

Significance of Mahasweta Devi's Writings from an Ecofeminist and Socioeconomic Perspectives: A Critical Study

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Abstract

The paper will shed light on the continuous combination of responsible social and economic and environmentally friendly growth required for environmental sustainability. It is impossible to attain without a fair and prudent distribution of resources both within and between generations. It is thus a prerequisite not only for human reform but also for protecting the environment. Nevertheless, disparities are “deeply gendered” in today’s societal structure. The paper is a presentation of the important concerns of Mahasweta Devi’s fiction from an ecofeminist and socioeconomic perspective based on the qualitative methodology that is the measurement of quantity and critical study.

As a result, taking an eco-feminist approach to the issues of diversity and environmental sustainability becomes a strategy for bringing women who have been excluded from decision-making activities pertaining to the responsible need for our environmental assets into the majority. To build conceptions of natural systems, the patriarchal thinking process that governs our lives constantly employs the story of dualistic and dominance. This duality positions man and his “culture” at the top of the world pyramid, while women and nature are enslaved as monopolization targets. The patriarchal economic dominance pollutes evolution’s variety, including female representation and flora and fauna variation. To service their profit-making companies, the variety that demands equality is suppressed and assimilated, resulting in societal deterioration and environmental devastation. There will be a concise exploration of intersectionality, with specific emphasis to some of Mahasweta Devi’s writings. The paper will try to reveal how the dominance and subjugation of gender roles have undeniable interconnection, as well as the latent possibilities of these disadvantaged groups to make a significant contribution and save the surroundings from the potentially deadly bondage of capitalism.

Keywords: *Environmental sustainability, Gender equality, Culture, Equality, Bondage of capitalism.*

Paper

Mahasweta Devi (1926- 2016) was a prominent Bengali author. Devi was a fierce warrior who used fictional and sociopolitical compositions as weapon systems. Her numerous works have made her excellent. Between 1981 and 1992, she released novels, short tales, fictional books, plays, and revolutionary writing in her outstanding body of work. She is well-known not just for her revolutionary prose style, but also for her significant contributions to populations of dispossessed workers in north - east India, where she labored for many months. Her close relationships to these groups enabled her to comprehend and began researching local concerns, establishing her as a socioeconomic observer for the downtrodden.

She has often thought that regular people are the ones who write history. For her, “amazingly noble human beings” and their hardships were an inexhaustible supply of aesthetic pleasure. Mahashweta Devi, a Bengali poet and campaigner who tragically died in Kolkata, had been battling racial inequality when she first picked up the letter for the sake of writing. She was more than a bystander; she was a respectable spokesperson of the nation’s underprivileged, oppressed, and neglected people. Millions of indigenous Indians could express their sorrow via her ferocious writing. This prominent social crusader and outstanding Bengali novelist wrote a whole book about the gaunt condition of our person’s most marginalized and destitute. Her criticism of civilization “for the indignity it dumps on some of the most downtrodden citizens” also is vehement.

Her works have attracted the ire of local and federal administrations, ranging from exposing autocratic outermost landowners’ harsh mistreatment of the lower castes to recounting tales about how tribals and their rituals are inextricably linked to the woods in which they dwell. *Hajar Churashir Ma (The Mother of 1084)*, her landmark piece about the Naxalite uprising in West Bengal, portrayed the campaign’s tragic reality. In reality, her novels including such *Aranyer Adhikar (Right to the Forest)* and *Chotti Munda O Tar Teer* vividly depicted indigenous opposition to the British as well as other dictatorial organizations (*Chotti Munda and his Arrow*).

Mahashweta Devi had put herself through into battle to help the poor recover their constitutional freedoms and become self-sufficient. In pursuit of oral tradition and customs, she went across isolated communities and deserts. Each of her projects reflects her “impractical earnestness” in gathering facts for her narrative. During the Bengal Famine (1942- 44), the writer had her first encounter with environmental destruction when she offered to address the causes. She’d hand out food, examine the corpses on the streets for those who were still alive, and transport them to relief centers. This was maybe the turning point in her work, which had been driven by intellectual advocacy.

Her efforts with the Sabars, a denotified ethnic group in West Bengal's Purulia region, earned her the moniker "Mother of the Sabars." She worked for the West Bengal Oraon Welfare Society and the All Indian Vandhua Liberation Morcha as a counsellor in the indigenous development field. She was a founder member of the Aboriginal United Association as well. Above importantly, she will be recognized for creating India's first bonded laborers' organization in 1980, which provided hundreds of them with an organized forum to speak out about forced labor.

