Somu’s mother cries:

Somu’s father ran all the way. He had such faith in the police, but they wouldn’t even take down his complaint. They didn’t do a thing. They only sent their vans when it was all over to collect the dead bodies....They didn’t do a thing. That was more than he could bear, and he died of the shock. O God! Is there no justice in this country? God! No justice? he went on and on asking till he was dead. (8.17)

Having lost thus the last bread-winner in the family, many mothers and sisters have given themselves up to despair. Their social position is pathetic, painful, even heart-rending, as is evident in the complaint made by Somu’s mother to Sujata,
which reflects the antinomy of life that seems to mock at the fate of her individual lives. “My daughter tell me, don’t cry. Will he ever come back? She tell me, you’re fine. Think of Partha’s mother, sister, she handed her son over to Death. Partha’s younger brother can’t come back home. They’d kill him too if he came back” (4.10).

The tragedy of these women reminds one of the women folk in J.M. Synge’s Riders to the Sea, a moving one-act tragedy. This play vividly describes the fishermen’s tragic life of hope, tolerance, hard work, failure and death. Though the sea, a symbol of life provides sustenance to them, more often than not it brings death, destruction and disappointment to the people especially to the womenfolk. They have learnt to lead a life of expectation, failure and loneliness, for their men go out into the sea and do not return. Maurya, an old mother in this play is the most unforgettable symbol of bereaved motherhood. She has witnessed many drowning tragedies—her father-in-law, her husband, and her five robust sons have been drowned in the sea—and the fate of her family symbolises that of the whole islanders. The vehemence of her keening after losing all her sons, “In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old” (24), closely resembles the agonies of the mothers in mothers in “Mother of 1084” who have lost their sons. The tragic climax comes when she loses her last son also and instead of giving way to her grief, she conquers it by saying that they are all gone now and there is not anything more the sea can do to her. In future, when a storm is about to blow on the sea, there would be no need for her to cry with anxiety about any son of hers or to pray for the safety of any male member of her family.

Though initially, grief had brought the bereaving mothers of “Mother of 1084” together, gradually the barriers that separated Sujata from the rest of the
people like Somu's mother appear to be dwindling away. Sujata could find an echo of her own silent scream of torment and desperation in their unending sufferings. However, finding in Sujata a rebel in the making, the vested interests do not allow her to visit the settlements of the underdog. The relationship established between Sujata and Somu's mother, the victims of the holocaust during the 1970s is quite natural and there is every possibility that it may turn a major threat to the prevailing social system as the victims learn to make common cause by revolting against all kinds of suppression. Somu's mother asks Sujata not to come again to her house because she is threatened by the antisocial elements. "They tell her, why does she come to your house? Forbid her. It'll be dangerous otherwise" (8.17).

Each of Sujata's meetings with the people who know the 'real' Brati, is, in a way, a confrontation which opens up the secret areas of understanding. In fact, these confrontations take place across the cleavages of hierarchies of power, of class and commitment. Actually they serve a two-fold purpose of letting the protagonist come face to face with the realities of life and of self-realisation. Involved in such situations, Sujata is in conflict with the world around her. Having been compelled to adapt herself to the prevailing social norms and traditions, she has unwillingly become a part of them. They have gone into her consciousness. And she is not bold enough to bring about a revolution to change them. And what is more surprising is that Sujata has been pathetically ignorant of her fault until Nandini, Brati's beloved and a fellow activist, opens her eyes:

SUJATA. Brati was the soul of my life, yet I know him so little....

NANDINI. It's a deadly time when people do not belong to one another by virtue of kinship or ties of blood. Everyone
remains a stranger these days to every other one. It’s a crime to allow this to persist. It’s an obligation these days to know one’s son.

SUJATA. Is it an obligation for parents alone?

NANDINI. It’s for you to take the first step. Isn’t it your obligation to set a model for the younger generation to follow? Why do you demand loyalty by virtue of relationship? Why don’t you try to earn it by virtue of your integrity? You won’t be honest, won’t forge relationships, and put the whole blame on us. (9.21)

Nandini’s voice is the voice of an angry young woman crippled by the police torture. Motivated by a selfless desire to bring in a new era Nandini, Brati and the others take to revolutionary activities. They have pledged every thing for the cause. There is a tone of tenderness when Nandini says, We thought we were bringing in a new era. I and Brati walked ...day in day out, talking, just talking. Those days there was sheer delight in talking, in looking at the streets, in the processions, in people, in the red roses at a street crossing....We could burst with delight” (9.20). It is an overdose of romanticism which does not make them see reality. One should not underestimate the power of temptations. Nandini tells Sujata:

