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**Portrayal of Dystopian Society and Brati as a Dystopian Protagonist in Mahasweta Devi's Mother of 1084**

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**Abstract:**

The concept of Utopia deals with the ideal perfect state with completely content citizens, whereas Dystopia portrays the complete opposite. In Dystopia, the people lead a wretched life due to tyrannical governments, environmental disasters, and dehumanization. They are constantly under surveillance and controlled with oppression and terror by the authorities. Though Dystopia is an imaginary concept, many oppressive traits are visible in the existing society, where citizens face excessive control of authority that curbs their freedom. Mahasweta Devi, a renowned writer and social activist, in her watershed novel 'Mother of 1084', portrays the picture of a society in which the authorities imposed complete control on the marginalized people and suppressed their basic rights, turning them into others without any rights. The present paper studies the dystopian traits visible in the society depicted by Devi in this novel and the revolt against it by the protagonist. Brati, the young boy, as a dystopian protagonist, tried to change the scenario and bring equality for these others by joining the Naxalite movement, but all his attempts proved futile.

**Keywords:** Utopia, anti-utopia, Dystopia, Dystopian protagonist, dehumanization, landlords, industrialists, bureaucrats, Naxalite movement.

**Introduction**

The epoch-making work Utopia (1516) by Sir Thomas More speaks about the ideal society, a perfect, flawless society with minimal crime, violence, and poverty where all the people are pleased and content. After Utopia, the concept of Dystopia came into existence and became popular, which was treated as the complete opposite of the earlier one. In contrast to Utopia, Dystopia is the state suffering

from tyrannical governments, environmental disasters, dehumanization, etc. Cambridge Dictionary defines it as a very bad or unfair society, especially an imaginary society in the future, with much suffering. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it is an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives. While Utopia depicts the ideally perfect state, especially in its social, political, and moral aspects, Dystopia depicts a state in which the conditions of life are terrible due to deprivation, oppression, or terror. The word dystopian comes as the opposite of Utopia- anti-utopia, derived from the Latin prefix 'dys,' which means bad, so dystopian means a lousy place to dwell. The dystopian society displays some common characteristics like the citizens of the society are controlled by propaganda, they are prohibited from information, independent thoughts, and freedom, they are under constant surveillance, they have a fear of the outside world, and they live in a dehumanized state. Various controls, such as corporate control, bureaucratic control, technological control, philosophical/religious control, etc, suppress society.

A dystopian protagonist is the main character in a dystopia who raises his voice against it. He is a strong individual who refuses to let the circumstances get him down. The stock characteristics of the dystopian protagonist are that most of the time, he is the young outcaste person from the repressed class; he can see and understand the stark reality of the oppression in the dystopian society, he can sense that something is wrong with the society, feels that he is trapped in it, he challenges the existing tyrannical social and political systems, rebels against the same for the survival. He ultimately faces the consequences of opposing the system. He is brave enough to fight against injustice. Winston Smith from George Orwell's '1984', Katniss Everdeen from Suzanne Collins's 'The Hunger Games,' Offred from Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and John the Savage from Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World' are the well-known dystopian protagonists from the famous fictions fighting against the dystopian society. Though all these fictitious characters belong to the futuristic imaginary society, the problems they often address are real-world issues, and quite often, their oppressive circumstances match the existing societal conditions.

Mahasweta Devi, a highly applauded Indian writer, and social activist, exhausted her pen to write about the pains and miseries of the marginalized people in her society. Her pragmatic writing and great concern for society won her many prestigious awards like the Jnanpith Award (1996), Sahitya Akademi Award (1979), and Ramon Magsaysay Award (1997), along with India's civilian awards, Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan. Most of her fictional and non-fictional works shed light on the oppression of women, lower caste, and tribal people by powerful authority. Her most renowned works include Jhansi Rani (1956), Aranyer Adhikar (1979), Agnigarbha (1978), The Breast Stories (1997), Dust on the Road (1997), etc. Mahasweta Devi's watershed novel " Mother of 1084" depicts the story of a young boy, Brati, who loses his life while fighting against the system, and Sujata, his Mother, who tries to understand the reasons for it. It portrays contemporary society,

which resembles the dystopian one to a great extent, and the protagonist Brati emerges as the dystopian protagonist trying to oppose the existing tyrannical system.

