

The Tribal and the Environment: Mahasweta Devi's Perspective

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There can be little doubt that, in recent years, ecology has become one of the central discourses in the literary world. Ecological issues are especially important in the social and natural sciences, who assume social and political responsibility by addressing urgent ecological problems and developing predictable and visionary solutions for them. Ecology is the study of scientific analysis and study of interactions among organisms and their environment, such as the interactions organisms have with each other and with their biotic environment. Ecology is not just a set of ideas and principles rather it is a way of looking at the world which emphasizes the assessment and understanding of how the pieces fit together, how each influences and is influenced by the other pieces and how the whole operates in ways not really predictable from the pieces. When one is able to capture these relations it allows to have a truly understanding of the great complexity of nature, as it is impacted by human activity. The term eco-criticism was first introduced by William Rueckert in his much cited article "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism" studies. Since then eco-criticism has been a continually growing divergent field in literary and cultural studies. Interest in nature and the relationship between mankind and nature can be regarded as the common ground of these approaches. Ecology is found in classic literature of all sorts. Charles Dickens, for example, touched on the ethical

questions of human population growth and density in many of his novels. One of Dickens' most famous characters, Ebenezer Scrooge, said in response to a request to help the poor who "would rather die" than go to the workhouses,

"If they'd rather die, than they had better do it and decrease the surplus population".¹

This idea of "surplus population" was not an uncommon belief in England during the nineteenth century, though Dickens himself deplored it. Functions, concepts and paradigms of the relationship between nature and society can be found in literature and other forms of art. Ancient literature addressed the opposition between human needs and the respect for the environment or the treatment of possible changes within nature, whose effects cannot easily be foreseen. Since then these questions have undergone important historical changes, while at the same time remaining closely connected to their respective cultural and social contexts. In addition one can observe that literature absorbs non-fictional discourses on ecology. The potential of new perspectives in literary and cultural studies on these issues becomes apparent if one applies Ette's concept of "Literature as knowledge for living".

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. But creative writing is only one side of her literary persona. There are several other dimensions of her persona concerns; activities and priorities which are distinct but closely interrelated. She cannot be branded by any conventional label such as writer, social activist, reporter, editor or organizer of peoples' groups at the grass root level. Each one of these titles is partially true. All these aspects of her personality considered together sharply distinguish her from her contemporaries not just in West Bengal but in the country also. As a creative writer, her contribution is noteworthy, both in significance and

volume. Her writings originate from her intimate knowledge of the ground realities. Her stories deal with a diverse range of issues related to the deprivation, degradation of life and environment, exploitation and struggles of the laboring poor and the underprivileged, the landless and small peasants, sharecroppers, bonded labor, contract labor and miners in West Bengal and Bihar. She has a deep sympathy with the tribal people and she documents their life, customs, culture and their problems in the wake of modernization. Her essays deal with the degradation of the ecosystem and lopsided forestation policy of the government which has ruined the primitive life and culture of tribal people. Devi urges for sustainable development concept so that the progress can be made without ecological devastation that is being perpetrated by industrialists and government officials.

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.

While nobody cares to pay heed to their claims to their right to survive, the hired writer, pandering to the middle and upper classes, content themselves with weaving narcissistic fantasies in the name of literature...What can be more surprising than that writers living in a country bedeviled with so many problems- social injustice, communal discord and evil customs- should fail to find material for their work in their own country and people? Such indifference to people is possible only in a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country like India, still suffering from the hangover of foreign rule. (xviii)

Devi is sad to see that Scheduled Tribes which make up 8.2% of the total population of India, the largest modern democracy, have been relegated to the lowest rung in the social ladder. Over centuries the advasis have evolved an intricate convivial-custodial mode of living. They belong to their immediate surroundings, which are the essence of their existence. They have a deep affinity with nature because nature is not a utility product for them. They believe in magical powers and their culture and religion is closely knitted to nature. In most parts of the pre-colonial period they were in fact self governing 'first nations' and they always governed themselves outside the influence of the particular ruler. They were self-dependent local economies, without having any conflict or disorder. Devi highlights the vital link between the material and cultural well-being of the tribal people and their environment. She recognizes that the delinking of this bonding due to neo-colonialism lies at the root of their contemporary marginalized status. She observes:

