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Parallel Novelistic Tributes to Maternal Love as Political Force: Literature and/ as Social Recognition

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Abstract: The article addresses two short novels set in widely different contexts, but depicting mother-figures of comparable, low-key strength; implicitly embodying moral-political force. Both Sunjata, the inconsolable mother of Mahasweti Devi's *Mother of 1084* ([1975] 2001) and Nasula, the desperately poor and stressed mother in Binwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope* (2000), are inspired by the unconquerable integrity of their children – Brati the revolutionary son of a wealthy, well-connected family in India and Sula, the quietly dignified daughter of a widowed, dirt-poor peasant woman in northern Zambia (eastern Africa). Devi's is a tragic account encompassing the son's death in police custody and ending with the mother's demise from the shock of grief and outrage. Sinyangwe's concludes on a small victory of immense significance as the mother through indefatigable courage retrieves stolen money needed for her daughter's further education. Despite these contrasts in tone and setting, both novelists reveal – in compellingly evocative portrayals – how the two women's painful experiences and deep thoughts expose the androcentric webs of collusive power and wealth that structure their societies. In conventional political thinking, these women are 'insignificant', but the authors – by showing both characters discerning and opposing the corruption of social structures – endow them with heroic stature.

Keywords: Moral-Political Force, Social Recognition, Maternal Love, Androcentrism

Denigration of women simply in terms of their gender is one of the uglier 'strokes across culture' interlinking continents and countries, classes and cultures and persisting over centuries.¹ Assigning women the

seemingly worthy but often insidiously functionalist and subsidiary role of motherhood has long been identified as (all too often) an entrapping and socially exclusionary device. Anyone who has read Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) knows that the title is not merely ironic, but fiercely sarcastic. In it, the multi-childed protagonist observes despairingly: "The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die" (187). In the novel's penultimate sentence, after Nnu Ego's lonely death, the narrator asks: "...for what else could a woman want but to have sons who would give her a decent burial?" (224) – a question that links sardonically with the novel's title and very likely mockingly responds to Sigmund Freud's notorious inquiry, "Was will das Weib?"² in a sarcastic counter-question – one that is noticeably at odds with what Emecheta's text as a whole has clearly shown us about most women's yearning for recognition. In the chapter "Mother and Son, Woman and Man" from her powerful text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* ([1976] 1995), Adrienne Rich, too, links continents and cultures by twinning two seemingly contrasting and iconographic images of the mother, observing how,

...at the two ends of a spectrum which is really a continuum, she is Kali, the "black mother" of Hindu religion, fangs ecstatically bared, a necklace of skulls around her neck, dancing on her dead husband's body; while in Michelangelo's white-satin-marble *Pietà* she bends her virginal mannequin's face above the icy, dandiacal corpse of the son on her lap.³ (185)

What is striking about the above quotation from Rich's text is that it might be read as an echo of the callously insensitive, completely uncomprehending remarks that her husband and other family members and associates make about the inconsolable and inexpressible grief Sujata (the protagonist) experiences at the death of her youngest (political activist) son Brati, in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*. They describe Sujata as heartless and feelingless about this loss of the one family member who understood and valued her, while holding her indirectly responsible for Brati's death –because she had supposedly 'indulged' him and because he had turned against his father in disgust at the latter's corrupt and wealthy lifestyle and marital infidelities. Yet the quotation from Rich's text, like the passionate indignation emanating from Emecheta's novel, does not account for the ways in which their profoundly and morally committed motherhood, in the lives of the main

female characters of both Devi's Indian and Sinyangwe's Zambian novels, enable both women to oppose injustice and to gain growing insight into their respective societies. It is not the purpose of this paper to criticise either Rich's important theoretical perspectives on motherhood under patriarchy or Emercheta's existential lament about it in the words of her protagonist. Neither Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope* (2000) nor Devi's *Mother of 1084* ([1975] 2001 transl.) is opposed to the perceptions of gender injustice conveyed by Rich or Emecheta. Nevertheless, I propose in this brief paper that the mothers depicted in the Zambian and Indian novels on which I focus derive from their motherhood the strength of non-compliance and the questing courage that bring out their latent heroism and capacity for prophetic insight.

I add immediately that the terms "heroism" and "prophetic insight" need to be carefully contextualized. Nasula's small but hard-won victory (in *A Cowrie of Hope*) does not and will not alter the basic, cynical structures (at family and state levels) of her society, while Sujata's death at the end of *Mother of 1084* – at the point when she has fully comprehended exactly how irreparable the loss of her son's life is and how ruthlessly state persecution and social cooptations of the poor function to destroy all those who would cleanse society – signals no facile triumphalism and communicates no sentimental beautification of ugly realities. The novel as a genre is nevertheless (this paper argues) the ideal mechanism to signal, vividly record and communicate *inwardness* within a familial or social context – the heart-space within which so many women's lives unfold in their ethical intensity and moral complexity. At the same time, the novel as vehicle carries the existential insights and the social knowledge and learning of its protagonists into the "public sphere" – particularly if endowed (as the philosopher Maria Pia Lara [1998] has taught us) with "illocutionary force" (2) or (phrased differently) if imbued with effective power.