### **Literature Review**

Thomas More's famous work "Utopia" (1516) speaks about the ideal place where everything is perfect; every citizen will get equal rights to education, healthcare, employment, peaceful Government, and a safe environment. The dystopian concept came into existence as the opposite of Utopia, a negative utopia, where everything is just opposite the perfect state. People will have no freedom; they will be oppressed and under the control of the Government. A famous example of a dystopian novel is '1984' written by George Orwell (1949), in which he portrays society facing the consequences of totalitarianism, the constant mass surveillance, the unequal distribution of wealth and power, and the repressive regimentation of people. Many researchers believe that this resembled the situation in the Soviet Union during the period of Stalin and Nazi Germany. The individuality and thinking of the citizens, language, and flow of information are controlled by Big Brother, a dictator who puts them under constant surveillance. George Orwell's other well-applauded work, the allegorical story 'Animal Farm' (1945), presents a dystopian imaginary world that resembles the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the early years of the Soviet Union and comments on communism and how oppressive governments wreck the society.

Before this genre became very popular with Orwell's '1984', Aldous Huxley tried it differently in his work "Brave New World" (1946). He wrote it as a parody of utopian novels in which he presented a different kind of dystopian society with an intelligence-based social hierarchy and no individual identity. The citizens suffer from excessive control by the Government, censorship, removal of emotions- the oppression and elimination of negative emotions, and a false sense of happiness, making everyone believe that they have everything they could want or need, and it keeps them ignorant of the actual feelings. The inhabitants are forced to use the psychoactive drug Soma, which gives them a false feeling of happiness and helps them escape from the problems of real life. In "The Handmaid's Tale" (1998), Margaret Atwood tries to present a dystopian society in the imaginary land - of Gilead, in which a woman's identity, fertility, and freedoms are suppressed, and they are forcibly assigned to produce children for the "Commanders," who are the ruling class there. This novel illustrates the plight of powerless women in a patriarchal society, the suppression of women's reproductive rights, and the peril of extremist religious beliefs in a totalitarian society. Along With this ma, many other novels present a topic where people suffer, lacking their fundamental rights due to the oppression of authority li, such as Suzanne Collins's "The Hunger Games," Veronica Roth's "Divergent," Lois Lowry's classic, "The Giver," etc.

Though Dystopia is an imaginary concept, many oppressive traits are visible in the existing society, where citizens face excessive control of authority that curbs their freedom. The problems around them grab the attention of the writers to convey them effectively to the readers, and to some extent, they portray them exaggeratedly in their work. In this way, they try to alert society. Amy Atchison and Shauna Shames assert that though Dystopia is inaccurate, it warns against some real-life governments

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that can be "dystopian" practicing excessive control over their subject. They dealt with three major dystopia types. The first one is the authoritarian state run by a dictator or powerful group, with powerful governments that infringe on individual lives and liberties. The second type is "aristocracies," a dystopian state that appears nonauthoritarian but still takes away the fundamental human rights of the people through market forces. The partnership of political and industrial leaders exploits the workers and consumers. The collapse of the Government, which led the territory to primitive feudalism, is the third kind of dystopian. Here, most things are ungoverned, ultimately leading to the individual dictator ruling the society. They firmly believe that there is always some real-world correlation with dystopian fiction and share many examples of real-world dystopian governments. (Atchison and Shames, 2019) If Indian society is considered, the caste system, the patriarchy, subjugation of women, marginalization of the poor and lower caste, the corrupt political system - all these elements turn the society into a dystopian one, and if anyone tries to oppose it and bring the changes he can be termed as a dystopian protagonist. The present study aims to study the novel 'Mother of 1084' from a dystopian perspective and interpret Brati as a dystopian protagonist.

