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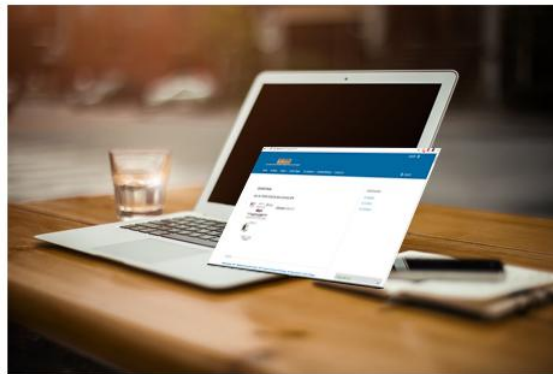
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Issues of Environmental Justice in Mahasweta Devi's "*Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha*"

Abstract:

Writer activists like Wangari Maathai, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Mahasweta Devi have worked relentlessly to fight for justice for the poor and the marginalized and have also proved successful in generating awareness not only regarding the struggles of the poor but also about degeneration of the environment. Mahasweta Devi has tirelessly worked for the tribals of India and through her creative writings has been voicing her concerns about the dalits and tribals. Speaking about her novella *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha* in an interview with Gayatri Spivak she herself states that *Pterodactyl* "is an abstract of my entire tribal experience".

My paper will delve into how the tribals have been systematically marginalized and oppressed over the years, this marginalization and exploitation is intrinsically linked with the exploitation of the environment that they inhabit --- with the depletion of forest cover and natural resources the tribals are further pushed into darkness and oblivion.

Through the character of Puran Sahay the journalist; Mahasweta Devi takes her readers for a journey into the grueling life of these tribals in the Pirtha Block which is devastated by famine and drought and with little or no government relief hundreds have lost their lives or have been reduced to living skeletons. The only hope for sustenance is through past and revisiting of their myths. *Pterodactyl*; the extinct bird which is the spirit of the ancestors casts its shadow on Pirtha to convey an important message or warning. The modern consumer ridden society has desecrated the bond between tribals and the environment by polluting their rivers, cutting down the forests making inroads into their dwellings; thus ringing the knell of doom. It is because of this deep association and interaction of the tribals with their environment that Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha have called them as "ecosystem people".

Keywords:

Environmental justice; Activism; Tribals, Marginalized people, Postcolonial ecocriticism.

Colonial process adversely affected not only the native people their cultures and histories but also devastated their environment as well. The colonial masters saw the world in binaries of civilized and barbaric and the tribals or adivasis were appropriated to fit into their definition of barbarians. Being conceived as barbaric or primitive the tribals were expected to conform to the civilized ways of the west and the forests which once belonged to them came into the hands of imperial forces turning the tribals into “ecological refugees”. Even in post-independent India the tribals have faced immense exploitation, abuse and neglect from all quarters as many of the tribes were denotified and others declared as criminals. Many such tales of pain, suffering and anger are told by Mahasweta Devi as lived experiences with great care and compassion striving to make all forms of oppression obsolete. Discussing about the contribution made by writer activists in bringing to fore issues of “imperceptible violence” and the power of “imaginative writing”; Rob Nixon writes in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*:

Writer-activists can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even the physiological life of the human observer....The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing of sights unseen. (Rob Nixon 2011: 16)

Writer activists like Wangari Maathai, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Mahasweta Devi have worked relentlessly to fight for justice for the poor and the marginalized and have also proved successful in generating awareness not only regarding the struggles of the poor but also about environmental abuse. Mahasweta Devi has tirelessly worked for the tribals of India and through her creative writings has been voicing her concerns about the dalits and tribals. The tribals have been systematically marginalized and oppressed over the years, this marginalization and exploitation is intrinsically linked with the exploitation of the environment that they inhabit --- with the depletion of forest cover and natural resources the tribals are further pushed into darkness and oblivion. The situation gets all the more pathetic with the insensitivity of the government and its officials who fail to see the plight of these poor tribals. Development and progress in India has been such that it has excluded the tribals from its benefits as there have been hardly any development schemes regarding establishment of hospitals, dispensaries and schools in tribal areas on the contrary the roads and highways are constructed to make inroads for capitalists to exploit both environment and the tribals. Nature is exploited for its rich resources of forests, rivers and minerals and tribals provide the capitalists with easy and cheap access to labour and thus are made to work like animals as their human rights are constantly violated and their dignity trampled over time and again. The tribals are

