

# Tribal Repression in Mahasweta Devi's two short stories '*The Hunt*' and '*Madhu: A Fairy Tale*': An Ecocritical Reading

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**Abstract:** Interrelationship between man and nature thus becomes degradation and continuous misuse of the environment tops the list of problems the world faces today. However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity have only recently caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and it's reflect in literature that have given rise to new branch of literary theory namely Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism functions as a tool that draws the attentions of the world to crucial environmental issues through analysis of literature. The present paper study the Tribal Oppression in Mahasweta Devi's two short stories *The Hunt* and *Madhu: A Fairy Tale* using an ecocritical lenses. Devi illustrates how the environment as well as the tribal constitutes the subaltern in the modernising paradigms of development.

**Keywords:** *Tribal repression, Ecology, subaltern, modernising paradigms.*

Interrelationship between man and nature thus becomes degradation and continuous misuse of the environment tops the list of problems the world faces today. However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity have only recently caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and it's reflect in literature that have given rise to new branch of literary theory namely Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism functions as a tool that draws the attentions of the world to crucial environmental issues through analysis of literature. The present paper study the Tribal Oppression in Mahasweta Devi's two short stories *The Hunt* and *Madhu: A Fairy Tale* using an ecocritical lenses. Devi illustrates how the environment as well as the tribal constitutes the subaltern in the modernising paradigms of development.

Mahasweta Devi's texts offer the critique of civilization, the dichotomy of nature and culture and the threat posed by forces of modernization. She offers penetrating insights into the connection between ecological and economic concerns. She is known as a committed artist, documenting the past and continuing struggle of the people. Devi's perspective on ecology forms an integral part of her entire creative output because she finds a close connection between man and nature. She believes that the survival of mankind is possible only when human beings acknowledges and respect Mother Nature rather than usurp it for personal profit. Her fiction unveils her concern about the alarming imbalance between man and nature due to globalization, privatization and capitalistic policies of different governments. She finds that consistent murder of nature has severely affected the life of poor deprived tribal and the rural women who depend on forests for livelihood and other basic requirements. These oppressed communities are the worst sufferers in the process of globalization and privatization of resources. As a writer, Devi feels that a creative artist plays a vital role in destroying the spurious elements of contemporary civilization and helps in reconstructing the future society. In the author's preface to *Bashai Tudu*, translated and edited by Samik Bandyopadhyay, Devi makes biting comments on the popular writers of the time for their snobbery and insensitiveness to social issues related to the plight of the dispossessed and the disinherited tribal and dalits.

Mahasweta devi's *Shikar* translated by Gayatri chakravarti spivak as '*The Hunt*' and included in the collection imaginary maps is indeed a poignant narrative of the twin exploitation of nature and tribal. The story clearly presents a picture of destruction of natural resources and domination of tribal running parallel in undeveloped areas like kuruda in India. The story falls into three sections. Section one explains the peaceful tribal life overtaken by a few estate owners and their exploitation of the people of the region. Mary Oraon is one such victim of exploitation. Dixon an Australian planter employs and exploits her mother, Bhikni and his son his successor impregnates the woman and deserts her and runs away to his own land. Prasadji the new owner of the estate continues them in his service and they remain his willing slaves. Section two deals with the landing of Tehsildar Singh, the contractor on the quiet but impoverished existence of Kuruda. It marks the onset of the mainstream mechanized and industrialized exploitation and the total alienation and reification of the tribes. Section three marks the desperations of the tribes on their being forced to resort to violence as the only possible alternative when the system fails in justice.

Mahasweta Devi's story '*The Hunt*' centres around the animal hunting festival, the most popular myth of the tribals of Bihar. The original title in Bengali is "Shikar" which means the hunt. Explaining the contest of the myth, Devi writes in the story, "Once there were (wild) animals in the forest, life was wild, the hunt game had meaning." (p 12) In this sense the myth marked the protection of the entire tribe and its environment from the destructive animals. The tradition, however, is kept up long after it had lost its relevance.

The myth informs the central theme of the story. Tehsildar Singh a greedy mainstream contractor lands in the quiet village of Kuruda with intentions of felling and carrying away the giant sal trees in Prasadji's estate of seventy five acres of land.

The tribals interest and well being at once of man and nature is represented by Mary Oraon, who embodies the intelligence of the west and the love of the tribals. She puts her intelligence to the best use and tries to counsel Prasadji and other village head men, but to no avail. She explains to Prasadji that the contractor had tricked him and would get the sals at throw away price and would

sell them to the timber merchants at an exorbitant rate by cubic foot. Prasadji is misled by his son and other village mirazdars like Lalchand and Mulni.

Though the government of India has passed laws declaring illegal the felling of trees in forest regions the government machinery is so corrupt that the illegal action never comes to light. Thus the happenings in Kuruda are representative of what happens in the whole of India. Events in the short story, the writer declares are authentic, including the character of Mary. She says she has actually seen her and heard her life history from the songs of the tribes. Thus the story combines the particular and the representative.

The tribals are blamed for deforestation. One of the village elders explains to Mary, "If I said 'No', the villagers would go wild. They would say who gives us this kind of money?" (p 9) In her own life, once a tribal told Mahasweta Devi, "I need five rupees a day to buy rice. Ask me to fell a tree, I'll do it unwillingly, but I'll do it." (P xii).