### **Discussion**

Dystopia is a hypothetical concept that deals with an imaginary society where all things are under control, the citizens do not have any freedom, and they are under constant surveillance and live in a dehumanized state. Though the concept is imaginary, many of the traits described in it are visible in real society, where the authorities violate the fundamental rights of ordinary citizens and are oppressed by the powerful, resulting in a torturous and pathetic life. The oppression could be caused by the Government, politicians, bureaucrats, religious leaders, etc. So Dystopia is no longer only a fictional concept; to some extent, it has become a reality, "Dystopia is not a real place; it is a warning, usually about something bad the Government is doing or something good it is failing to do. Actual dystopias are fictional, but real-life governments can be "dystopian" – looking a lot like the fiction." (Atchison and Shames, 2019) These kinds of real-life dystopian governments use their force against helpless citizens, always keeping them under threat to stay in power. Margaret Atwood, in her PEN Pinter prize lecture, comments on the emergence of real-life Dystopia, "Then ... warlords and demagogues take over, some people forget that all people are people, enemies are created, vilified and dehumanized, minorities are persecuted, and human rights as such are shoved to the wall." Not so much a distant and frightening future, she said, as "the cusp of where we are living right now." (Charlotte Higgins, 2016)

The same kind of dystopian scenario with the oppression of the poor and helpless by the authorities is presented by Mahasweta Devi in the famous literary work, "Mother of 1084". This novel, a significant milestone in her literary career, is set against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement emerging in a small village, Naxalbari, in West Bengal, gradually spreading its influence to other states of India and starting a revolt against the Government. To bring social and political transformation to help people experiencing poverty get their fundamental rights,

some people fought against the order - the capitalist system - the landlords, industrialists, and bureaucrats. They wanted to eradicate social injustice and economic inequality and rectify the system which was ignoring the sufferings of the marginalized people in the society. These marginalized people without any political power and basic social facilities became the others, the neglected and powerless entities in society. The Government tried to control the revolt ruthlessly with power and oppression, resulting in great chaos and unrest in that era. "The 1970s remains an unforgotten decade in Bengal's memory because there was a total break in the communication between the people and a popularly elected government of a democratic nation, a situation that bred mutual suspicion and distrust. It took a decade, many lives, and a change in political dispensation before a semblance of order could return to the state." (Sarkar, 2011). The middle and upper-middle-class youths were influenced by the concept of socialism introduced by the movement. The Naxalites were raising their voice in support of the oppressed people of society like the Adivasi, Dalits, and the poor landless laborers. They blamed the Government for failing to improve the poor and exploited conditions.

Knowing this historical background helps the readers better understand the political setting of the novel 'Mother of 1084'. This novel shows the uprising of the young students against the establishment, its violent suppression by the authorities, the brutal killing of the young revolutionaries, and the cold reaction, or rather no reaction of the society to it. According to Mahasweta Devi, the most threatening part was the complete indifference of society towards it; no one was stunned by it and mourned except the family members of the victims. The support and the indulgence of the youths in this movement against the establishment and the brutal suppression of it by the authority depicted in this novel exhibit the dystopian traits of the existing society. The novel depicts Brati's struggle against the contemporary socio-political system, which refused equal rights and benefits to the lower caste and lower class people but instead justified their oppression.

### **Depiction of Dystopian Society**

The concept of a dystopian society is imaginary in which everything appears unpleasant and bad due to the oppressive totalitarian system. People are deprived of their basic rights and denied equal opportunities, and the unequal distribution of power and wealth increases the gap between the rich and the poor, making the rich more powerful to oppress the poor. The poor, helpless people live in poverty and fear of violence and persecution. The society depicted in the novel 'Mother of 1084' resembles these dystopian traits; it portrayed the society during the 1970s in Bengal when the Naxalite movement was at its peak. Though there was a democratic government, the writer considered it an authoritarian one with a democratic mask. Mahasweta Devi, with great concern, depicted the socio-political circumstances of that era as dystopian. The growing support of the young students for the movement against the Government was a matter of great concern for the authorities. They tried to suppress the opposition and revolt of these youth with force. These revolutionary people questioned the intention of the profit-mad business people and leaders who tried to control society for their self-interest (Devi, 2016). The ultimate result of this

opposition was Death, "Death was the sentence reserved for every one of them, for all those who had rejected a society of spineless, opportunist time-servers masquerading as artists, writers, and intellectuals. .... People in all the parties, people of all creeds, had the unlimited, democratic right to kill these young men who had rejected the parties of the establishment." (Devi, 2016). These youth were supposed to be misguided, 'a cancerous growth on the body of democracy' (Devi, 2016).