rendered landless and nothing is done to rehabilitate them or to provide them with a vocation to earn their livelihood. When huge dams are constructed or forests are cleared for big corporate houses to establish industries tribals end up losing their dwelling places, their source of livelihood and their cultural backbone as well and in the absence of these essential requirements their existence gets annihilated slowly and gradually. Huggan and Tiffin while describing India as “the third largest dam-builder in the world” and understanding the aims and goals of the massive dam projects of “Sardar Sarovar in Gujarat and the Narmada Sagar in Madhya Pradesh” there is no denying the fact that “Hundreds of thousands of local people, mostly Adivasis, have been ousted from their land, with irreparable damage being done to their daily lives, their economic self-sufficiency, and their culture” (Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 46). The main concern of Mahasweta Devi in this novella is to bring this crisis to the knowledge of people and to protect the tribals from getting extinct like the ancient bird Pterodactyl. When New India is achieving new milestones and is marching ahead in the field of science and technology its tribals are still struggling to fulfill their basic needs, being systematically marginalized and robbed off their natural resources. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Mahasweta Devi says: “India makes progress, produces steel, the tribals give up their land, and receive nothing. They are suffering spectators of the India that is travelling towards the twenty-first Century.” (Mahasweta Devi 2001: iii)

Speaking about her novella *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay* and *Pirtha* Mahasweta Devi herself states that *Pterodactyl* “is an abstract of my entire tribal experienceIf read carefully, *Pterodactyl* will communicate the agony of the tribals, of marginalized people all over the world.” (xiv) Through the character of Puran Sahay the journalist; Mahasweta Devi takes her readers for a journey into the grueling life of these tribals in the Pirtha Block in Madhya Pradesh which is devastated by famine and drought and with little or no government relief hundreds have lost their lives or have been reduced to living skeletons. Devi describes the survey map of Pirtha Block as “some extinct animal of Gondwanaland” which “has fallen on its face” (98) and the adivasis of the area are literally “in the animal’s jaws” (99). In spite of continuous reports of people dying in the Pirtha area the Chief Minister of the state who is luxuriating in the Bhopal gas tragedy and having “built himself a luxurious residence” has no intention of declaring Pirtha a famine area. The text also throws light on how the rivers and streams get polluted with poisonous chemicals and the consumption of the same poisonous waters by the tribals leads to death and epidemic. The adivasis never benefit from government schemes and aids as they get sacrificed on the altar of corruption and nepotism. A famine prone area like Pirtha is inspected by government officials in the rainy season and ultimately it is declared that “there’s lot of water in Pirtha” (100) further no help or training is provided by the government to the tribals to teach them about the know-how of harvesting the rain water. Devi’s

novella unravels the government's apathy towards the tribal people and their plight and how even an epidemic goes unattended by the government officials as hundreds of adivasis are left in the jaws of death and disease waiting and wasting their lives in the hope of getting some help from the government which never reaches them in time. Tribals are victims of what Rob Nixon terms as "slow violence", whereas government and public attention is caught by episodes like that of union carbide disaster in Bhopal. Defining slow violence in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* Rob Nixon writes:

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all....a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive....(Rob Nixon 2011: 2)