We should’ve known that they too had their programme, just as we had ours....A programme of betrayal....I still wonder how we could afford not to know that with all that has happened since 1947, all human loyalties had dissolved by 1970, I wonder how we could be unaware that they could betray us to kill us....Now when we look back, it all seems to have been a betrayal. (9.19)
Due to arrests, tortures and murders in the name of encounters, a whole generation between sixteen and forty has been wiped out. The newspapers have stopped reporting, but nothing has changed. Thousands of young men rot in the prison without trial and yet the politicians claim all is settled down. Torture continues with greater sophistication and more secrecy, and yet the state and the police claim everything is quiet. The third degree torture inflicted on them by the police in the prison leaves the youth mentally and physically abnormal. Nandini gives a spine-chilling account of the interrogation scene in the prison in which Saroj Pal, "bloody cur of the police" (3.9) adopts cruel techniques to elicit information from her. He questions:

What was your relationship with Brati Chatterjee? Was he a friend? (Bends closer to her, lights a cigarette, presses the lighted cigarette to Nandini’s check. She screams...He puffs at the cigarettes, and then presses it again to Nandini’s cheek....The questions and the pattern continue. (10.25)

Because of the police torture Nandini’s right eye is blinded by the gleam of the thousand watt lamps and there is a little sight left in the left eye. Saroj Pal closely resembles Inspector Mathews in *The God of Small Things*. As Mahasweta Devi, Roy projects before us the naked picture of the police department, where corruption is rampant everywhere. Thomas Mathews is totally oblivious of all the virtues enlisted for a police. He tortures Velutha to an extent that he dies. He speaks in the most derogatory manner to Ammu and use the most vulgar words which are not supposed to be used in front of a lady. He flings amorous glances at Ammu. Tapping her breasts with his baton, he calls her a ‘vesya’.
Even after this much of torture and sufferings Nandini is an embodiment of resistance. Smilingly she tells Sujata with great optimism, "I have to harness my present, think of the future....But I’ll never come back to the so-called tidy life. Some day you’ll learn that I’ve been arrested" (11.26). Nandini’s unwavering faith in human dignity is inspiring. It is in her company. Sujata’s true self is laid bare. Nandini shouts at her:

How can you be so smug and complacent? With so many young men killed, so many imprisoned, how can you wallow in your complacency? It’s your all’s right with the world, let’s go on nicely that frightens me most. How can you carry on with your pujas, concerts, cultural festivals, poetry fests? (11.26)

This angry outburst vehemently shakes up Sujata from the state of stupor. Particularly the story of Nandini not only moves Sujata to tears but also exposes her to the hard realities of the contemporary society. Now she has been transformed altogether into a different mother who appears to be throwing defiance in the teeth of immoral social values. The following passage illustrates this:

SUJATA. I’ll come again...

NANDINI. No. What do you gain out of coming to me? You live with your past. I have to harness my present, think of the future.

SUJATA. I won’t go to Somu’s mother again. I won’t come to you. I won’t go to the places where Brati exists. May be that’s my punishment for not knowing Brati. (11.26-27)

It is true that Sujata discovers a new way—a way of realising her being as mother, which makes her stand apart but as a model for humanity. Obviously, her
confrontation with Somu’s mother and Nandini makes her aware of the seedy side of life to which she has been a stranger so far. Now she has developed an empathy and can identify herself with the cause of the suffering humanity.

Thus Sujata goes through a painful process of discovering Brati and her own being while others in the family including Dibyanath, the father, enjoy socialising with those persons who have been overtly a part of the Establishment that was the cause of Brati’s death. But Sujata is now fully aware of the situation in which she lives and the significance of the sacrifice made by Brati. She reacts sharply when he other children make flippant remarks by dragging Brati into their discussion:

TULI. You will react every time we mention Brati....Are we not worthy enough to pronounce his name?

SUJATA. The way you pronounce it! To hurt me!...You, your father, Jyoti, Neepa, the way you all speak his name, as if, as if Brati was a criminal. (3.8)

Sujata’s identification with Brati is total. For her he is more than a mere son. He represents a whole class of people who staked their lives for the sake of noble values. She realises the supreme irony of the situation—the men like Brati who are committed to the cause of humanity, are subjected to physical torture and death whereas the turncoats like Anindya go scot-free and the reward for the mothers like Sujata is only a ‘sophisticated’ number—“THE TEN EIGHT FOUR” to identify the corpses of their sons among a thousand other corpses at the official mortuary. The number itself is a symbol of the countless horrors that gripped the common life during the brutal suppression of the People’s Movement in the seventies and the Establishment’s endeavour to reduce its insurgents to the level of an insignificant being.
Sujata understands that in a society which is full of Dibyanaths and Saroj Pals, a greater revolt and higher sacrifice like Brati’s is essential to safeguard human values. She feels satisfied to find in Brati’s revolt a parallel to her suppressed protest against the decaying middle class moral values. In fact, her discovery of Brati and his cause helps her to rediscover her ‘self’ and her cause as a mother, a woman and a human being. And she does not regret being classed with Brati. She recalls:

With Brati, they cast me too in the opposite camp. If Brati had been like Jyoti, or a drunkard like Neepa’s husband, Amit or a hardened fraud like Tony, or had run after the typists like his father, he’d have belonged to their camp. (3.9)

Sujata finds herself in direct conflict with the group of hypocrites that is her so called respectable household which she has so far failed to disconnect herself with. Alienated from her husband and other corrupt children, she finds herself drifting towards the ideology of her dead son. Her identification with him is complete. So she remains a passive spectator in the final scene when the guests and her household join the festivities held on the occasion of her daughter’s engagement to socialite Tony Kapadia, because Tony’s mother’s guru (who lives in the United States) has said that this is the most auspicious date. In fact it is the day on which Brati was born and also died. Casually they have selected this day for the engagement party because they do not cherish any sentiment for Brati and they do not care for the feelings of Sujata. “As the mother Sujata, relives her son’s life, we are also given a taste of Devi’s satire, as in the reference to the customs that has vitiated religion and elitism” (Parameswaran 458).

