

Third World Women and Environment: An Ecofeminist reading of Mahasweta Devi's Short Story 'The Hunt'

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Abstract

Ecofeminism as a literary theory is an amalgamation of two critical Thinking – Ecocriticism and Feminism. The perspective of nature-woman parallelism got underscored by the introduction of the term 'Ecofeminism' by Francoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*. Ecofeminism perceives that ecological problems and atrocities against women are fallouts of patriarchal egotism. Ecofeminist writings especially from third world writers address problems which are peculiar to the most oppressed group of people. Mahasweta Devi, in 'The Hunt' unveils layers of oppression inflicted upon women in tribal inherited areas of India. The present paper aims at analyzing the short story – 'The Hunt' written by Mahasweta Devi from an ecofeminist point of view. The story traces the transition of a humble tribal girl Mary Oraon to a legendary defender who succeeds in bringing an 'ecojustice' to her community. Her body symbolizes the environment of the tribal community which is in constant threat of being exploited by the outer world in postcolonial era. The story also endeavours to bring forth the adverse impacts of models such as Decolonisation and Development in the lives of tribal women.

Keywords: ecofeminism, patriarchal egotism, multi-layered, oppression, Development.

Introduction:

Mahasweta Devi is a prominent writer-activist who is considered to be an empathizer of the subalterns. She adduces issues faced by the subalterns mainly the Adivasis. Devi's work reflects microscopic contemplations of tribal struggles with the political-economic system of the country.

Devi raises her concern over the denial of subaltern rights over their land and resources. She speaks for them and is extremely anxious about their 'degradation of life and environment...' [Dust on the Road: vii]. The degradation is clearly perceptible as observed in the tribal inhabited areas of the Chottanagpur region. Ecological issues faced by the subalterns in the third world countries is divergent from those addressed in the mainstream discourse

of environmental problems and correspondingly what subaltern women suffer is multi-layered, 'where it would be necessary to recognize that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism'. ['Women and Environment: Postcolonial Ecofeminism, Activism and Women Writing Indian Fiction in English': 30]

Nature and the Third World:

Nature is very much 'alive' for the tribals. This idea is analogous to the ancient Greek philosophy of Hylozoism, which believes that all matters in the universe has life. According to Janet Beihl, "Historically, "aliveness" as a cosmology is called

hylozoism, and it is often assumed that an ethics based on hylozoism would encourage us to value life and would countervail the prevalent trend to destroy the biosphere.” [Janet: 57] The Oraon tribes are an Adivasi group inhabiting various states across central and eastern India. There is a firm linkage between nature and Oraon customs. Their rituals are rooted in the cycles of nature. Janiparab is their version of Spring Festival where hunting is the most important ritual. They celebrate the advent of spring by hunting down animals symbolically representing the evil spirit. Nirmal Minz (qtd. in K. P.) in his essay “The study of Tribal Religion in India” remarks that “Natural objects are accepted as symbols of the divine presence and adoration and oblations are given seasonally. Life-cycles, birth, marriage and death, and annual cycles of major seasons and changes of nature accordingly form an integral part of occasional and seasonal festivals and sacrifices.” [20]. Tribals are democrats who adhere equality and egalitarianism in their society where nature is an integral part. “They had no sense of property. There was communal land-holding because, just like the Native Americans, they also believed that land and forest and river belong to everyone.” [Imaginary Maps, ‘The Author in Conversation’: ii]. Nature is a source of livelihood, a religion and often a playground for the tribals where they find solace. “They understood ecology and the environment in a way we cannot imagine.” [Ibid: ii] Shiva aptly states ‘All religions and cultures of the South Asian region have been rooted in the forests, not through fear and ignorance but through ecological insight. Almost in every ritual and festival one could observe the subtle interplay between man and nature’. [Staying Alive: 57] Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak tries to deliver the gravity of the nonsensical feeling as she translates:

Once there were animals in the forest, life was wild, the hunt game had meaning. Now the forest is empty, life wasted and drained, the hunt game meaningless... [Imaginary Maps: 12].

