



## **DEFENDING THE NATURE AND SELF: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S THE HUNT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to study the concept of environmental justice in the short story of Mahasweta Devi's "The Hunt" in *Imaginary Maps*. Environmental Justice is one of the most talkative movements in India nowadays. Social Activists have shown their support to prevent hardship against Adivasis. Environmental Justice gives a place for the voiceless people and economically weaker section to raise their voice against upper class society that aims to destroy natural wealth. The present paper seeks to lime light the sufferings of the tribals and their homeland. Mahasweta Devi voices for the marginalised tribal people and also explains how nature was corrupted by the power mongers.

**Keywords:** Environmental Justice, Tribals, Culture, Festival, Deforestation, Exploitation.

From the origin of this world, Mother Nature is being worshipped by all people. It provides all facilities to the human being such as food, shelter and clothes etc. However, the young generation detach themselves from nature. Modern youngsters know how to use technology, science and artificial intelligence and some of the emerging trends. On the contrary, they are not

instructed how to preserve our nature and ecological systems. Few environmentalists opine that the third world war will happen due to scarcity of water in future. Human race is responsible for the natural disasters such as acid rain, global warming, epidemic diseases etc.

One has to protect and preserve not only the ecological system, but also the life of indigenous people whose lives

encircle around it. Today the industrialists and corporate monsters gobble up the most precious and ancient woods that are full of flora and fauna. This paper focuses on how the Adivasis, the tribal community play the vital role in preserving nature. Although they strive for the green planet, their position in India is so poor. They have been denied of everything. They are expelled from their homeland and their roots are under threat. Their economic circumstances submerged into a feudal system and their existence further worsened by environment- harming policies of the government. The so-called human civilization, such as industrialization, globalization and urbanization, has drawn tribals to compromise their relationship with nature.

Capitalism causes severe problems in the world today, and it creates lower socio-economic status among the people. The voiceless people those who depend on nature are referred by post-colonial scholars as the subaltern. The post-colonial theory described subalterns as 'lower social classes and other social groups' who are marginalized in society. Maria Mies, an eminent sociologist states that "since women are more involved than men in daily life, they are more engaged with the elements of nature"

(107). Mary Mellor in *Feminism and Ecology* depicts Ecofeminism thus:

Eco-feminism brings together elements of the feminist and the green movement, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement the concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminine the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women. (1)

Conformists do not understand issues of tribal; their relationship goes like tracks of trains.

Urbanization and deforestation make them paupers and they have lost their land due to the construction of big dam projects. They have not received any money for giving up their land. There are a few tribes who fought for India's freedom struggle like other leaders.

Even though they participated in the freedom fight movement they are not recognized well by the government of India. They have been suffering in the clutches of the upper class people till now. Indian society is entangled with caste, gender oppression, colour discrimination and class conflict. Mahasweta Devi, an eminent Indian contemporary writer, talks about all forms of oppression including the oppression of tribals in her works. Devi's

literary works depict how the marginalized people are trapped by the upper caste.

Devi differs from other female Indian writers. She is at her best when she gives her voice to the voiceless and marginalized people. Mahasweta Devi's "The Hunt" is the first short story of *Imaginary Maps*. It starts with the Gomo-Daltonganj line. From the very beginning, the writer gives the geographical locale of the Kuruda. No train has stopped at this station because the expense of having train stops was high. The first part of the story depicts the beauty of Kuruda.

Mahasweta Devi says "Kuruda outstation, (has been) Abandoned"(1). It describes Kuruda is forbidden by the Government of India. If Government could make any scheme for developing the welfare of people, these schemes will not reach this remote area of India. Tohri is the busiest station for many bus routes, picking up coal and it is the right place for timber brokers because Mother Nature has given her hand in order to grow sal trees at Kuruda abundantly. Sal trees play a vital role in this area. Sal-logs landed here day and night and that are sent in every direction of India.

Kuruda village is a heavenly place. It is located behind the station. It has two hills and one meadow. The villagers who live in Kuruda, enjoy the train movement

on the hilltop from distant villages. They celebrate annual festivals. These annual festivals give them happiness and they will be in a jubilant mood during the festival. This is their lifestyle. They give importance to their customs and rituals.

Mary Oraon, the protagonist, is a beautiful eighteen year old tribal lady. She wants to live her life with her own style. She always prefers to put on printed saris. Her attire shows us that she is not a tribal woman at first sight. She looks like a gorgeous queen in printed sari. Mary's mother Bhikni is exploited sexually by Dixon's son who came from Australia. Bhikni is a brave lady. Even though Australian white left his offspring in her womb, she did not take any steps to have abortion rather she gives birth to Mary Oraon. This shows how tribal women are abused physically and sexually after the colonial period.