Forced to take part in the celebration, Sujata does not feel at ease. Thus, the stage is set for the inevitable when Saroj Pal, the Deputy Commissioner of Police, a
friend of her son-in-law, turns up to convey his best wishes. Being reminded of Saroj Pal's voice which came through the telephone with the news of Brat's death and his cold and business-like attitude on the day she was summoned to the morgue to identify Brati's dead body, she feels hemmed in on all sides by the enemy. His presence strikes a chill into her heart. She grips her throat to stop the scream from breaking forth. There is a stare of disbelief in her eyes. Having found Saroj Pal "still in uniform...still on duty...still the Black Maria, the revolver in the holster, the helmeted policemen within the van" (12.30), she cries out alarmingly:

Where—again? Where will Brati run to?...You can't be on the run any longer, Brati, come back. I found you today, Brati. If the siren screeches again, if the vans race, and Saroj Pal chases another young man somewhere you'll be lost again. (12.31)

In the review of this play in his article "This Fiction is Injurious to Illusions", Jaidev remarks, "The play's title is wrongly translated as 'Mother of 1084'; actually it should be 'Mother of Corpse No.1084'" (7). But the title "Mother of 1084" is quite apt because Sujata's day-long odyssey into the life lived beyond the circuit of her so-called respectable existence, brings her face to face with the reality of the death of ONE THOUSAND AND EIGHTY FOUR rebels. In her attempt to understand the sad and violent realities of the Naxalite movement, this mother comes face to face with her sense of estrangement from the double standard-ridden bourgeois society to which she belongs. As Keller in Arthur Miller's play All My Sons, whose evasion of responsibility for a decision in wartime which led to the loss of twenty-one lives says, "Sure he [Larry] was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess, they were, I guess they were" (3.89), Sujata identifies herself as the mother of all youths who step unknowingly into the trap laid by the
vested interests. This metamorphosis becomes possible because of the insight she gains through her agony.

The play ends with Sujata breaking down after exhorting the audience not to be silent sufferers but respond actively to social reality. She lashes out at the police and then the brutally complacent and ignorant people of richer or rather upper middle class people. She knows it is a common cause in which she has merged her ‘self’. Addressing the audience she cries:

Why don’t you speak? Speak, for heaven’s sake, speak, speak, speak! How long will you endure it in silence? Where is the place where there is no killer, no bullets, no prison, no vans?...Where can you escape it all...in Calcutta, in West Bengal, from north to south, from east to west? (12.31)

What pains Sujata is the indifference shown by the people to the cause and to the sacrifice of youths like Brati, Neetu, Somu and the like. She points to the audience and says:

Corpses, stiffened corpses, all of you!...Did Brati die to let you carry on in your cadaverous existence, enjoying and indulging in all the images of the world....Do the living die, only to leave to the dead to enjoy? No! Never...Let this No of mine pierce the heart of the city...to every nook and corner. Let it set the past, the present, and the future tremble. Let it tear down the happiness of everyone cooped up in his own happy happiness. (12.31)

With this outburst, Sujata collapses on the stage possibly for ever as the appendicitis of her body and of her mental anguish is burst. She can no more cope up with the ‘stink’ that overpowers her. The play starts with a flash back, the pain of
childbirth and ends with the pain of a ruptured appendix. A woman’s most primal, creative suffering precedes the beginning of Sujata’s self-discovery; the pain of a diseased organ symbolises the end of her journey.

Like “Mother of 1084”, in “Bayen” also motherhood features again as it is concerned with a mother who is caught in a trap laid by the vested interests and branded as a witch. Being excommunicated from her family and society Chandidasi, the protagonist in this play is deprived of the right to motherhood and her son Bhagirath is forbidden to enjoy the motherly affection. Her banishment serves as a catalyst which accelerates realisation of the greater human values that are often ignored. The main thrust in this play is the release of human soul from all kinds of oppression. Here in this play, Mahasweta Devi deliberately turning to the rural world, attempts to bring to light the realities outside the pale respectable existence. She also attempts to show how the monstrous exploitative mechanism, stretching its ugly tentacles all over, reduces the human being to the level of a mere beast.