Like the dystopian society, the novel depicts the pathetic picture of contemporary society where proper development planning was lacking, and environmental issues were ignored. More and more residential colonies were developed for economic gain by sacrificing the natural environment - the fields, forests, villages, etc. No one showed any concern for this environmental degradation. The basic facilities provided in these newly developed colonies depended on the political support it offered to the ruling party. If they supported the opposite party, the Government denied them basic amenities. "The Opposition had consistently polled a majority of votes in the region.

Moreover, the Government had taken its revenge by denying the region the simple comforts of a decent road, a health center, an adequate number of tube wells, or a bus route." (Devi, 2016). This petty politics ruined the development of the place, creating unrest among the youth. The youth could see the oppression of the marginalized people and the denial of fundamental rights to them by the authorities, making the weak section of the society weaker. As the youth started opposing it, the place did not remain safe for them. The police, if suspected, chased the youth, put them in prison, and tortured them, and in that process, many revolutionaries were killed. The families of the deceased revolutionaries were added to the blocklist of the police and were constantly under surveillance and threat.

The most disheartening part was the complete negligence of the so-called intellectuals of the society who did not criticize it and support the youth. Everyone pretended that everything was normal, and this pretense of normalcy was alarming, which encouraged the brutal suppression of the movement by authority. Many were chased and killed, whereas many were sent to prisons to suffer without any trial of them, "Deny the existence of the country's youth. Deny them altogether- that would be enough to wipe them out. The prisons are overflowing. There is no information about thousands of the country's young men. Ignore them. That is the way to exterminate them." (Devi, 2016). Brati, a very sensitive young man, could not tolerate the suppression of the weak section of society by the powerful and joined the movement to bring change to the existing dystopian society.

#### **Brati as a Dystopian Protagonist**

Mahasweta Devi portrayed Brati as an emotional, timid, and caring child who greatly loved his Mother. However, he finally turned into a revolutionary young man who fought against the establishment of equal rights for underprivileged people. Brati refused to follow his father's plan for higher studies abroad, a good job, and a settled, reputed life. Instead of focusing on his bright future in the elite class like his other siblings, he joined the movement with his young friends from the lower strata of society. He stood against the establishment, which infuriated his father. His struggle

was against the aristocratic system, denying the marginalized people basic facilities and rights. He had differences with his father not as an individual. However, as a member of the rich and influential group ignoring the plight of the poor, "The individual who goes by the name of Dibyanath Chatterjee is not my enemy. ... All the things and values he holds on to. Many others swear by the same things and values; we consider them our enemies. He belongs to that class." (Devi, 2016). Though Brati also belonged to this wealthy elite class, he was always compassionate about the poor; he could feel the anguish of these deprived people like Somu, Laltu, and many others. So, he joined the movement to help them and give them equal rights and opportunities.