Using quite different styles of composition and set in vastly separated geographical, cultural and class locations, the two novels' studies of crises of motherhood (or: crises arising in both cases from an especially intense embrace of a maternal relationship) are yet comparable in the vividness of their depiction and in the communicative power with which they pull us irresistibly into each mother's anguish. Both protagonists taste as if for the first time in its utter ruthlessness the corruptly self-serving mechanisms of their society, coming face to face with those who flourish within it. Both remain unwavering in their care,

concern and commitment to the child who has earned their love and respect. The emotional trajectory of the two novels is different – Devi's ending on a heartbroken, heartrending cry of unendurable loss and loneliness and Sinyangwe's in a quiet glow of terribly delayed, but recovered joy and hope – yet each woman's fidelity is not only enacting her motherhood but faithfully withstanding the agonizing testing of that role and commitment, is unmistakable. Fascinatingly, Sinyangwe (who is male, a widower and a successful professional) crossed a gender and class barrier to depict the dirt-poor peasant widow Nasula, whereas Devi, in creating the gentle and (hitherto) obediently socially conforming (and ideologically ignorant) upper-caste matron Sujata (a bank employee), portrays someone whose lifestyle is vastly different in its quietism from Devi's own socially activist and creative life. Yet each woman is imagined so vividly, with such moving empathy, that they are ineradicable from the reader's mind while pushing us to look more perceptively through their eyes at the society around them – and around us. We acquire social knowledge *along with* the protagonist.

Let me at this point provide a very brief synopsis of the two novels I deal with to aid those unfamiliar with the texts. Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* is set in Calcutta, West Bengal, in the seventies, on the day exactly two years after Sujata the protagonist's only politically conscious and activist son Brati was killed; ambushed along with three of his colleagues, all from poor families in contrast with his own, by the latter's fellow slum dwellers – youths coopted by the police and turned feral by the harsh social circumstances of urban squalor and squatterdom. Sujata grieves with special intensity in commemorating her son's life on his death-day, which would have been his twenty-second birthday. She visits for the second and last time a slum-dwelling woman outside whose home and with whose son (and two other youths) her own son Brati was killed; goes by invitation to meet for the first and last time her son's beloved fellow-revolutionary, just released from jail and nearly blind from torture; returning to her own home where the luxury and decadence of her younger daughter's engagement party now appal her – Sujata having understood at last exactly how wickedly contrived and unjust her son's and his three friends' killing was. In addition, she now grasps the bitter truth that the pattern of collusion between the state's 'security' forces and the worst members of society – among the obscenely wealthy *and* the dreadfully poor – is a basic structural aspect of the society in which she herself is (now, unbearably!) enmeshed.

When she is obliged to go outside from the party to greet the special operations head of the police (her daughter's rich and corrupt fiancé's closest friend and ally) who was directly involved in her son's death, Sujata collapses and dies: ostensibly of a burst appendix, but actually of a broken heart. The unendurable realization that is uttered in her final, wordless cry is that Brati (the most valuable person Sujata has ever known) was destroyed so that the heartless, corrupt and opportunist persons who make up her social and familial context could survive in the decadent luxury to which they believe they are entitled. Hence her cry – in the narrator's words – "smelt of blood, protest, grief" (127) and marks Sujata's final, complete dissension from the society she had served; shattering the façade she had helped maintain. Throughout the text, the pain giving the warning signals of Sujata's appendicitis has been associated with the birth-pangs that announced Brati's imminent birth twenty-two years ago. I interpret this physical pain as paralleling (in addition) the anguish of her growing understanding that the social structure is predatory and rotten. It is this that gives birth to intense moral awareness and judgement on her society that is an advance towards and a more fully loving union with Brati her dead son – although it also kills Sujata with feelings of dread and horror at what her son and his fellow revolutionaries were killed for.

Binwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope* is set in northern rural Zambia and in Lusaka, the capital city of this country. The hard life she has led, attributed by herself to her illiteracy; lack of professional skills; consequent poverty and dependence on the man she married, convinces Nasula – the barely subsisting peasant woman who is the main protagonist of this text – that she must ensure an education for her only child, her now fifteen-year-old daughter Sula. The mother recalls how persistently her husband's relatives ridiculed her during her married life in Lusaka for having (and in their eyes, therefore *being*) 'nothing'; how pitilessly they stripped her of the inheritance her husband had intended for her and Sula by putting this into his will and how she has had to scratch a living from the soil and from doing badly-paid piecework among her fellow villagers in the rural north of Zambia. Sula, her daughter, is hardworking and intellectually gifted and has earned a place in a good high school, but the cost of this further schooling is unreachably beyond her mother Nasula's pitifully limited means.