The action of the play takes place in a remote village in Bengal. Endowed with an authentic rural atmosphere, the play depicts the effects of superstitions on the innocent people. Notwithstanding the so-called scientific enlightenment, there is still a large part of Indian life which is sunk in ignorance and superstition. Besides, the agents of the corrupt feudal system which is still in full control of the rural life exacerbate the situation further.

Even in this twenty-first century, many believe in the reality of witchcraft. The practice of witchcraft, based mainly on the ignorance of the people and the manipulators’ interests, has been in vogue all over the world from ancient times. Particularly, the women of the oppressed sections, who are alleged to have been possessed by evil spirits, or as practising necromancy, that is raising of the dead.
Necromancy had justification in the medieval times as the act of Satan. And the existence of Satan as anti-God was essential for religion and Church and so necromancy and witchcraft came to be looked upon as necessary complements for faith. ‘Witchcraft persecution’, which began in Europe about the close of the Middle Ages, has been still prevalent among uncivilised peoples of the world. Especially in the Santhal areas of Bengal in India witch-hunting or witch-branding, a social evil, ever growing like a cancerous ulcer on the face of rural life, is an excuse discovered by the antisocial elements to kill the innocent people and grab their property.

Mahasweta Devi reports:

In these rural areas any strange thing or event can be attributed to the ‘witches’ and they can be killed with popular ‘approval....Majority of the victims are women and it is estimated that 600 women are killed annually on this charge. (qtd. in Satyanarayana 83)

Set against this background of the barbaric practice of witch-hunting “Bayen” deals with an intensely human story touching on the larger space of the social forces that separate a mother and her son in a male-dominated society. So it is a testimony not only of witchhood but also of the quest for mother-son bonding. In fact, with Chandidasi Mahaswetha Devi seeks to reveal to the readers the ‘other’ India where the people ignorant of the radical changes due to different movements in the mainstream society, still experience the trauma of oppression, reminiscent of the colonial rule. The personal freedom of the individuals is ruthlessly crushed to the pleasure of the oppressor who assumes different roles-moneylender, zamindar and Jotedar. It is evident that the process of subordination and exploitation of the underdog started long ago and the myths and legends, created by the bourgeois
intellectuals are intended only to support the doctrine that one class is superior to the other.

Chandidasi, the protagonist of the play, like Sujata in “Mother of 1084”, is a loving mother and sensitive wife. But the world she belongs to is a far cry from that of Sujata. Chandidasi is “a progeny of the illustrious Kalu Dome” (1.78). Her work is to bury the dead children and guard the graves as her forefathers had been entrusted to look after all the cremation grounds of the world, as a reward from King Harishchandra in return for their timely help when he had fallen on evil days. Malindar recalls how Kalu Dome, for his magnanimity towards the King was rewarded:

Yes, that’s how it happened, Bhagirath….The Brahmans, the sadhus, the sanyasis get cattle, land and gold, and we get all the cremation grounds of the world. All the cremation grounds of the world for us, for us, for us, for us only. Your mother was a descendant of Kalu Dome. Her name was Chandidasi Gangadasi, she used to bury children. (1.79)

Though this conventional profession does not normally befit a woman and that too a woman with a tender heart like Chandidasi she carries out her obligations as a sign of reverence for her forefathers. She has willingly sacrificed what Freud called the ‘pleasure principle’ for the sake of the larger good of her community. As she puts it:

Whenever I seem to have made up my mind that I won’t go back to the job ever, I seem to hear my father’s voice roaring like thunder; If you opt out, it’ll be my beat again, is that what you desire? Would you
like me back on the job guarding the graves from the predatory jackals? I can almost hear him chasing the jackals away, thundering all the while, hoi! hoi! hoja!

(2.83)

Although Chandidasi is intellectually inferior to Sujata, she is more alive to her inner desire for freedom. She does not hesitate to defy whatever she thinks that might do harm to her sentiments. It is this longing for personal freedom which results in a conflict between her and the vested interests, who wait for an opportunity to manipulate the situation. So long as Chandidasi remained unmarried, she never experienced any inner conflict and there was no real anguish. She was feeling proud of being a gravedigger and was conscious of her social status among her own tribe. She told Malindar after his proposal in a tone of intense pride, “I’m Chandidasi Gangadasi. My father, the late Patitpaban Gangadhar. I bury dead children and guard the graves ...Kalu Dome’s my forefather. I’m at the top of the Domes here” (1.80).

Chandidasi is endowed with all the essential human qualities—an intense love for life and a sense of sympathy for the suffering humanity. Chandidasi carries out her filial duties till she is married to the insensitive Malindar. He, a permanent employee in the morgue, is the only person who knows how to sign among the Gangaputtas. Although Malindar prides himself on having her as his wife, “a golden doll of a wife, a descendant of the great Kalu Dome” (82) he does not care for her feelings.