Mahashweta Devi had been on the winning end of the sufferings of her fellow people long before she began writing about them. She had to take on a variety of small jobs, from selling dye powder to giving primates for study in the United States, in order to augment her husband's salary, especially when their son was born. Despite the fact that she was qualified for a position in government with the Post and Telegraph Department, she was labeled a socialist and fired. She also survived a shattered relationship and a period of severe despair to distinguish oneself as an author for the public. Mahasweta Devi has also been a vocal opponent of West Bengal's industrial policies. She had mobilized citizens against the administration's forcible seizure of huge swaths of productive farmland and sale of them to manufacturing companies for a pittance through magazines and newspapers and appearances.

Women authors' 'permissibility' is constrained by social constraints. Literature, for example, has long been seen to play a key role in dismantling repressive political and social institutions. However, whenever females utilize this same creative affectation form to disintegrate repressive conduct in the house, relationship, wedding, and parenting, it will become undesirable. The voice that undermines the hypocritical conventional social order's basic underpinnings must be suppressed and curtailed. The requirement for a maternal culture to invoke the discipline and legitimize feminine choice results in the restriction of a female character.

Females must remain 'invisible' in order to do so, and this goal is achieved by the horizontal separation of duties and areas of activity. Women's exclusion from the "public" sphere has been authorized on many tiers, in order to explain society's power relations and gender bias. It also does not stop here, but as women join the 'public' realm, this deconstructing of female's mobility and belonging in a certain location becomes even more evident. And it is there that the process of reading takes place. Women's authorship becomes not simply an act of "identification" and "empowerment," but also a gesture of defiance, subversion, resistance, and transgression, identifying female opinions in a variety of ways. I'll discuss the function of women narrators, female writers, and women protagonists in discursive construction.

Women in literature have a space that is created by and for them. For societal constraints, this space is always perverted and limited. Women do, nevertheless, express their feelings and stand up for their rights in various conditions within this constrained area, and these situations realize the role of females. Women narrators do show the most specific topic in societal changes and others in some

situations. Women writers portray the invisible reality of the 'private' sphere, which leads to the 'public' realm as well, using creative expression and style. I use the term "public" to refer to both cultural and political debate.

The creation of a female narrator, female protagonist, or female persona's voice is difficult since, in most situations, the female narrator talks via people. Because of the societal situation, this character's voice and the writer's voice are jumbled together. That is to say, the voice of a female character is successfully impacted by surroundings. Female authors, for the most part, write about their personal experiences. These tales are about pain, joy, and other emotions. Some narratives open up opportunities for people to express themselves and affirm their individuality.

Sustainable development necessitates the dynamic integration of "responsible" socio-cultural and "environmentally friendly" productivity expansion. It is impossible to attain without a fair and prudent distribution of resources both within and between generations. Is thus a requirement for not just social growth but also environmental sustainable utilization? However, disparities are strongly gendered in today's societal structure. As a result, taking an environmentally friendly approach to things of species and sustainability has become a strategy for bringing women who have been excluded from choice procedures pertaining to the responsible use of our environmental assets into the forefront.

In this paper I would like to highlight the importance of integrating "with the objectives of environmental protection and sustainable development through the short-stories *Draupadi* and *Duoloti*, the Bountiful and the novel *The Book of the Hunter* by Mahasweta Devi. The novel and the short-stories must be looked at in their historicity. The novel is set in sixteenth century Bengal. Chandi Bon, the forest, where the Shabars, in the novel, live, and their way of life is being slowly encroached by the town of Ararha. The hunter/ tribal community of the Shabars is juxtaposed with the "civilized" brahmanical life of the family of Mukundaram to underscore the differences in the customs, rules and ways of life of the two communities/castes.

The Shabars practically live off whatever the forest, the Mother, provides them with. "They don't know what money is, nor do they see much of it" (Devi, 117). It is a world where gender equity exists along with the understanding of sustainable use of the forest resources. Tejuta, the daughter of Danku, the chief of the Shabars, to who was passed down the wisdom and knowledge of the secrets of Abhaya, unites the two ideas of gender equity and environmental sustainability when she reprimands her son, Kalya, for beating his wife Phuli. She says:

Why won't you learn lessons from the forest even now? Do the tigers and deer thrash their females mercilessly like you do yours? ...When a tiger is hungry, it kills a deer; an elephant eats leaves and twigs from the bamboo and the banyan tree, but there is no needless killing, violence, or destruction (100).