It is truly unimaginable for the tribals to exist without their natural environment. “As long as the forests were there the

hunting tribes did not suffer much, because the forests used to provide them with food, shelter, timber, hunting. But now that the forests are gone, the tribals are in dire distress.” [Ibid: ii]

Tribal Women:

The condition of tribal women in pre and post-Independence has remained deplorable. This condition is an outcome of the patriarchal gaze penetrating from the mainstream societies as it is clearly perceptible that the treatment of woman in Tribal societies is a singular lack of exploitation. In fact, just like the absence of exploitation of nature, it is only natural that tribals generally do not exploit the rights of the female sex. The role of tribal woman is to safeguard her home – the ecological space. She holds an important position in her community. In tribal beliefs the earth is the symbol of ‘mother’ – the origin of all life forms. Tribal woman is thus, the mother who nourishes the culture and heritage by preserving the earth, nature and the cosmos itself. In the framework of such cultural and social values, women become the most empowered. Oraons observe Janiparab, popularly known as the women’s hunting festival every twelfth year. It is exclusively meant for their women. Spivak’s translation reads, “For twelve years men run the hunt. Then comes the women’s turn. It’s Jani Parab. Like men they too go out with bow and arrow. They run in the forest and hill. They kill hedgehogs, rabbits, birds, whatever they can get. Then they picnic together, drink liquor, sing, and return home at evening. They do exactly what the men do.” [Ibid: 11] The participation of women in such hunting festival challenges the patriarchal ego cultured in the non-tribal societies.

Violating a woman’s honour is as easy as felling a tree for patriarchy such as Tehsildar. The homogeneity is clear in Tehsildar’s consciousness when he says, “Every five years or so some trees will be ready and I’ll buy. One two three. This is a virgin area.” [Ibid: 7]. The thought of addressing the forests of Kuruda as ‘virgin’ reflects the patriarchal ego innate in Tehsildar’s character. According to Radical Ecofeminists, men categorise woman and

nature as one entity so as to strengthen their dominance over them and to vitiate their status. There exists an apparent politics when patriarchal societies attach feminine characteristics to nature and natural phenomena. Feminist writer Rosemary Radford Ruether rightly points out:

Domination of women has provided a key link, both socially and symbolically, to the domination of earth, hence the tendency in patriarchal cultures to link women with earth, matter, and nature, while identifying males with sky, intellect, and transcendent spirit" [Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing: 64]

Though Radical Ecofeminist condemn the association between women and nature it cannot be denied that the tribal's attachment of women to nature is acquitted as they give them divine status and seek to protect their sanctity. The Patriarch's motive behind comparing the two entities is completely different from those of the tribals. The tribals perception regarding woman and nature is what the Cultural ecofeminists believe in. According to Cultural ecofeminist, women are more intimate to nature than men attributed by their inherent qualities of nurturing, caring, intuitive and sensitivity. Cultural ecofeminist also finds women and nature analogous in their biological cycles such as menstruation, procreation and lactation which makes the former relate emotionally and physically towards the latter as validated by ecofeminists such as by Ariel Kay Salleh (qtd. in Agarwal):

Women's monthly fertility cycle, the tiring symbiosis of pregnancy, the wrench of childbirth and the pleasure of suckling an infant, these things already ground women's consciousness in the knowledge of being coterminous with nature. However tacit or unconscious this identity may be for women...it is nevertheless 'a fact of life'. [121]

Decolonisation, Development and the Tribals:

In 'The Hunt', Mahasweta Devi despondently depicts the gradual engulfment of the uncorrupted life of the Oraon Tribe in Kuruda by the changing economic recovery which occurs after Independence. Mary, the protagonist in the story symbolically represents tribal people battling against outsiders like the greedy Tehsildar who has an eye on chaste woman like Mary as well as on resourceful environment of the tribals. Tehsildar is an agent from mainstream society who succeeds to intrude into tribal life with the propaganda of development. India like its counterparts (the once colonised nations) adopt several developmental policies to compensate the economic lost perpetrated by the colonisers. While these policies are aimed to retrieve the country's economy and wellbeing of its citizens, it fails to ensure better living condition for the subaltern groups including Dalit, Tribals, Indigenes and other lower caste groups. They remain aloof from the economic restoration the country initiates post-independence. It is apparent that the country's hard earned freedom is not for them. It can be highlighted that the subjugation legacy of the colonial masters has been passed on to those on power including the stakeholders of developmental projects and precisely to an exclusive class of wealthy people. Referring to Rosa Luxemburg's idea on 'Capitalism' and 'Development', Vandana Shiva successfully concludes that 'Development' is complemented by 'poverty and dispossession' [Staying Alive 1]. Developmental projects paradoxically have hampered development of the subaltern. It pledges to eradicate poverty and uplift the condition of the poor, thereby bringing a holistic growth of the nation. However, 'Development' has only exploited nature and its resources, violated women's rights and enlarged the gap between the haves and have-nots.