Chandidasi is not happy because she is fed up with the awful work. She feels hurt when people suspect her of having an evil eye. On being noticed while cajoling a dead infant, an errand rumour spreads among the villagers that Chandidasi is
responsible for the death of children as she is misunderstood as a possessor of necromantic powers. She very much tries to break free from the obligations of her profession thrust on her by the feudal society. She pleads time and again with her husband to take her away where she can lead a happier life looking after her little son. But her husband is a man of straw and an embodiment of all the characteristics of the typical modern man. Engaged in the rat race of the mundane world, he has forsaken human values and is ready to lead a compromising life. She implores her husband,

It hurts to do the job these days, the job handed down to me by my ancestors, my hands rebel and yet I have to go on doing it....They say I have the evil eye. The little ones die of summer heat, winter’s cold, and small pox, don’t they? And is it any fault of mine?....Why can’t you see it, Gangaputta, why I think of throwing up the job again and again? When I guard the graves through the night, my breasts bursting with milk ache for my Bhagirath back home, all by himself. I can’t, can’t stay away from him. (2.82)

But her grievances are unheard. Though Malindar raves at times against those who throw stones at her and speak ill of her, he does not care for what is really eating her. He rather encourages her to carry on with her work, by saying, “When a child dies, can anyone keep it in the house? The job you do is a useful one, but the bastards won’t recognize that” (2.82). He does not have the empathy to realise that she feels disturbed because she finds in the corpses of infants an image of her own suckling child who, she has to leave for the graveyard at night.
A very special feature of Mahaswetha Devi’s dramatic world is the uniqueness of her women characters. They are so much alive and tug at our hearts. Sujata and Chandidasi are stronger creations as compared to their male counterparts who are often portrayed as lacking in insight into what is happening to their being. Malindar remains a passive spectator as his counterpart passes through the painful situations created by an indifferent establishment. Though Malindar feels sympathy for his wife’s plight deep down in his heart, he never ventures to protest the tradition which is all set to wreak havoc on his family. His thoughts and feelings are regimented. He learns to make compromises at every stage and adds indirectly to the woes of his wife. When asked why Chandidasi has to become a Bayen, he tells his son Bhagirath, without any hesitation: “Our bad luck, hers, yours and mine” (1.78).

On the contrary, Chandidasi is a woman of complete integrity. She is a lover of freedom, unfettered by the social constraints. She can not watch the sufferings of others and goes out of her way to help them out. Endowed with the strong moral fiber of a true rebel, she violently resents any kind of encroachment on her freedom. But her being married to an insensitive man paves the way for the tragedy in her life. Actually, Mahasweta Devi’s mothers are always as much the victims of indifference of their household as of the society in which they live. What Rashmi, a character in Nayantara Sahgal’s novel This Time of Morning, comments about marriage: “Women stayed married, had since time immemorial stayed married, under every conceivable circumstance, to brutal insensitive husbands, to lunatics and lepers” (qtd. in Rao 205) is applicable to these two mothers.

Structurally “Bayen” is astonishingly simple. The play is divided into four short well-wrought scenes with a beginning, middle and an end. Malindar Gangaputta’s confrontation with Bayen and his revelation to Bhagirath constitutes
the beginning of the play. Enactment of the whole process of dreadful expulsion of Chandidasi from the village forms the middle of the play. And Chandidasi’s sacrifice and Bhagirath’s defiance of the established morals of the society form the end of the play.

The playwright, as in the other plays, does not employ any complicated dramatic technique in “Bayen” also, though the device of ‘recalling’ is put to use in the latter half of the first scene and in scenes 2 and 3. The play moves with ease from the present to the past and back to the present, as Malindar, deliberately recalls and enacts very much like Paatan in “Aajir”. The device of a character in the present performing an incident in the past, by changing roles right in front of the audience, not only allows the playwright to present different dramatic situations without any recourse to superfluous scenic displays but also assures the smooth flow of action, touching the play with an element of authenticity. The play, as in folk theatre, uses very few stage properties. The bare stage allows the playwright to telescope time and space. Freed of the burden of conventional theatrical trappings, the actors easily manipulate the same space to represent different locales. And a shift in scene is indicated by dropping the curtain.

We see Chandidasi is torn by the conflict between the societal self and the personal self. Though she realises her social responsibility as a gravedigger, she has to do justice to her greater role as a wife and mother. There is also a conflict between Chandidasi and Malindar on the one hand and between her family and the social forces represented by Gourdas, the archetypal exploiter, on the other. The privileged who, belittled by the prominence of her household wait for an opportunity to strike—the way they always strike. The second scene opens with the frustrated conversation of Chandidasi with her sleeping child:
Bhagirath, your father hasn't two minutes to spare to listen to my woes. Won't you listen to all that hurts within me? Before you were born, I never knew I'd feel like this. Now it hurts so bad when I bury the little ones under the banyan tree. O my son, do you feel your mother's woe? Men in general are so insensitive. Their children die, I bury them. And they say I have the evil eye; if I stare at a child, it's sure to die....The other day in the dark someone hurled a stone at me. (2.81)

Here, Chandidasi is the mouthpiece of the playwright. By calling men in general insensitive, Mahasweta Devi lashes out at the men whose passivity and inarticulateness have caused, irreparable damage to the spirit of womanhood. These words reflect not only the predicament of Chandidasi but also that of every suffering mother. Symbolically, the child with its primal innocence serves as a link between the active world of the mother and the inactive world of the father. Added to that, the readers are also, by implication, for the first time, informed that Chandidasi's confrontation with the ungrateful superstitious people is imminent.