The “inviolable” unwritten rules of Abhayachandi ensure that knowledge of her secrets is not gendered but passed on to the one who deserves them. Hence, Tejota and not Megha, her husband, inherits the wisdom from her father for Megha has “sinned” by killing, knowingly or unknowingly, a pregnant deer. Some environmentalists accord to this primeval way of life a sense of utopia. However, we must not be carried away by this image of the Abhayachandi, the Mother, who protects her creatures: men, women and flora and fauna, within her bosom and blesses them with fearlessness even in the wilderness.

The raising of a woman to the pedestal of the Mother Goddess has severe implications for the freedom of a woman. Tejota did not ask for the knowledge; it was handed down to her by the patriarch, Danku, and it exacted from her the price of sacrificing her own desires and needs to be the ideal bearer of the wisdom. Phuli, too, is bound by the commands and whims of her husband, Kalya. No matter what little she earns by selling her wares, Phuli has to meet the demands of her husband for rice and other foods. Her desire for the female companionship of Jagadishwari, the Brahman wife, is crushed by Kalya’s unreasonable hatred for Brahmans. Motherhood becomes the only way for Phuli to protect herself from the violence inflicted by Kalya: “He’s not beating me these days. I’ll tell him when he comes to thrash me” (123). The invasion of the town civilization is inevitably taking over life in Chandi Bon; its “foul” (67) influence is clearly visible and is threatening the life of the Shabars. “Sana’s family had learned to save”, Phuli’s eyes would be dazzled by the houses of other peoples” (122) and “Kalya’s generation was raised on rice! He only knows how to beat Phuli for it” (106).

Danku’s desperate search for the magical herb that will reinvigorate him so that he can take a wife and procreate to ensure the continuation of the Shabar way of life- an unreasonable, untenable idea that endangers the sustainability of environment by miss balancing the population to resources ratio and Kalya’s unwarranted aggression in his demand for the knowledge from Tejota, in his desire to be king of the Shabars and against the townspeople and Brahmans, are all masculine reactions to the conflict between the indigenous way of life of the hunters/ tribals and the ever encroaching town civilization. It is informed by the masculine mentality of domination and hierarchy rather than the ideals of diversity and equity.

It refuses to accept the fact that with rapidly changing times interdependence of communities is inescapable – “Where else does a Shabar go but to town to sell meat, skins, bird feathers, resin, honey, fruits and tubers? Who else would buy such things except a town-dweller? If we don’t sell our wares, we can’t get rice to eat” (106). Throughout the novel it is the community of women that implicitly proposes a viable solution to the dualistic conflict. They act as active agents of change. The boundaries become blurred as women of different castes interact and empathize with each other while Tejota is respected and sought for advice by all and sundry. The tribal women mediate between their life in the forest and their dependence on the town-dwellers to fulfil their roles as providers

while Daibaki takes upon herself to look after the family when her husband and elder son confine themselves to the pursuit of Brahmanical knowledge. Again, it is Tejota's narration to Mukundaram that ensures the passing on of the story of the life and customs of the Shabars to posterity before they "take down our houses and pick up and leave" (Devi, 100).

The short-stories, *Draupadi* and *Duoloti*, the Bountiful, represent the next stage of the conflict wherein no more "virgin" forests are left for the tribals to settle anew in. With the patriarchal commercial enterprises' takeover of the indigenous way of life of the tribals and their forest resources, the superstructure of the dualistic and hierarchical narrative of society and nature is consolidated. Diversity is replaced by hierarchy and intrinsic values of nature and women are overridden by their exploitability. The premonition in *The Book of the Hunter* has become a reality as the corporate "savages" waged the war of aggressive conquest, possession and control of women and Nature. Denied empowerment by deficiency of knowledge and inequitable ownership and distribution of resources, the potential agents of change are, now, not just representatives of the denuded, dismembered and degraded forests but themselves sites of exploitation.