First coined by German Economist Mortiz Julius Bonn in the section on "Imperialism" in his Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (1932), the term Decolonisation literally means dismantling of colonisation. It refers to the crumbling of

the colonial empires accompanied by great economic depressions during the first half of the 20th century. The colonial empires have either withdrawn from their control over the colonised or they have been defeated by the colonised nations through prolonged nationalist movements. Renowned historian Prasenjit Duara defines Decolonisation as “the process whereby the colonial powers transferred institutional and legal control over their territories and dependencies to indigenously based, formally sovereign, nation-states” [Prasenjit: 2]. Decolonisation necessitates uprooting the colonised mind besides deconstructing the colonial hypothesis regarding the colonised countries, its culture and heritage. It challenges the tenacious nature of the colonial culture which has succeeded to maintain its influence over the ethos of the colonised.

Tribals have taken active part in the struggle for Independence. Tika Manjhi's revolt, Sambalpur Revolt, Santhal rebellion and Munda Uprising are some of the tribal revolts which have been given least significance in Indian history. The revolts were a long struggle against those policies initiated by the British which were solely motivated by their economic interests. This struggle by the tribals to secure their rights in their own land and forests seems to have no culmination. While mainland Indians witnessed the socio-economic transition owing to Decolonisation, the threat of colonisation still lingers among the tribals. The continuous negation of indigenous rights over their land and forests make them apprehensive regarding the true purpose and meaning of decolonisation. Development is an essential process that follows Decolonisation and for tribals, it is a rechristened model of Colonisation wherein a new set of powerful people finds the most convenient way to fulfill their colonial dreams over the powerless. The Indian Government after independence initiated ambitious developmental policies. The process germinated many corrupt intermediators who inherit colonial license to exploit tribals and their habitat. Highlighting the deliberate ignorance of the Indian government toward the tribals, Devi says:

The government of India has pauperized them (tribals). They have to beg for everything they need. They do not understand mainstream machination, so although there are safeguarding laws against land-grabbing, tribal land is being sold illegally every day, and usurped by mainstream society all over India. The tribals, then, paid the price for decolonization? [Imaginary Maps: iii]

When the ‘mainstream society’ in alliance with the government started exploiting their forests and land, the Oraons have realised the criticality of their destitution. Devi highlights the intricate network which assures the continuous influx of income-generating resources from the tribal forests and land to the mainland. She explains:

Once a tribal told me, I need five rupees a day to buy rice. Ask to fell a tree, I'll do it unwillingly, but I'll do it. Ask me to fell a tree, I'll do it. Ask me to chop off a head, I'll do it, because I need five rupees at the end of the day. So that the hands that fell the tree are not the hands responsible for the deforestation all over India. Big money is involved in the furniture you see in Delhi, or Hyderabad, or Calcutta. The local political worthies, local police, local administration are bribed...All over the world Governments protecting the environment is nonsense. Thus through Mary Oraon I have narrated events that are true of India today. [“Author in Conversation”: xii]