It is very obvious that, as a character, Chandidasi has an edge over other creations of Mahasweta Devi. Unlike Sujata in “Mother of 1084”, she never minces words and is more eloquent and fearless in her expressions of protest against injustice. When her motives are suspected by people, she turns to her husband for moral support. He stands by her in the beginning, but when having been annoyed by her endless complaints, he says, “How can you be a witch? Those who bury children turn into Bayens, when they are possessed, not witches” (2.83). Hearing these words, Chandidasi becomes furious and demands an apology from her husband:
What's that you said? So, you call me a Bayen? Me, a Bayen?
That's what you said, didn't you? So you'd say I dig up the
graves and raise the dead babies? Kiss them? Suckle the dead
children? How could you say it?... What a joke to crack at the
expense of a mother with a little child! Take back your words,
else I'll beat my head against the floor till I die. (2.83)

While exhorting him to avenge the injustice meted out to her she tells,
"Before your very eyes, I'll jump before the running train with Bhagirath in my
arms" (2.85). It is this aggressiveness in Chandidasi's character which is mainly a
result of her helpless situation makes her one of the most sympathetic creations of
Mahasweta Devi. The sensitive, sympathetic, tender and compassionate mother
pulsating with the essential human virtues is also a rebel when it comes to the
question of safe guarding the higher principles of life her status and dignity. It may
not be a social or political resistance, but a human resistance against all forms of
tyranny. In her fight for justice she becomes an organic intellectual.

But however a woman rebels in this male-dominated society she is generally
considered inferior to man, and is deprived of all her freedom. Ultimately she must
conform to the existing ideals allowing herself to be marginalised, otherwise she will
be trampled by the unethical values of the feudal society. And that is the tragic end
of Chandidasi.

Men like Gourdas, a hypocrite and a counterpart of the urban exploitative
class, attempt to eliminate Chandidasi because he sees her as a threat to his existence
as the defender of feudal virtues. Being instigated by this clever manipulator, Shashi,
a close relative of Malindar, accuses that Chandidasi's 'evil eye' was responsible for
the death of his child Tukni. Malindar senses it and mad with rage shouts, "It seems
Shashi has an adviser now in Gourdas. Gourdas! when a neighbour’s house is on fire, would you pour kerosene over the fire instead of water? Is that what you’d do? One can see Shashi mad with grief. But you’ve not gone mad. What are you trying to suggest?” (2.84). In order to deceive Chandidasi into a trap, immediately Gourdas pretends repentance and starts pleading to Chandidasi who refuses to do her duty in the cremation ground:

How can you say that?...Have you forgotten whose daughter you are? Your ancestry? If you do not bury them, their souls remain hovering, far from their destination. You are a progeny of the illustrious Kalu Dome...Have mercy on us, mother, forgive us our transgressions. (2.84)

Though the flattering words do not move her, Chandidasi feels pity for Shashi’s predicament and decides to do the last rites of his child. She swears upon the head of her own child and cries:

I’ve never wished any ill on Tukhi, nor on any child. You all know who my forbears were. I carry out my obligations as a sign of reverence for them. I guard the graves that hold your dead children. I pull out thorn wood to cover the graves, chase away the jackals. But all that’s over now. I’ll never serve you again. If my forefathers resent it, I’ll plead for their forgiveness....And let the community know that this will be the last time that I’ll do this job. (2.84-85)

Her motherly love is aroused to act when she hears the jackals’ cry in the midnight. She at once leaves her suckling child in bed and goes to the grave yard to protect the dead Tukni in the grave. Bending over the newly dug grave with great
affection, she says, “There’s nothing to be scared of Tukni dear....It’s me on guard little mother. You needn’t get scared....My breasts ache, at bursting point, with all the milk, and the suckling child at home” (3.86).

But this very act of maternal love, the milk of human kindness, proves to be a death blow to her very existence. The act of victimisation is in the offing. Chandidasi has to confront the degenerated social forces—the people with beliefs in superstitions and black magic and whose intellect is blunted by their insatiable greed for power and wealth. Being set by the wicked schemer Gourdas, the credulous folk, convinced that she is possessed by evil spirits, surrounds Chandidasi to attack her.

GOURDAS. See for yourself, Malindar, you bastard. It’s your wife, the Bayen that’s been killing our children....Who was she talking to? Whom was she fondling?

MALINDAR. Chandi? Why did you leave your bed and come here?...Why is your sari dripping with milk? Whom were you suckling? For whom was the lullaby?