They had no sense of property. There was communal landholding, because, just like Native Americans, they also believed that land and forest and river belonged to everyone. Their society was of course broken under mainstream onslaught...They understand ecology and the environment in a way we cannot yet imagine. ("Author in Conversation" *Imaginary Maps* ii)

Her fiction narrates the journey of the tribal from their forest homes to the agriculture fields and the industrial belts of modern India. She introduces us with a new vocabulary which deals with the Shabar, Munda, Bhil, Santhal and their life. Her stories provide ample space to tribal uprisings and the history behind them which are often ignored in official text books. For example, none of the adivasi fights against the British have been treated as a part of the ‘national struggle’ for independence. From the Malpahariya uprising in 1772 to Lakshman Naik’s revolt in Orissa in 1942, the adivasi repeatedly revolted against the British. Her novels celebrate the forgotten heroes like Rani Luxmi Bai, Birsa Munda, Chotti Munda and many others whose names don’t find space in history books. The novels *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* recreate the tribal history of the Mundas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the British had consolidated their economic and political hegemony over India at the cost of her natural wealth and freedom of her people.

Aranyer Adhikar or Rights to the Forest was originally written in Bengla in 1975 and published in serial form. This novel raises the issue of the “rights” of the inhabitants of the forest to their land through the historical events of the Ulgulan, the Munda rebellion led by Birsa Munda against the British colonial regime in the period 1895-1901. During the colonial period, the British devised policies to exploit nature and people. Large scale destruction of forest cover was done to meet the demands of the rapidly developing industrial society in Europe. All this was done very shrewdly to befool the people. The process of industrialization in England was fuelled by India’s teak and sal forests and bamboo forests. The royal sport of hunting wiped off many wildlife species and pushed the remaining wildlife population into opposition with humans. In order to make a more prudent use of India natural resources, the British formed the Imperial Forest Department in 1864. Further acts like Indian Forest Act of 1865 and 1878 only served to hand over the forest cover under the control of the state more effectively. This novel raises the question of the “rights” of the tribal and village communities over their traditional lands which

formed the basis of their lives. Voices of dissent over forceful land acquisition by the state have stormed the nation in present time and Devi through this novel stresses on the need to frame a people-friendly land acquisition policy. She feels extremely sad over the plight of displaced, dispossessed, deceived tribal who find themselves as “the nowhere men”. She is not against industrialization because the process of development is impossible without it. According to her the real question is how to utilize land, forest, water and minerals and what should be the role of industries? She disapproves the present state of capitalism in the guise of socialism which has made the rich, super rich and the poor, more poor. She does not seem to repose much faith in the panchayat system rather she believes in giving authority power to the grass root organizations of tribal. She took initiative in reviving the Lodha Shabar Kalyan Samiti in 1982 after a number of Lodhas were killed in West Bengal in a series of incidents during 1979-82. These organizations have helped in carrying developmental work and income generating activities in tribal areas. In the present time, industrialization process in the mineral rich areas like Jharkhd, Chattisgarh, Orissa, Bihar, and West Bengal has helped to intensify poverty and illiteracy because government’s policies were profit oriented only. Devi presents a dissenting voice emphasizing gaps and lacunae in the work done by the administration and the panchayat. In her stories we find the picture of the dismal tribal world and her demand for a system which considers every person, religion, tribe and area, an indispensable part of it, where there is enough space and opportunities for a healthy life and education. And the best part is that her journey still continues in an age of eighty eight years, despite illness and age related problems. Devi remains as a lighthouse in the present age of chaos and loss of values.

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