The only hope for sustenance for these tribals is through past and revisiting of their myths. Pterodactyl; the extinct bird which is the spirit of the ancestors casts its shadow on Pirtha to convey an important message or warning. The modern consumer ridden society has not only marginalized and oppressed the tribals but has also in its pursuit of power and pelf desecrated the bond between tribals and their environment by polluting their rivers, cutting down the forests making inroads into their dwellings; thus ringing the knell of doom. Since the ancient times forests have been the source of sustenance for the tribals as they provided them with food and necessary wood both for fuel and to construct their dwelling places as well, but this very natural abode which provided them with physical and spiritual well-being was ruthlessly snatched from them leaving them hungry, unsheltered, and exposed to all forms of oppression and exploitation. Shankar the tribal expresses his anguish and blames the outsiders for ruining their sacred living; he says:

Alas, they enslaved and bound us. They named us, as bondslaves, Haroahi, Mahidar, they named us Hali, named us kamiya, in many tongues. Our land vanished like dust before a storm, our fields, our homes, all disappeared....
Oh, we climb hills and build homes, the road comes chasing us. The forest disappears, they make the four corners unclean. (Mahsweta Devi 2001: 119)

His greatest agony is that they have "failed to give peace to the ancestors" as the burial grounds of their ancestors have been trampled over in the name of progress and thus "the unquiet soul casts its shadow and hovers" and it is perceived by the tribal people as the "curse of the ravaged land, village, field, home, forest!" (120). Shankar's lamentation reflects complete hopelessness and frustration towards the system which has completely failed to offer any support or relief to the adivasis; on the contrary he believes that all trouble has come to their lives with the coming of development and

outsiders into the life of the tribals. “Can you move far away? Very far? Very very far?” (120) is his last request to the BDO before he gets unconscious. The texts also delves into instances where although bonded labour has been made illegal by law still tribal children are exploited and made to work as bonded labourers on the fields of money lenders for a meagre “debt for thirty rupees”. (179) Through the use of the mythical bird Pterodactyl; Mahsweta devi wants to bring the attention of her readers to the tribal people who represent a system of living which was not only closer to nature and also at peace with it; as it revered and looked up to the mother earth for its physical and spiritual sustenance and it is because of this deep association and interaction of the tribals with their environment that Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha have called them as “ecosystem people”. Since the ancient times the tribals have dwelt in the forests and have treated the forests, rivers, hills and mountains as living entities (concepts which are now getting worldwide recognition e.g. Whanganui river in New Zealand has now been declared a living entity and to pollute, harm or abuse it has been made a punishable offence) and have always tried to give back whatever they have taken from nature. Tribals have never exploited nature for their own use as they have great understanding and reverence for the same; for them nature has always been a part of their physical and spiritual existence. Generations of living in the forests have provided them with vital information about their environs and how to conserve them. They draw from nature only what is essential for their sustenance; there is no concept of hoarding or exploitation amongst the tribals. In the present times this very ecosystem and these people are under the threat of extinction if appropriate steps are not taken to restore their lands and to preserve their dignity. Similar kinds of concerns are reflected in the writings of Saro Wiwa who also fears the extinction of his Ogoni People:

There is a clear definition of genocide by the United Nations: anything done to destroy a group of people. Now, if you take the Ogoni case for instance, you pollute their air, you pollute their streams, you make it impossible for them to farm or fish, which is their main source of livelihood, and then what comes out of their soil you take entirely awaythen surely you are leading the tribe to extinction. Ogoni people are going extinct. (Saro Wiwa 1998: 351-52)

Mahasweta Devi says that tribals sacrificed their lives for India's freedom but received no recognition in post independent India and their heroes find no mention in the history of the nation and thus Devi feels the need and urgency to record the contribution of the tribals in the Indian history and their struggles as well in preserving the forests and the environment as well. She sadly expresses that no share has been given to the tribals in the progress of the nation and they have been systematically alienated from their environment and thus have been a victim of environmental

racism and in their suffering and discrimination she compares them with the Native Americans whose history and culture has been obliterated from the present day America:

Only in the names of places the Native American legacy survives. Otherwise entire tribes have been butchered. Their land has been taken away. There is movement, camps. But I say to my American readers, see what has been done to them, you will understand what has been done to the Indian tribals. Everywhere it is the same story. They reclaimed the forest, converted it into agricultural land, yet they were dispossessed. (Devi: iv)