The novel opens with Nasula bracing herself to go and beg for the payment of the school fees from her dead husband's wealthy and

philandering younger brother whom she had refused to be married to upon being widowed; an act of resistance that earned her the detestation of all her in-laws. Walking many miles to their place, she finds it devastated; the family had got into debt and her brother-in-law's lifestyle brought in AIDS to ravage his and all three of his wives' lives. She returns home in despair, but then an unexpected visit from an old friend brings a new plan: Nasula's dried bean harvest can be sold in the city for a price that will cover the school fees at this time of drought and food scarcity. Nasula's friend (who lives in the city) assists her with managing transport south to Lusaka and with setting up her bag of a special, sought-after type of beans for sale, but a city conman makes off with the beans, leaving her still empty-handed and even more emotionally devastated than before. On her way home, drawn out of her very despair, Nasula hatches (not a plan in any sense, but) the implacable resolve to track down the thief and retrieve the money owed to her, and she returns to Lusaka.

After a week of living unwashed and underfed on the streets of Lusaka, Nasula finds the man and clutches on to him (and later, his car) while shouting at the gathered crowd that he's a thief. A bribe to a corrupt police officer almost succeeds in letting the conman off, but Nasula finds the station commander and finally, justice is done, her daughter's school supplies can be bought and her fees paid and Nasula returns joyously to her daughter in the village. She sends Sula off to high school; hopefully the first step towards a future professional career for her daughter.

What these synopses cannot convey is the immediacy, intensity and vividness with which the two women's experiences and thoughts are evoked in the chosen texts. What I have dubbed the 'mother force' working in the heart, soul and mind of Sujata in Devi's and Nasula in Sinyangwe's text is an active and motivational love-power – propelling each of the protagonists into acts and encounters and resulting in levels of knowledge about their societies and themselves that they would not otherwise have attained. The prominence given in each text to passionate righteousness, to courage and to dignity, gives vivid life to the two mother-figures as much as to the remembered 20-year-old son and to the brave 15-year-old daughter. Neither mother's realizations and acts bring about large transformations, but they affect lives and increase social knowledge within the text and powerfully communicate these impressions beyond the texts, both shockingly and inspirationally, to

their readers. By these means the literary works reach into the public sphere, reviving social and moral awareness of realities that ought to shock us, but to which we tend to become accustomed and eventually oblivious.

In Devi's text, the brutal telephone call informing Sujata that Brati is corpse no. 1084 in the police morgue (in the course of the police force 1970s crackdown on the Naxalites' attempt to change West Bengal) wakes her out of her moral sleep. "Everything seemed so well organized, orderly, neat and beautiful" (5) before this news, though within it Sujata had lived, despite her class, "*subservient*, silent, faithful, and without an existence of her own" (9 – emphasis added); during her mother-in-law's life without even "the right to buy a sari of her own" (24). Before, Sujata "had never thought of asking questions" (31), but her loss of and longing for the one child of hers who refused "to join their game" (30) brings her there. In Brati, there was "conviction... courage... irresistible passion" (20); in his father (Sujata's sleekly complacent, corrupt husband) merely the efficient prevention of the news – that his son died a social revolutionary's death – being made public. And in Calcutta, Devi observes sarcastically (and shows Sujata, at last, comprehending the hidden collusion), the city's supposedly "radical artists and intellectuals" look abroad: "demonstrat[ing] against barbarities in Vietnam" (49). Meanwhile the persecution – also of the dead young men's poor families – continues. Sujata, however, "had felt in the marrow of her bones how terrifying, brutal and violent this normalcy was" (60).

The shock of her belated, intense day of political education emboldens Sujata into scathingly denouncing her husband's sexual decadence, at last coming to this preening but powerful *paterfamilias* with her words. She also exposes her younger daughter's greed and snobbery – and her cruelty towards an elderly servant. Sujata dies of grief and love and outrage but has come alive in full moral awareness by means of her loving, motherly retracing of her son's life.

In Sinyangwe's novel, similarly, Nasula's defensive maternal love kindles an irrepressible determination and courage. Indeed, the author beautifully employs an extended, recurrent image of fire and flame to signify Nasula's burning hope for her child's future. I quote: "Her soul had eyes that saw far and a fire that burned deep" (5). Elsewhere we read: "Nasula was courage. Days had inured her to many things and turned her into hardwood" (14). These earthy images perfectly fit the healthy, weathered toughness of Nasula's personality. But within her rural poverty and the bareness of precarious subsistence, Sula her

daughter is the one thing of immense value, the "cowrie" of the title: "a great gift from the gods... to wear round one's neck for inspiration and, above all, hope" (72).