The authoritative system was so shrewd that it manipulated some members of the same group and used them to suppress the movement. Brati and his friends were so absorbed in the thought of revolution that they could not anticipate the betrayal. When Brati realized this betrayal, he rushed to save his friends, but it was already late; the trap was set for them, and the violent mob attacked them. They could not handle the frenzied crowd, and all of them fell prey to the brutal attack of the system and lost their lives. The attack was so barbaric that Brati had "Three bullet holes: on the neck, on the abdomen, on the chest. .... Brati's face was battered and smashed by the blunt edge of a sharp, heavy weapon. .... There was not an inch of skin left smooth and clear to bear the touch of her fingers. It was all raw flesh, all battered and smashed." (Devi, 2016). It shows how the establishment was determined to crush this opposition. Even after the massacre, the authorities were not ready to take notice of it and catch the killers. These young revolutionaries were tagged as anti-socials and were not allowed even the proper cremation after their Death; their corpses lying at the Kantapukur morgue were burnt in the darkness of night in police protection without any proper rituals. No one bothered about it; no one was questioned and held responsible for the Death of these young boys. Without any investigation, the police closed the case, and Sujata wondered about the Death of her son Brati. No one raised any questions about the Death of these young boys, and the authorities did not give any clarification. The story of torture continues after the savage annihilation; the remaining members are imprisoned and cruelly tormented, Nitu is beaten to Death, Nandini and Brati's friend lose her right eye, and the normalcy in her life due to the torturous solitary confinement. The protest of the people against this brutality was also eliminated with force. The media and the newspapers were all under their control, so they also did not support the movement and never portrayed the real story of oppression to the nation. These young revolutionaries were prohibited from having bulletins to spread their opinions and ideologies to the common citizens. When they tried to put up posters with slogans opposing the Government, they faced the bullets of the police. The authorities ordered the killing of these people, and unfortunately, their killers were moving freely in society without any fear. There was complete chaos in the society where "One could kill and go unpunished, for the killers were extremely cunning. Can any society be in a more terrifying situation? Why is there no one to identify those who initiated the

killers into killing the youth? How could they go unscathed? Why does it all remain so baffling?" (Devi, 2016).

Brati dreamt of the end of this torturous era and the emergence of a new one where everyone would get what they deserved. He put all his efforts into making it a reality, but unfortunately, the authority proved more influential, spoiling all his dreams. Society did not react to the sacrifice of these young boys, remaining indifferent and pretending that everything was normal. Even in his family, Brati could not get the love and sympathy except from his Mother. He was a spoiled child for his father; his siblings also could not understand his feelings. He could not tolerate his father, Dibyanath, for his adultery and aristocratic behavior. He strongly opposed him and always tried to support his Mother by raising her voice against injustice. For his father, Brati's Death was a matter of shame that could put his reputation at stake. So, instead of being grief-stricken by Brati's Death, he was busy hiding it from society. Brati sacrificed his life to bring some positive change in society, but unfortunately, it did not work; in the end, Sujata rightly pointed out, "Did Brati die so that these corpses with their putrefied lives could enjoy all the images of all the poetry of the world, the red rose, the green grass, the neon lights, the smiles of mothers, the cries of children— forever? Did he die for this? To leave the world to these corpses?" (Devi, 2016). Brati, as the dystopian protagonist, raised his voice against the dystopian society but, unfortunately, was stamped out by the authorities.

Along with Brati, many characters portrayed by Mahasweta Devi in the novel tried to oppose the existing oppressive system and were brutally handled by the authorities. Brati's friends like Laltu, Somu, and Partha were their low-income family's only hope of bringing happiness in their deprived lives. However, their revolt against the Government led them towards their tragic end, leaving their families in complete shock and despair. Nandini stood against the system, but the torture in solitary confinement changed her life completely; she would never be normal again and would never be able to start her family. Sujata got stuck in the age-old patriarchal social system, which marginalized her to the status of a subordinate in the family without any say. However, ultimately, she revolted against it. It is also an instance of a revolt against the dystopian society.

### **Conclusion**

The social setting drawn by Mahasweta Devi in the novel reveals the dystopian traits where the people do not have freedom and equal opportunities, are under control, and their fundamental rights are violated. Brati, along with his friends, tried to raise his voice against it, but the authorities muted their voice. Unfortunately, the revolt of these young people was not appreciated by the society for which they struggled or their family members. The elite in the society still believed that there was no problem in it; everyone had food, jobs, houses, cars, and wealth to lead a happy life. They were utterly ignorant of the hardships faced by the other end of society and were not ready to acknowledge the struggle and revolt of these deprived people.

Moreover, this ignorance and indifference of society towards the oppression and marginalization of a sector in society turned it into a dystopian one full of



problems with no solutions. Mahasweta Devi's comment, "Has nothing changed? No. Nothing has. Why did they die? What has changed? Are men now all happy? Have the political games ended? Is it a better world? No. " (Devi, 2016) shows the futility of the sacrifice of all these boys. Brati emerged as a dystopian protagonist and his friends tried to change this dystopian society but could not succeed.

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