Thus Mahasweta Devi brings all indigenous and tribal people under one umbrella and makes the readers understand how nefarious designs of colonization and then how globalization and commercialization of natural resources have led to the marginalization of the tribals as it robbed them of their forest cover and sources of sustenance. The forests and their natural resources were ethically used by the tribals but modern day man have trampled over and has exploited earth and its natural resources; further in his lust for progress and power has tried to force its control over the environment and its resources. By building huge dams and through industrialization modern man has been foolishly trying to commodify nature and its resources.

Puran Sahay, the journalist and the modern man is unable to comprehend the message of the Pterodactyl as he lacks the true understanding of the tribals, their culture and customs and their need for self- preservation and right to dignity for the living as well as for the dead. Mahasweta Devi says “The journalist, the representative of the mainstream people, has no point of contact with the tribals. Their roads have run parallel. He does not know what the tribal wants, what the tribal holds most dear to the heart.” (Devi: xv-xvi)

Puran realizes at the very outset that he cannot betray about the existence of Pterodactyl to the outside world as this news will further pollute the tribals and their sacred living and envisions the imminent crisis when “Newspapers and scientists from the world over are pouring into Pirtha, extinguishing the tribals altogether.” (142) Puran reflects that the discovery of Pterodactyl in Pirtha will further jeopardize the existence of these hunger and disease stricken people who have no hope for their survival except for revisiting their past for some source of sustenance. Puran tries to fathom the silence of Bikhia; the young tribal boy, after the visitation of the extinct Pterodactyl and realizes that perhaps the illiterate Bikhia understands that he cannot reveal the truth about the extinct bird and its existence has to be kept secret for its own good and for the good of the tribal people as they both need protection from unwanted gaze which perhaps can ruin their existence:

The world-of –today cannot be informed about you. ‘Today’, ‘the present times’, ‘civilization’, becomes most barbaric by the demands of getting ahead.

Yet he doesn't know that 'today' desecrates the ancient peoples' burial grounds by building roads and bridges.... He is a tribal, an aboriginal, you are much more ancient, more originary than his experience, both your existences are greatly endangered. (Devi: 156)

Puran gets frustrated by his inability to decipher the message of Pterodactyl and in a somber moment of epiphany realizes that the message of the extinct bird could be much more serious and could spell doom. It could well be an indication for the doom of the tribals but could also be a warning signal for entire world. As we proudly amass weapons of mass destruction while marching towards progress, power and scientific achievements oblivious of the fact that we are moving towards destruction and compete annihilation. Devi draws a gloomy picture of imminent apocalypse whereby the medium of prophecy is the already extinct bird which faced extinction due to "natural geological evolution" but the irony is that man is heralding his own doom through "nuclear explosions, or in war, or in the aggressive advance of the strong as it obliterates the weak" and then like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*; Devi's text also speaks about how the soil will become unproductive "having murdered nature in the application of man-imposed substitutes" (157-158) and how the use of DDT and other pesticides will render the vegetables unfit for human consumption or if consumed will lead to death and destruction. Mahasweta Devi unravels the importance of myth in the lives of the Pirtha tribals as it binds "the past to the present" and further questions that "How can one rob a people of the supernatural, of *myth*, what is in their understanding an unwritten history, when the present time has given them nothing?" (179)

On his return journey from Pirtha; Puran realizes that he cannot remain dissociated about Pirtha and the plight of its people as he is "carrying Pirtha village in his heart" and further he goes on to confess that "We have lost somewhere, to Bikhia's people, to Pirtha" and adds that "By comparison with the ancient civilizations modern progress is much more barbaric at heart." Symbolically enough Puran also understands that by failing to decipher the message of Pterodactyl the modern man has also failed to establish a "communication point" with the tribals and thus he says that "we have slowly destroyed a continent in the name of civilization"(196).

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