Mahasweta Devi points out how the Indian tribal lady Bhikni was cheated by a White man. The impact of colonialism in Kuruda has been aptly depicted out by Devi as follows: "Once upon a time whites had timber plantation in Kuruda. They left gradually after independence. Mary's mother looked after the Dixon's bungalow and household. Dixon's son came back in 1959 and sold house, the forest, everything else. He put

Mary in Bhikni's womb before he left. He went to Australia" (2).

After independence Dixon's bungalow is owned by Prasadji. He takes Bhikni and her daughter as bonded slaves to look after his huge bungalow. They are not aware that they have been charged a lesser amount for household chores by Prasadji. This exhibits they are exploited by mainstream people like Prasad. Bhikni's statements reiterate how she and her daughter are spoiled by his master. Bhikni says that "the whites kept twelve ayahs- servants -sweepers. Under Prasadji Mary alone keeps the huge bungalow clean" (2).

Mary is an ideal lady to keep the place clean and tidy. She knows the business tricks to sell fruits and vegetables at Tohri market. She is attracted by everyone in the market. She shapes her life. When she gets down at the station she looks like a queen. She sits in her rightful place at the market. She inspires other people in the market. Mary is an emancipated tribal woman who chooses her own husband.

The patriarchal system in the society is depicted by Mahasweta Devi in this short story. Women who belong to upper caste are not given chance to select their husband. If they want to get married with her lover they are not able to get any

moral support from their families. Like a typical patriarchal set up, in this story Mrs. Prasad makes a matchmaking for Mary. However she refuses their offer, and loves Jalim which exhibits her courageousness. She doesn't want to live the common and ordinary life. Mary utters "No living in a shack, eating mush, the drinking, no soap or oil, no clean clothes. I don't want such a life" (3). This statement shows that she is an independent woman.

Mary is neither tribal nor Australian. The tribal women from Oraon community are her friends. Although she lives in village she does not follow the habits of tribals. Mary maintains the moral values of life. If someone had approached her with the wrong intension she would have raised her machete. Whenever she spends time with Jalim she maintains distance. Unlike Bhikni, Mary gives importance to Indian customs particularly chastity. She refuses the offer of her lover. When Jalim calls her into his room, she says "No, marriage first" (3). Jalim respects this greatly. Although she has Australian blood in her veins, Indian customs teach her how to keep her chastity, before she got married.

She loves Jalim deeply who suffers a lot to earn money to support his family. She saves money for her marriage by selling Mahua fruits which are available in

Prasadji's farm. Mary is the picker of Mahua fruits. She shouts at Prasadji, "Let hired people come and see. I have my machete" (4). Mary's voice is harsh and grim. Prasadji finds her voice is like a white blood. This shows her economic independence that she asserts and protects herself from exploitation.

Oraon tribals never watch movies - they neither wear good clothes nor take delicious full meals. Mary has shown her sympathy towards tribal victims of sexual oppression. Every Oraons knows that Mary loves Jalim and they are getting married very soon. No one from Oraon community denies their marriage because she is not a legitimate daughter from Somra, or Budhna or Mangla Oraon community. Tribals from these communities would not allow this kind of marriage happen. They follow their religious customs and rituals strictly and intensely. She would be acting as protest against Oraons if she belongs to the Oraons community. Mary leads a blissful life in her village.

The arrival of monster Tehsildar Singh (Non-Tribal) to Kuruda collapses the entire situation. It converts Mary's beautiful life as the most troubled one. The exploitation of forest resources in the name of development is an important factor of the story. Tehsildar Singh could

be regarded as mainstream people; the entire system is behind him. He appreciates deforestation for getting money with great skill. Mahasweta Devi shares her experience in the conversation about tribals:

Once a tribal told me, I need five rupees a day to buy rice. Ask me to fell a tree, I'll do it unwillingly. 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 the hands that fell the trees are not the hands responsible for the deforestation all over India. Big money is involved in the furniture that you see in Delhi or Hyderabad, Calcutta. The local political worthies, local police, local administrations are bribed. The railways cooperate by carrying this illegally felled timber. Illegal sawmills come up everywhere. There are bosses in the cities felling the sandal wood in Karnataka. All over the world government protecting the environment is nonsense. (xii)

Indian Constitution, Article 370 gave Jammu and Kashmir a special status. It has its own autonomy in comparison with other states of India. Article 370 explains that the residence of Jammu and Kashmir enjoy exclusive benefits in areas such as housing, real estate, education and government employment, not available to

others. According to this article their natural resource has been preserved. After the cancellation of Article 370, 35 A, outsiders like corporates can come into Kashmir territory; Kashmiri tribals would be exploited easily, corporate beast would take a part of Kashmir. The democratic government implements law to preserve nature but the result of law would be nonsense according to Mahasweta Devi. When we point out Eco feminism which is related to oppression of women and that of nature are interrelated. Eco feminists depict that in a culture where women are oppressed, nature is also seen to be exploited and vice versa.