CHANDIDASI. I’m no Bayen. I’ve a suckling child, and that’s why my breasts ooze milk all the time. (3.86)

Ironically Chandidasi who moves bravely among the graves driving away ferocious jackals, becomes powerless to protect herself from the domination of patriarchal chauvinism. Her cry for mercy has fallen on deaf ears. “Gangaputta, you know it’s true. Why don’t you tell them?” (3.87) Trembling uncontrollably Malindar shouts at the top of his voice, “I...Malindar Gangaputta...strikes my drum (beats the drum frantically)...to declare that my wife has turned into a Bayen, a Bayen!” (3.87). Chandidasi is pathetically defenceless when her insensitive husband has also become a party to victimisation.
All the forces seem to have intrigued against Chandidasi to deprive her of the status of a human being. As it has been rightly pointed out by Patricia Waugh, “If women speak outside (the symbolic) order they will either not to be heard or be heard as insane” (qtd. in Satyanarayana 97). Branded as a Bayen, Chandidasi’s presence is considered inauspicious. The villagers are scared to face her for she has become, “the enemy of the state, the individual, and of her own salvation” (Wiener 521). The inhumanity of the superstitious people, in forcing a fellow being to the level of an animal, is effectively depicted as Malindar makes a revelation about Chandidasi to Bhagirath their son:

Now I’ve told you everything. Your mother’s been a Bayen ever since. They’d have burnt her to death if she had been a witch.

But, son, a Bayen’s not for killing. Kill a Bayen, and the children start dying. They set up a hovel for her beside the railway track, every Saturday they leave a hamper of food for her at her doorstep. Once a year they give her two saris and two ‘gaamchhas’.... She couldn’t let me out of her sight for a moment.

But now she’s been all alone for all these years. There, listen, it’s the Bayen singing her lullaby. (3.87-88)

It is the mother in Bayen that sings the lullaby for her child:

Come, sleep, come to my bed of rags,

My child god sleeps in my lap,

The elephants and horses at the palace gates,

The dog Jhumra in the ashheap. (1.75)

Kavita Mahajan, a prominent Marathi writer, in her novel Br which is an utterance of protest, projects a similar situation. Prafulla, the protagonist of the
novel, during her survey in tribal areas about participation of rural women in politics, encounters with variety of problems and several women. A few of these women elected to Gram Panchayat, whenever they try to use their power or make decisions, their male colleagues or husbands suppress them and they are deliberately kept away from the administration. Jayabai is one such woman who, when try to fight against the system, is declared 'Bhutali' (woman practising black magic) and beaten to death by the people. In Bernard Shaw’s St. Joan, in spite of the discouraging words and false assumption of the people that she is mad Joan persists in doing the will of God. She becomes a memorable and powerful instrument to free her country from the conqueror’s yoke and restore the crown to Charles VII of France. But being sold to the English for ten thousand gold crowns, she is charged for sorcery and perishes at the stake. Jayabai and Joan closely resemble our tragic heroine, Chandidasi.

After Malindar finishes his flashback, the audience is taken back to the present, that is now with Chandidasi in her new role as Bayen. Malindar, like the 'Sutradar' of the folk drama provides a natural link between scenes. The playwright by making Malindar act out his love affair with Chandidasi and brand her as a Bayen achieves greater theatrical economy and frees herself of the burden of composing the bridging scenes.

Condemned to lead a solitary life, Chandidasi is deprived of the right to motherhood, and Bhagirath is forbidden from enjoying the motherly affection. Though she leads a life of living death, her banishment serves as a catalyst which accelerates the realisation of the great human values that are quite often ignored. Her transformation form mother to the witch-mother not only sharpens her awareness which is a special attribute of the human beings but also serves as a means of self-
realisation. Though, to some extent, she enjoys caressing the imaginary child, she is not unaware of the pain of being separated from her son and live companionless. She ruminates in the opening scene, “I don’t have anybody any more, nobody, When I hadn’t become a Bayen, I had everybody, (rocks an imaginary child in her arms). I used to rock him like this, suckle him, all that milk, a real flood…the floor, and that’s why” (1.75).

In Mahasweta Devi’s Breast-Giver, the tragedy of Jashoda is the tragedy of the motherhood enjoined on a woman as a feudal virtue but in reality it is only a means of perpetuation of the patriarchal conventions. But the tragedy of Chandidasi is the denial of motherhood that turns out to be a curse. The relationship between a mother and a son, which forms the core of these two plays “Mother of 1084” and “Bayen” acquires a metaphysical dimension, as both the mother and son are engaged in the pursuit of fulfilment in each other’s martyrdom. As such while Sujata in “Mother of 1084” is in search of her son Brati—a missing part of her soul, Bhagirath, in “Bayen”, sets out to learn of his mother, Chandidasi, a victim of decadent social conventions.

The natural commitment that binds a mother and her child together is impossible to be ignored by any human institution for long. As the legendary Bhagirath, after accomplishing arduous penance had brought the sacred Ganga down to the mortal world, Chandidasi’s son Bhagirath, having undergone enough penance in terms of his loss of motherly love, is successful in crossing the conventional boundaries to bring his mother, “the embodiment of mother Ganga” (2.84) back to society. Bhagirath enquires his father of the seeing him talking to the Bayen:
BHAGIRATH. Isn't the living man who speaks to the Bayen doomed to die? My second mother tells me, Bhagirath come back straight from school, run whenever you hear the canister clanging otherwise she'll suck life blood. And you spoke to her? Won't she kill you off?