Environmentalists like Vandana Shiva refer to the idea of development that we have borrowed from the West as "maldevelopment" (Kaur, 388) because they more often than not involve and encourage violence against the local environment and women. *Duoloti*, is in fact, a part of the gangrenous consequences of such "maldevelopment". The same commercial entrepreneurs abuse her for pleasure who exploit the forest resources for profit. The diseased and degraded *Duoloti* does not have the home in the forest to go back to, but just the memory of the banyan tree – the forest, too, has been denuded. The venereal disease that *Duoloti* dies suffering is the fatal infection of discrimination and exploitation that the tribals face. She and her father, Nagesia Crook's, dismembered body are symbolic of the dismembered tribal society and their muffled voices denying them the right to seek justice for the cruelty unleashed upon them. In *Duoloti*, the Bountiful, the earth is represented as a caring mother, a "quintessential" attribute of the feminine.

However, it will be wrong to read too much of Vandana Shiva's theory of ecofeminism in it. Vandana Shiva talks of nature in the reductionist terms of "Aranyani" (Epic Struggle, 129) or mother goddess, and accords the highest value of "cultural evolution" (129) to the Brahmanic way of life when the Brahmans lived in the forests as ascetics and composed the Vedas. This is in total disregard for the primeval tribal way of life in the forests. On the contrary, in the stories of *Duoloti*, *The Bountiful*, and *The Book of the Hunter*, it is a Brahman who brings the downfall of both *Duoloti* and the Shabars. Ambivalence is what underlies the relationship between women and nature. This is what Mahasweta Devi invokes in the novel, *The Book of the Hunter*, and the short-story, *Draupadi*. In the novel, the forest, Abhayachandi, is the Mother that gives but also taketh away when her rules are violated.

The Shabars not being allowed to go beyond a certain point into the forest, the shroud of secrecy that envelopes the forest, the unwritten laws that must not be violated – all these signify a darker, unknowable, unreachable character of the forest. She is not the ever “for-giving” mother but an entity that can punish severely when not respected. In a different context, in *Draupadi*, the forest is a dark place of refuge for the revolutionaries/ tribals who have been wronged. The “ill-famed forest of Jharkhand” (Devi, 20) is like a labyrinth for the security forces into which the revolutionaries disappear after attacking them. The two women, Duoloti and Dopdi, are representatives of the cultural diversity that the tribals stand for, in India.

The inhuman attempt to subdue and control them by the upper caste/class, shows the homogenizing assault that desecrates this diversity, both in terms of gender and caste/class. In *Duoloti*, the Bountiful, Duoloti is obedient to the point of causing her own downfall. She does not revolt. Dopdi, on the other hand, takes up a violent path to seek retribution from the exploitative class. Her mangled breasts, her wounded vagina, as the “moon vomits” (35) revolted by the sight of her dehumanized body, which now just breathes like the rise and fall of a “piston” (36), are a site of a revolt. She uses her body as a way of resistance just as the women did in the Chipko movement. Denuded, she now challenges the senanayak to clothe her again. She spits out blood at his “white bush shirt” (37) just as the denuded earth spits out wrath on the humans, trembling in anger and agony.

The andocentric thought process that dominates our life always uses the narrative of dualism and hierarchy to construct definitions of society and nature. This dualism places man and his “culture” at the seat of power while women and nature are entrapped below them as objects of exploitation. The patriarchal profitable hegemony defiles the diversity accessible in nature- the diversity of gender and flora and fauna. The diversity that deserves equity is marginalized and homogenized to serve their profit making enterprises causing a degradation of society and denudation of our environment. It is important to trace back this discourse of dominance and control to the colonial and pre-colonial era. The colonizers flouted the Indian way of life that was harmonious with nature. They took upon themselves the work of “civilizing the heathens” and popularized an alien idea of development. The tribal society with all its equity and diversity was forced to conform to a hierarchy that placed them at the bottom, homogenized into bonded laborers in plantations and even criminalized them – “the British rulers declared them to be „criminal“ in 1871. That stigma is still operative...” (Devi 10). Before that, the tribals lived by their own customs and traditions and did not “honour them (the Brahmins)” (121).

Their women enjoyed respectable status and took part in economic activities. But the patriarchal colonizer defined a woman's role as the nurturer and provider, confined her within the homestead and slowly took away from her the independence to engage in "economic activities". The pre-colonial casteist Indian society added fire to the fuel. A tribal woman now became doubly marginalized- a vulnerable woman with no income so to speak of, that too of a lower caste/class. In spite of working more with no leisure time, a woman became more susceptible to poverty and exploitation. Even after India's independence from the colonizers a new kind of colonialism continued to pervade the whole human society- internal colonialism, signified by Duoloti's tragic death on the fifteenth of August, India's Independence Day.