The second part of the story starts with the virgin area of Sal trees. It was planted by Mr. Dixons on fifty acres. All Sal trees are so tall and it breaks the sky and the trunks are as big as railway engines. Now the owner of the Sal trees is Prasadji. His son Banwari takes the initial step to cut the Sal trees in Daltonganji and Chhipador. However, the real beneficiary is Tehsildar Singh. Now this virgin area becomes contaminated by mainstream man named Singh. The broker planned to call tribal women and men from Oraon, Munda, and other six villages such as Kuruda, Murhai, Seeho, Thapari, Dhuma and Chinadoha. These tribals don't know that they are going to be exploited by

Tehsildar Singh with least wages for their hard work. Women are going to be paid eight annas and twelve annas for men. They are not given proper education so they are not able to estimate Tehsildar Singh's cruel mind. Instead of giving proper amount they are being offered first quality liquor to six elders. But Mary understands the tricks of the broker. Mary's intension is love of tribal. She tries to advise Prasadji and other village headmen but to no avail. Even though Prasadji knows the tricks of Thasildar Singh he would not stop his greediness. Mary acts like a prophet. She requested Prasadji to talk to the big companies and do his business. The socio-economic status is so low that is why they accept the least amount given by Singh. Tribals say to Mary "who (will) gives us this kind of money?" (9) These tribals do not know that these Sals belong to the government, still they illegally cut trees. The poor are compelled to cut trees to prevent deforestation at Kuruda. The exploitation is not only economic exploitation of the indigenous people it leads to sexual exploitation of Adivasi women. Tehsildar Singh sees Mary at Prasadji's home. At first sight he falls for her and plans to abuse her sexually. To impress her, he used to chant magical words about her

beauty. He praised her prettiness as follows: "You look like Hema Malini" (9).

Tehsildar Singh wants to hypnotize Mary by praising her beauty but he couldn't win her. Mary is so aware of Tehsildar Singh's lustful mind. She scolded him rather than falling for his love. She calls him a monkey, bastard and so on.

To avoid Tehsildar Singh's trap, she keeps Machete wherever she goes. According to Hindu mythology Devi Kali carries weapons like knife, garland of skulls to take the lead without fear, unapologetically to stand up against evil. Similarly Mary here shows her Machete to defend her against Tehsildar. Mary warns him severely: "This time I let him go with words. If he comes to fuck with me again, I'll cut off his nose" (9).

Though Tehsildar is a married man with wife and children, his longing for women goes on. He thought that she would be a whore but she is not so. She is not a common tribal woman. Her prettiness is unmatched like her intelligence. Tehsildar is not able to cheat her by presenting gifts and offering saris. She says, "You think I'm a city whore? you want to grab me with a Sari?" (10). Mari humiliates him by throwing the sari at him. For her Tehsildar, is an animal. Mary is a brave hunter and she knows how

to kill that animal. She waits for her hunt on 'Jani Parab', a festival of spring. It gives a chance to hunting animals for women for once in twelve years. At that time tribal women can access their liquor, they can sing a song and they can do whatever they like exactly what the men do.

Urbanisation makes forest empty. Due to globalisation every year so many trees were cut down from the forest for the development of housing and industry. It harms the ecological systems which lead to animal extinction in the forest. An old woman from the tribal says: "Once there were animals in the forest, life is wild, the hunt game had meaning. Now the forest is empty, life wasted and drained the hunt game meaningless. Only the day's joy is real" (12).

Even though the hunting is meaningless, tribal community do not want to give up this ritual because they wanted to celebrate this 'Jani Parab' with full joy. Tehsildar Singh gives trouble to Mary's life. She needs the social justice to save her life. Tehsildar Singh's love for Mary is fleshly and not spiritual. Mary uses her body as a weapon. She wanted to marry a Muslim boy named Jalim. If Mary fails to offer herself, she thought Singh will arrest him on a false larceny charge. As a result, she plans to murder him on the

day of Jani Parab. Mahasweta Devi comments on the character of Singh as follows: "And that man was just like a Lakra, a wolf, that had been killed"(xi).

If she leaves him without killing, he will seduce her definitely. To protect her honour and chastity, Mary Oraon kills Tehsildar Singh. She kisses him on his lips to trap him. She raises her machete and lowered it on him and pushes him in the ravine. So that the animals like Hyenas and leopards smell the bloody Tehsildar Singh. She has not felt any guilty for this killing. She started dancing. Before killing Tehsildar, every tribal woman in the village makes sarcastic comments on Mary because she has not been hurting any animals. But she used to enjoy the festival. She hunts the biggest beast and left the place with full of joy to lead the beautiful life with her dream boy, Jalim.

Indian Society makes gender construct. It sets certain roles for the

gender in the society. The gender social set up brings the differentiation between men and women. In "The Hunt" the tribal woman Mary is different, singular and rugged one. She hypnotises Singh by her intelligence and kills him to save herself and the society from oppression. Mahasweta Devi represents Mary as goddess Kali /Shakti, an empowered woman. Through this character, Devi asserts women should not be the mute spectator and she opines that they need to take up powerful positions and challenges to protect nature and oneself.

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