Tehsildar Singh in the story is the representative of the mainstream power that exploits the poor workers as well as the earth. The myth of hunt game is rehearsed through Mary Oraon, who like Mother Earth is also viewed by the contractor as an object to be exploited. She identifies him as the wild 'animal'. She takes law into her own hands and dispenses justice by killing him on the festival day. At the end, she walks "fearless as she has killed the biggest beast" (p 17).

Thus the myth gets well intergrated with the present day tribal life. The story promotes awareness among the powers that be, that because of their negligence, deforestation goes on undeterred. Government should intervene and prevent deforestation on war footing and the tribals should be educated and guaranteed a minimum standard of living and purposeful engagements, if the land and its people are to remain secure and protected from degeneration.

Mahasweta Devi's another short ecotopian narrative "*Madhu: A Fairy Tale*", translated by Devi herself. As a narrative of environmental degradation and outright destruction of forest ecosystem, the story predicts an imminent catastrophe leading to the gradual extinction of a community of people. Being severely critical of the modern ways of 'development' Devi in this foreshadowing narrative brings to the fore the aftermath of unremitting onslaughts wrought on the environment by thoughtless human activities. The narrative certainly acquires an extra dimension in Devi's selection of the victims of the ominous environmental collapse. She has presented here the Korjus, one of the oppressed tribal communities in India, as the helpless victims by the mainstream imperial masters. Devi's displeasure with the process of 'development' gets manifested here because it is this form of development, as presented by Devi, that benefits a certain section of people at the cost of the victimization of the poorer sections of people.

"*Madhu: A Fairy Tale*" is a powerful dystopian narrative that portrays the grim effects of development-sponsored environmental collapse on a forest-based community of peoples and their silent protestation against such exploitative 'development'. The Korjus, as presented in the story are essentially the forest-dwellers who use to live in happy mutuality with the non-human forms of life. They are basically the hunter-gatherer people whose survival was largely dependent on the forest resources. They carry a deep reverence for all forms of life on earth: "...the Korjus knew that snakes and human beings should coexist in harmony" (97).

Their style of living was so indissolubly interwoven with the local environment that their existence got tremendously threatened by the large-scale deforestation done to promote railway expansion. "When the Sagwana, or the saga forests, were felled, the Korjus, who were food gatherers, became a condemned people....The Korjus ate reori seeds, tuber, roots, fruits, nuts, deer, birds, hares and monitor lizards. Their brains ceased to function when the forest died" (98)

In the story the Korjus are presented as the helpless victims of the indiscreet mass felling of trees that was done to facilitate the introduction and extension of rail network in India by the British Colonial masters. This large-scale illicit cutting of trees completely devastated the local environment which badly affected the local economy leading to the existential crisis of some eco-centric communities of people like the Korjus.

"Korjus, hitherto sustained by the forests, first became homeless and then their very existence was devastated. Physically alive, they felt they simply did not exist. They were like drifting, lost kites with their strings cut off" (102).

When they saw before their eyes the ill-treatment of saga trees, the 'Banadevi' they worshiped, they felt themselves to be so abusively treated by the harbingers of modern developmentalism that they "began to shed their desire to survive" (102). Physically the forests got destroyed but the Korjus' bond with the forest was so strong that "The non-existent saga forests found shelter in their heart" (102).

Devi here in this fairytale is unambiguously critical of the anthropocentric ways of the empire and the 'nation' that always victimize the powerless others to facilitate the 'progress' of the 'nation'. She rather has upheld the uncivilized eco-centric ways of living of those oppressed tribals whose identity, history, ideology, culture, language and literature are integrally related to their close, symbiotic relationship with nature.

Devi is here outspokenly critical of the imperialism, the establishment, the bureaucrats and the mainstream social activists who instead of understanding the Korjus' reciprocal relationship with nature and their real problem tried some scientific means to understand their "century-old grievance..." (101). It is quite natural that the heralds of modern developmentalism can never understand the indefinable unique interrelation of the tribal aboriginals and the forests. On the other hand they use Madhu, a Korju, as a specimen to experiment with to conduct "research on nutrition balance in order to unravel the mystery of death due to chronic hunger" (104).

The speculative ending of the story very much in the manner of a modern apocalyptic fiction obliquely refers to the catastrophic disaster that the anthropocentric attitude of human society is to bring forth. The unnatural transformation of Madhu from a man into a superhuman figure swallowing almost the entire city of Mumbai is highly suggestive. The system's attempt to change the

life-style of a forest-based community ultimately results in the existential catastrophe of the entire city. Madhu, a common member of the Korju community, got transformed into a gigantic creature first because of the destruction of forests in Korju area and then because of the system's scientific experiment with a man of nature.

To conclude, through this proleptic tale of anthropocentric exploitation and a silent resistance against it Mahasweta Devi portrays an eco-dystopia where development-sponsored environmental collapse led a forest-based community of tribal people to die in utter desolation. The possibility of their complete extinction as a result of the relentless deforestation as portrayed in the story conveys a very serious message to the human civilization as a whole.

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