Even if a female performs any work outside the home to raise her children does not mean she is unconcerned with what happens in her home. Even though she is not there all of the time, a working mother must remain strong for her family, and it is well recognized that females could be both caring and assertive at the very same moment. In addition, Jashoda must resist the repression of a predominantly traditional society, which would be a key womanist goal. In many respects, Jashoda triumphs despite her status as a "outsider." Men are held in more respect than women in the culture in which Jashoda lives. The males are both the family's breadwinners and the household's leaders. Such feudal traditions are challenged by Jashoda. She rises to the position of leader, and she goes to work outside the house to support her family. In this sense, woman equalizes or surpasses her husband and the rest of society's males. She assumes tasks that are typically assigned to the male of the home. *Jashoda and Kangalicharan* exchange males and women's traditional "roles." While Jashoda is at work, *Kangalicharan* takes majorities in the house. This inversion of conventional roles reflects Jashoda's business acumen as well as her authority in the family and society. When you examine the labor done at home, which is usually the work of the woman, she and her husband become partners.

The patriarchal institutions of governance and decision making do not offer equitable opportunity to women by denying them capacity and skill development opportunities, and by being ceaselessly careless about the huge gap in the access to knowledge, information and financial aid to women that will enable them to implement necessary actions for sustainable development. Ignorance of the masculine intellect in regard to the negative impact that environmental degradation has on women has made it alarmingly imperative to take women on board in the decision making processes and help them fulfill their roles as efficient managers of natural resources. Eco-feminism draws a parallel between the exploitation and degradation of women and nature. It emphasizes the fact that sustainable development and conservation of biodiversity is not possible without ensuring an education and understanding by all the people of gender issues.

Such an education will help them break away from stereotypes and “develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge to make informed decisions for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future and to act upon these decisions” (Koparanova and Warth, 17). A revision of the measures taken so far for sustainable development and biodiversity conservation is, therefore, crucial. Where exploitation has been carried out in a top-down fashion, conservation must be implemented in a bottom-up manner. This will guarantee an inclusive exercise where the marginalized sections will be given a priority in the process of policy making, and a fair chance to undo the injustice meted out to them for so long. The Book of *The Hunter and Draupadi* are palimpsests that reorient our perspectives on the questions of gender and environment. It signifies women’s fight for the symbiotic existence of diversity. Writing, especially by a woman, becomes significant as a tool and also as an agency to voice the demand for gender sensitive education and policies and programmes, for a supportive environment that includes removal of barriers and ensures rewards, and for full participation in decision and strategy making at both micro and macro levels. A woman can provide an insider’s point of view both in terms of a marginalized class/caste and gender and hence, provide a better alternative than straightforward conservation which may, in fact, threaten the closure of the sources of fulfilling the needs of the tribals and cause a indigenous way of life that relied on and thus, possessed the knowledge and skill for conservation of biodiversity and sustainable development to disappear.

Her literary writings serve as the challenge of the ecofeminist and socioeconomic perspectives in which the woman is viewed as a societal and familial rescuer. With their power and forms of being, she instills the feminine inside them. Her literary works have not only been the catalyst for change, but also the catalyst for change. Her protagonists are usually taken from the destitute or downtrodden groups, and their quest for justice has mythical connotations, according to Alter. In this reality, every person and item is distinct from one another from a certain viewpoint. This segregation is not unfair if it is predicated on the categorization of human beings, but it is unlawful when it oppresses simply on the basis of caste, category, religious belief, faith, shade, and sexuality and creates a vertical disjunction, distinguishing persons’ rise and fall on the hierarchical and patriarchal social structure where poorer has always been monopolized by upper. In those aspects, discrimination provides a forum for injustices when distinctions affect the reading. It is ethically immoral and unfavorable in this situation since it results in social inequality.

To conclude, Mahashweta Devi’s literary writings stand in stark contrast to the notion that persists in research. Her works are inspired by her ‘field’ experiences, and her ‘texts’ represent the interaction, emerging as one naturally. These are presented with simplicity and compelling metaphors that stretch the emotions of the audience and identify the correct in which the spontaneous interaction of environment and text can be experienced.

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