Similarly to Sujata's feelings for Brati, Nasula senses in her daughter a kind of awe-inspiring integrity of mind that inures the girl to the mocking taunts of her richer classmates. Hearing of this abuse, bravely withstood by the girl, "the innocent wisdom, maturity and spirit of the child took [Nasula] aback." Talking to Sula, she says, "was talking to a spirit" (76).

When Nasula starts her return journey from Nairobi on the bus after the theft of her beans, the narrator evokes her as assaulted by "dangerous thoughts in the caverns of her being" (97). In the wonderfully surreal passage depicting Nasula's spontaneous decision to return to Lusaka and wrest her rightful payment from the powerful, predatory criminal who took her produce, Nasula prays: "spirits of the dead, help me, I know of no other way than to bury my heart in this heat without fire" (108). In a description as applicable to the other mother, Nasula is propelled by "a power she could not overcome, which was from a bleeding heart" (122). Nasula's home remains, at the end of the text as at the beginning, "a metaphor of poverty. But it felt good being there" (147) – and in another poignant contrast with Devi's text, Sinyangwe's novel ends on the statement: "There was life in the bus and [Nasula] was part of that life" (147).

In the words of Frantz Fanon, these two novels, separately and together, "do battle for the creation of a human world... a world of reciprocal recognitions" (155).

In conclusion, let me acknowledge that while Devi's *Mother of 1084*⁴ is an acclaimed and internationally known text, Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope* remains (like so much contemporary African literature) a work that has hardly been 'noticed' in the international literary sphere, despite its beauty and the important cause it serves.⁵ Devi's unforgettable, tragic novel garnered almost immediate recognition, though some have more recently expressed demurrals at what is seen as an omission from the text of depictions of Naxalite acts of cruelty.⁶ Perhaps, in juxtaposing these two brief but powerful novels, I may be seen as exploiting the fame of Devi's text to draw attention to Sinyangwe's, but I would reiterate my implicit point that his small, deeply moving novel is worthy of much greater attention than it has so far been given. In that sense, the present paper seeks to pay tribute to both texts as its own attempt at contributing to "reciprocal recognitions" (see Fanon, above). Even so,

the author acknowledges the caution of Ernesto Laclau, that "[t]here is no universality except through an equivalence between particulars, and such equivalences are always contingent and context-dependent" (Butler et al., 211).

ENDNOTES

1. See texts by el Saadawi; Gilbert and Gubar; Angela Davis; Spivak; Nussbaum; Sahoo and Adichie.
2. Letter to Marie Bonaparte, cited in Jones, Ernest, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work* (1955, 421). The German words may be translated as 'What do women want?' or 'What does a woman desire?'
3. In a poem by Ramprasad Sen [his dates: 1718-75], he evokes the goddess Kali as follows:
Was she not merciless, would she kick the breast of her lord?
Men call you merciful, but there is no trace of mercy in you, Mother
You have cut off the heads of the children of others, and these you wear as a
garland around your neck
It matters not how much I call you "Mother, Mother." You hear me,
but you will
not listen.
Cited and translated from *Hindu Goddesses* by David R. Kinsley (University of California Press, 1988 – p. 128).
4. It was first published (in India) in 1973 in shorter form as *Hazar Churashir Ma*, in the journal *Prasad*.
5. The 2005 article by Macola, published in an archaeological rather than a literary journal, is the only one I could find and Sinyangwe's is not the only text featured in it, though this novel is accorded considerable space. By contrast, literary references to and commentaries on Devi's novel are abundant. Bandyopadhai criticizes Spivak's comment on the style of Devi's novel, commenting: "One fails to see how Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak can find *Mother of 1084* written in a prose that 'belonged to the generally sentimental style of the mainstream Bengali fiction of the fifties and sixties'" (xviii). A citation by Spivak (in her edited Devi collection *Imaginary Maps*) of what she considers a loving complaint by G.S. Deo, that Devi "leaves too [?] much unsaid", so that "Not everyone can understand her point of view" (cited Spivak 197), may (if transposed to *Mother of 1084*) serve as a reply to her own criticism of the Devi text addressed here – if I may be allowed the irreverence [question mark inserted in Deo citation by Spivak].
6. See e.g. Martyris, who calls the text the Indian Maoist movement's "defining fiction," but adds: "Yet it makes no mention of Naxalite brutality, and 'the movement' is referred to only abstractly" (39-40).

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