MALINDAR. No, dear, she won't kill me...she's a Bayen now,... She's your mother....You were born of her womb,...she showed you the world, she suckled you, and then she become a Bayen.

BHAGIRATH. My mother? Without clothes? Without food? Without oil on her hair? (1.77-78)

After knowing that the Bayen is his mother, this school going child cannot suppress his curiosity of seeing his mother. He contemplates, “I'll not look on her face, I'll just see her face in the water. There can be no harm if I don't look on her face. I'll look at the reflection in the water” (4.88).

Bhagirath cannot restrain his inner urge to have a look at his mother as is evident in the stage direction. As his mother fills the pitcher and is about to turn around, he notices the reflection in the water. He raises his face, and for one long second they stare into each other’s faces, before the Bayen turns her face away, but Bhagirath stares on. Looking at his utterly exhausted and despondent mother in a filthy red saree and her hair dishevelled, Bhagirath is not able to resist his rhetorical enquiries: “Don’t you have another sari? Would you like to have a whole sari not in shreds? Want my dhoti? Why do you cry every evening?” (4.88).

Though Chandidasi’s maternal instinct is deeply stirred by his love and concern, she fears the confrontation believing that there is poison in the air into
which she breathes and there is poison in her touch. Though very much excited to see and talk to her son, Chandidasi hardens herself and speak with greater firmness: “The Gangaputta’s son should never again come to the tracks in the evening. I promise, I won’t cry again. Let him go home and swear that he’ll never come here again even to look upon the Bayen’s shadow. Never again” (4.89). In this scene in which the son confronts the witch-mother who herself fears the confrontation more than the son, the playwright touches the larger space of the social forces that separate mother and son in a superstitious system.

With the son’s arrival, Chandidasi’s relations with humanity are reestablished. The most surprising element in the character of Chandidasi is that she never bears a grudge against her persecutors, the society at a large. Thus Chandidasi, a victim of male-dominated society is seen again in action in the final scene. Having seen Gourdas and his gang spread the bamboo poles on the track to derail and loot the train, Bayen gives up her life to save the lives of hundreds of people travelling in that train. Though ill used by family and society, she rises above the community and shows that her concern for the welfare of the community is in no way lesser than that of others in the society.

The Railway Guard, acknowledging her great sacrifice, tells, “She’s been brave. A brave woman. A brave deed. The Railways are sure to award her a medal, posthumous of course and a cash reward too” (4.91). This act of martyrdom shatters the superstitions and prejudices woven around her as a Bayen. When the Guard enquires about the identity of the dead woman, Bhagirath’s spontaneous, genuine acknowledgement before the world that the dead as his mother is a strong defiance against the age-old constraints, “Let me tell you all. You can write down....She’s
my mother...my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi (suddenly breaks into loud weeping)...my mother. Not a Bayen. She was never a Bayen, my mother” (4.91).

Mahasweta Devi raises quite a number of pertinent questions for the audience to think about: Who is the actual outcast? Is it the Bayen who was ostracised by her community or those within the community who spoil the welfare of the community and society by staying within it and acting against it in thought, word and deed?

The metaphoric core of “Bayen” in which a mother is branded as a witch and separated from her son till the latter acknowledges the dead woman as his mother, lies deeper than obvious protest against the inhumanity of superstition. In this final acknowledgement, there is thus the assertion of a value that is too often denied or ignored the natural commitment that binds mother and son together.

Both the plays “Mother of 1084” and “Bayen”, are a fine study of the effects of the socio-political exploitation on the psyche of the sensitive mothers who are essentially humane. Both the plays end with their protagonists throwing defiance in the teeth of immoral social values and both advocate universal motherhood, a metamorphosis from limited personal relationships. Similarly Steinbeck’s eternal creations, Ma and Rose in his novel The Grapes of Wrath are supreme examples of the kind of compassion that one can extend to the suffering humanity. Steinbeck has a lesson of affirmation to pass on to the reader through the story of Joad family who are strong against hurdles. Ma’s conviction is proved by her action of allowing her daughter Rose to come to the rescue of a dying man by nursing him with her breast milk which is no longer necessary for her own still-born child. The family has lost everything, but it has not lost love and it is this basic reality that Mahasweta Devi also stresses in these plays.
Through these portrayals Mahasweta Devi affirms Gandhiji's conviction that women are not the weaker sex. In his essay "Women not the Weaker Sex", Gandhiji celebrates the instinctual power and the enduring and sacrificing qualities of women. As he pronounces that the power of woman can be understood only when one enters into her mind, Mahasweta Devi bestows an endless power to these mothers to love and sacrifice. In a world divided by religious, caste, gender and regional identities, Mahasweta Devi's mothers gain an insight into the governing philosophy of life that is in the choice between hate and love, they choose love and stay there.