Devi highlights hypocrisy of the ruling governments throughout the world regarding their concern over environment. Through the story she claims to portray the true picture of India after independence. Justifying the tribes' association with such venture, Devi highlights their helplessness and exposes the malefactors behind such activities. Owing to their poor economic condition, the Oraons living in Kuruda bow down to forests proprietors and contractors for their livelihood. There are intermediaries

from the mainstream society who intrude into the lives of the tribals to curb maximum benefit by exploiting their rights. Tehsildar Singh is one intruder who came into the lives of the Oraons in Kuruda. He represents the mainstream patriarchal society which has no respect for women and lack empathy toward natural environment. The Oraon's destituteness made them surrender their trees but they demand assurance from the brokers for the security of their women. It suggests the Oraons' concern for their women and hence the strong commitment to preserve their egalitarian society. The village old men enquire, "How about women's honour if they work?" [Imaginary Maps: 8] Mahasweta Devi highlights the threat imposed by the outer world on societies like that of the Oraons. Tehsildar enters the Oraon's life as a capitalist negotiator. His encroachment to Oraon's forests and his easy dominance over the Oraons encouraged him to trespass their social norms. Tehsildar's attempt to violate Mary's chastity is an open declaration that the mainstream society has no regards for the egalitarian social structure preserved by the tribals. Tribals do not tolerate the exploitation of women. Tehsildar is the representation of the patriarchal society where both nature and women are seen as dormant entities with no voice of their own. This prejudice toward nature and women sets apart patriarchal society from tribal societies. Highlighting the disparity between these two societies Devi comments, "The tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel. There has never been a meeting point". [Imaginary Maps ii].

Though Mary has a white blood running in her veins, she inherits and internalises all traits of a strong tribal woman who does not tolerate hierarchical dominance. When the Oraons rendered their service to Tehsildar she tried her best to convince them that he is violating their rights. When Tehsildar's greed extended to her body she decided to penalize him. Mary's killing of Tehsildar at Janiparab symbolically implies the proclamation that whoever tries to trespass the social norms of Tribal Society gets befitting punishment. Mary's action substantiates the loudness of the feminine voice in tribal Societies. Her

violence toward Tehsildar has been justified by the Oraons. This is apparent when Kuruda villagers turn her story into a song so that it can be remembered as a vital part of the Oraon's history. Mary's story exemplifies the overthrow of the "incursion upon the tribal land and forests by feudalism, colonialism, and global capitalism. As a result, the subaltern figure of Mary Oraon becomes a metaphor for tribals and marginalised people all over the globe" [Madhu Singh: 91]

Mary emerges as a triumphant hero who has crucified the malefactor of her society and her environment. Spivak's remark, "The point I am trying to make is that there is no lack of the celebration of the organic intellectual in Mahasweta's work and writing – work. In the present collection of stories, Mary Oraon in "The Hunt" is one of those figures." [Imaginary Maps xxiii] is an apt one. The critic has rightly referred to Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'organic intellectual' which denotes distinct personalities who have the ability to fight against any power for a subjugated and alienated group of people. Organic intellectual also has the power to influence and organise these people to fight against any wrongdoing against them. Mary is indeed an 'organic intellectual'. She is comparable to a messiah or a redeemer for the Oraons in Kuruda.

Conclusion:

"The Hunt" is a realistic portrayal of the status of Tribals in Independent India. The government's impotency regarding the proper implementation of the Tribals' welfare projects immune its agents (from the mainstream society) to establish an exclusive monopoly over the land and forest of the tribals. Mahasweta Devi also calls for recognition of the society and culture of the tribals if the country dreams of a peaceful coexistence in the future. Mary Oraon is comparable to millions of tribal women who raise their voices against those exploiters who have firmly set their ambition on exploiting their environment and their existence as a whole. There are forces from the outer world which threatens to pollute their way of life by imposing their patriarchal ideologies. Mary is a victim of

intersectionality which is a key concern for ecofeminist. She faces discrimination at many levels. Mary is victimised because she is tribal women. Her character is considered to be a vulnerable one by Tehsildar and his likes because of her caste and class. Besides this, she is racially discriminated. Being a half blood Australian Mary always feels that she is not fully accepted by her community. "In her inmost heart there is somewhere a longing to be part of the Oraons." [Imaginary maps: 5]. She becomes a target for Tehsildar's sexual desires owing both to her gender and her class as an adivasi Oraon women. She single headedly fights patriarchy. A character like her is a threat to the essence of Colonisation propagated by Decolonisation and Development. Mahasweta Devi projects Mary as upholding the character of a strong woman who is empowered enough to protect herself, her community and her environment from destructing waves of Patriarchy as well as Capitalism.

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